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PEPITO AND THE LAST TAMALADA

*by Manuel F. Medrano*¹

In 1960 I was eleven years old and attending Central Jr. High School in Brownsville (On the Border, By the Sea), Texas, United States of America. I had just discovered my first facial pimple and did not know what to do with it. More important, I was also recognizing how different girls really were, although they rarely noticed me. I could not understand why because I was thin (really skinny), tanned (from working on the farm, not going to the beach) and smart (but athletes ruled nerds). None of this mattered because our Christmas tamalada was only a month away.

Tamales originated in pre-Columbian Mexico and originally had fillings of chile, turkey, beans or deer. Before the Conquest, during the Spanish occupation of Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs even prepared tamales for the conquistadores. Tamaladas evolved in Spanish Mexico, spread throughout New Spain and eventually reached the South Texas border. Today, some people even purchase frozen tamales or in microwaveable cannisters in the Hispanic aisles at “my HEB”.

Our tamaladas included fun, food and family with no one judging or making fun of your looks or your name like they did in the school cafeteria. At least fifty people attended, and everyone, young and old, was assigned or assumed a task. The men and boys were responsible for skinning and butchering the hog after it was slaughtered. My uncle Agapito Barrios killed the hog with the butt of ax as quickly and painlessly as possible and amazed all of us with his skill. The hog was then hung from a mesquite tree with a hook through his snout, gutted and sliced into portions of various sizes. Some of its skin was then cut into smaller pieces, dropped into a large vat of hot lard, and made into crunchy chicharrones (pork rinds). The men ate theirs with cold beer and the boys with Mexican Cokes. One of us then took the pork meat into the house.

There, the women and girls, who had their own heirarchy of tasks, prepared the meat and made the tamales. The young girls took corn husks that had soaked overnight to their mothers and tias who prepared the masa (corn dough) and spread it on the husks. Their grandmothers seasoned the pork with red and black pepper and salt and placed it in the corn husks. The husks were folded it into tamales,

arranged into a pyramid shape over an upside down molcajete (grinding volcanic stone vessel) and cooked on the stove.

The tamalada was always on Christmas Eve at our house behind El Jardin School. Abuelos/as, tias/os, primos/as, hijos/as, compadres/comadres and vecinos (neighbors) all participated and brought side dishes and dessert to share. Mexican candy, pan dulce (sweet bread), and polvorones (sugar-powdered cookies) were my favorites. Most of the families could not afford to buy Christmas trees or presents for their children, but this was a way to still celebrate the season. We were the lucky ones because we actually gave and received some gifts. It was a respite from the drudgery of being poor and marginalized Mexicanos in a city where the vast majority of people were like us.

For me, this year's celebration, also included some surprise and sorrow. In June, my father Manuel, bought a two-hundred-pound pig from one of our neighbors. The hog was friendly, loud and entirely white. It looked like the Abominable Puerco, with reddish-pink eyes and pink skin below its wiry white hair. My Dad told me to take care of it, and I did, along with an assortment of dogs, cats, goats, cows and chickens on the rancho. I fed and bathed him, and he became a dog-like pet that followed me as I did some of my chores on the rancho. I named him Pepito, and believe it or not, he responded when I called his name. My friend Ramiro even brought fresh corn to feed him. Throughout the Fall, Pepito grew larger and larger and grunted louder and louder. He ate anything and everything. Once, my father forgot his cigar on a board near the hog pen. When he returned to retrieve it, the pig was already eating it.

By mid-December, Pepito weighed over five hundred pounds. Once, as I was bathing him, he stepped on me with his formidable hoof. I was not wearing shoes, and he left me with pain and a bruise. I even thought of changing his name from Pepito to Pepote (large Pepito), but that was short-lived because Pepito just sounded better. On the morning of the twenty-fourth, the Medrano family was in the euphoria of tamalada fever, and preparations for the celebration began early. Chores were first, so I fed the cows two bales of hay and the hogs a bushel of corn and other Godforsaken fruits and vegetables discarded from the Flores Farmers Market. My father and Mr. Flores had made an arrangement to exchange dairy products for produce, and it seemed to work well for both of them. Anyway, Pepito was not among the hogs, but because he was constantly roaming between the pens and the corral, it did not worry me. Later, when my mother "Chata" called me in for "fideo and pollo" (vermicelli and chicken soup), I realized that my pig might be lost or missing. I began to search for him in the fields behind our house and in the drainage ditch behind the fields where I accidentally stepped into mud near the bank. Hijo! I smelled worse than Pepito. I also looked near the bales of hay we had stacked last Spring and placed an assortment of soft fruit in an old saucepan for him near the pig stall. Nothing. Now, I was concerned. I shouted out, "Pepito! Pepito! Where

are you Pepito?” It felt good to say it even though I sensed he couldn’t hear it. Nada.

It was now three o’clock, and people were arriving to help with the tamalada. My cousin Puffy did not necessarily arrive early to help, but he did come to eat early and often. He called it cultural research, and it was evident he had done a considerable amount and earned his nickname. Another cousin, Abel (We called him Nune, but I did not know why), asked me where Pepito was, and I said I did not know. Finally, I mustered the courage to ask my father. Meme seemed always busy and that made asking him for information complicated. He said to look for Pepito near the corral, and I did.

I could not run there quickly enough. As I neared the large mesquite tree near the corral, I heard a loud dull thud and a sickening squeal. Agapito Barrios had done what he did every Christmas – kill a hog for the tamalada. As he raised it on a rope over a large branch, I realized why I could not find Pepito. It was Pepito that was hanging from the tree with a hook through his pink snout, and whether I liked it or not, he would be the main dish of our holiday meal. That day I learned that on the rancho, livestock could be sold or eaten anytime.

Pepito’s last tamalada occurred sixty years ago. My parents, all my uncles and aunts, except for tia Rosa, have passed. When my mother died in 2004, she left the rancho to her children, and it was soon sold. No one wanted to purchase it individually, must less live there. I visited my old home before the house and corral were leveled and thought how valuable growing up on the rancho had been to me. The education of life, responsibility and respect far exceeded some of lessons I learned in the classroom. And many years later, on Christmas Eve, I can almost hear the voices of my family as they celebrated themselves and their heritage during a much simpler time.

Endnotes

1 Manuel F. Medrano is Emeritus Professor of History at UTRGV. He is producer/director of the Los del Valle oral history documentaries and author/co-author of six books and over twenty-five articles and essays about people, history and culture in the Rio Grande Valley.

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