

Wedding Traditions on the Border

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*"Something old, something new,
Something borrowed, something blue."*

A border bride can easily fulfill the first three requirements for a happy wedding, but the blue might be green, if she includes the dollar dance in her marriage traditions. Modern border weddings are a blending of old and new traditions, innovations in society and borrowed customs from both the Mexican and Anglo cultures.

Indian tribal custom dictated a ceremony performed by the tribal elders, emphasizing the history of the tribe. The Spaniards brought Catholicism, and the importance of tribal ceremonies dwindled. However, the Aztec love of music, dance and celebrations was incorporated into the festivities which follow the religious ceremony.

Marriage remains an alliance between two families. Historically, the groom's family would approach the bride's family to ask for her hand, either directly or by matchmaker. They would visit at least twice, and during this time of negotiations the bride-to-be was not permitted to socialize with any young men. This custom was enforced to avoid the possibility of an elopement, which would bring disgrace to the families involved. Today a groom may approach the bride's family for her hand in marriage as a token of respect for her family and

matron of honor and the best man. In the Mexican tradition, *padrinos*, who are bridesmaid and groomsman pairs, are considered for different roles in the wedding ceremony.

Padrinos de ramo provide the bouquet (*ramo*) for the bride. *Padrinos de lazo* furnish a special symbolic rosary used to show the unification of the couple during the ceremony. Another pair of sponsors, the *padrinos de arras*, bring 13 silver or gold coins in a special basket or box for the ceremony. They also provide the *cojines* or kneeling cushions for the bride and groom during the wedding mass.

The bride also chooses the colors used as a theme throughout the wedding decorations. Ties and cummerbunds of the groomsmen match the colors of the bridesmaids' dresses. The wedding cake is decorated in the same colors. Even the cars used to convey the attendants are decorated with matching colored ribbon and sometimes paper flowers.

Younger bridesmaids (*damas*) and their escorts (*chambelanes*) are invited to participate. These are usually teenage relatives or friends of the two families. The bride and groom pick a little girl and boy to be the flower girl and ring-bearer for the ceremony. In Spanish they are called *pajecitos*, which means page, from the royal term for young attendant. Thus, a border wedding party can be quite large.

seven sacraments which a person receives in life. This is a most reverent and spiritual time in a young person's life.

Guests begin arriving at the church, and children of all ages often attend these border celebrations. Little ones are more likely to remain with their parents than be taken to a nursery or be left home with a sitter. Border weddings are truly a family affair.

When the ceremony is to begin, the *padrinos* begin the procession into the church followed by other attendants and then the *pajecitos*. All of them take their proper places at the front of the church. As the bride enters, escorted by her father, the congregation stands and watches the bride proceed to the altar.

For the Catholic service a regular mass is held, and the marriage ceremony is conducted. Often in our area the ceremony is conducted in both English and Spanish out of respect for the bilingual community.

During the ceremony the groom presents the *arras* to the bride as a symbol of support in their married life. Thirteen coins represent the 12 apostles and Christ. He pours the coins into the bride's hands as she accepts and promises to use the provisions for the care of the family.

The couple next kneel on the *cojines* to take communion together. The priest and the *padrinos de lazo*

tradition.

In Mexican tradition the groom-to-be and his family assume all the costs of the upcoming wedding. Modern border weddings combine both the Mexican financial tradition and the American tradition of the bride's family assuming most expenses, with the result that both families help with all the expenses. Sponsors of the wedding, such as godparents and the bridesmaids and groomsmen, also provide or pay for some of the many traditions of both the ceremony and the party which follows.

The modern Catholic Church is a large part of the border lifestyle, and so the preparations for the wedding begin with at least a six-month notification to the parish that a wedding will take place. Both individuals must be baptized and confirmed Catholics to be married in the faith. A six-week counseling session is required prior to the wedding.

These sessions are provided to help the couple become accustomed to marriage and a lifetime together. Communication, family economics and sexuality are topics of discussion. The priest also meets with the couple several times in the six months prior to the wedding and expresses his consent or disapproval of the marriage. The couple must also take a test which gauges compatibility.

Aside from the church preparations, the whole family becomes involved in planning the wedding. The six-month period before the wedding allows the couple time to reserve the location for their reception or dance. In many cases the availability of the location for the celebration will dictate the wedding date. Some halls for large dances are booked up to a year or more in advance.

The bride also has time to choose her dress. She can purchase a dress or arrange with a seamstress or bridal specialist for a custom-made dress, often in Juarez where money stretches a bit more. Brides in times past designed their wedding dress with their mothers, who would then do the sewing.

Next, the couple chooses their attendants. They pick a close friend or relative for the maid or

Wedding invitations are ordered at least six weeks in advance. Traditionally, the invitation lists the parents of both the bride and groom as those inviting the guests to the wedding. This is different from the Anglo custom of just the bride's parents inviting the wedding guests. However, a look at contemporary brides' magazines indicates that listing both sets of parents is now customary.

In the Mexican tradition, all of the wedding attendants are listed on the invitation with their special significance as *padrinos* noted. Also information about the reception and dance are printed on the invitation or included as separate cards. A guest must remember to bring the entire invitation along to the festivities to gain admittance.

On the day of the wedding, everyone is up and dressed early in preparation for the big day. Even the groom and groomsmen who celebrated the American-style bachelor party the night before are expected to fulfill their duties. They must decorate the cars to be used in the wedding party as early as possible. If the couple are not using a caterer for the reception, then family members will be busily cooking barbecue or *mole*, *frijoles*, Mexican rice and *chile con queso* for the wedding reception that afternoon or evening.

The person hired to decorate the church must be there at least an hour before the ceremony to put flowers on the end of the pews of the bridal path and on the altar. On occasion an archway decorated with flowers is constructed at the end of the aisle in front of the altar. From this portal the young woman will pass as an unmarried woman escorted by her father and return on her husband's arm as a married woman.

The attendants and the bride and her family travel to the church in the decorated vehicles. The groom awaits the rest of the wedding party at the church with the priest. Before the ceremony begins, the priest blesses the couple and the articles which will be used in the ceremony. A traditional bride will carry a rosary and Bible for the special day. Roman Catholic belief is that marriage is one of the

place the *lazo* around the couple. The *lazo* is two rosaries joined together with a cross. Placing the *lazo* around the couple signifies that the couple are united as one. The traditional belief of the *lazo* is that if the couple pray the rosary together every night, their marriage will endure.

The congregation is invited to share in communion with the bride and groom. The priest offers advice to the new couple, and the mass is ended with a prayer for the congregation. The church is then filled with the sounds of music, and the attendants precede the new married couple down the aisle.

Following a photo session, the wedding party joins guests at a reception and dance. Halfway through the wedding dance another custom is observed, a blend of Anglo and Hispanic customs. The bride throws the bouquet for the single women, and the groom tosses a garter for the single men. The guests chant, "Beso! Beso!" encouraging the recipients to kiss. They are supposed to be the next married.

Following this tradition is the custom of the "dollar dance." Guests are encouraged to line up for a lively dance with the bride or groom. A bridesmaid or groomsman will hand the next dancer a straight pin so then he or she can attach a dollar (or higher denomination) bill to the bride's or groom's garments. With this custom friends and family can assist in starting the new couple's household.

After the gaiety of the dollar dance, the bride and groom cut the cake and toast each other with champagne. Cake and wedding cookies, *biscochos*, are distributed to the guests, and the music for the dance continues. Revelers keep dancing until the end of the dance, usually twelve or one in the morning, while the new couple slip away to begin their new life together.

With sore feet and the relief of the end of a very full day, the new couple can look back on memories they will always treasure. Wedding gifts and thank-you notes can wait for another day, as they leave for their bridal suite. With such a grand launching into their new marriage, they hope to live happily ever after. ■