

CHRISTMAS AT  
GRANDMA'S

by MARGARETE BAGSHAW



**My grandmother,** Pablita Velarde (1918–2006), is known throughout New Mexico and the world as a major Native American artist and the first Native woman to sustain a full-time career as a painter. I, too, know and revere her as a pathbreaker who opened doors for all Native women painters who came after her, including my mother, Helen Hardin (1943–1984), and myself. I also know her as Grandma, the woman who not only ground her own paints in her studio and made her own frames in her backyard, but also cleaned her own house, did her own ironing (while watching soap operas and *Bonanza*), and put meals on the table for her friends and family on thousands of ordinary days as well as on special ones. As Christmas approaches, whenever I cook for friends and family, I think of Grandma.



When I was a very little girl, Grandma's house in Albuquerque was always the warm and cozy place where family came to celebrate most holidays. Even in the summer, outside barbecues were in her backyard, and then pool parties. When I say pool parties, I mean both types of pool. She bought an aboveground "build-it-yourself" pool for me and the cousins to keep us occupied in the summer. Yes, she did build it herself. Then she stocked the freezer full of popsicles to keep us amused so that we would "Let Grandma paint!" Her son, my Uncle Herby, who lived near her in Albuquerque, had the other kind of pool. The table sat on her covered back patio and weighed a thousand pounds, with cue sticks, balls, and an ice chest. But that's another story.

In September, after the busy summer art show season, Grandma and Mama took a brief break from their hectic painting schedules. But in October as fall settled into Albuquerque, they were back at work because Enchanted Mesa Indian Arts, a trading post on Route 66, had an annual Christmas show. This was always good for extra income in the winter.

Once Thanksgiving—held at Grandma's house—had passed, we would start seeing odd behavior from Grandma, more so than usual. We couldn't just drop by anymore; we always had to call first, with Mama asking "if the coast was clear." Or Grandma would scold us kids to stay out of the spare bedroom. As Christmas got nearer Grandma would ask us, puffing on

a cigarette, what we thought Santa Claus was going to bring, making mental notes for her next shopping trip in her big station wagon. Sometimes we'd end up hearing a litany of who did what that was bad that year, and that would scare the snot out of us. Santa might not come!

Friends and customers would be dropping by to pick up orders of paintings, or Grandma's famous Christmas nativity cards, made from paintings of the manger scene, the three magi, and the flight into Egypt. In later years it would be her handmade Pueblo and Navajo dolls. Another sure sign it was the holidays at Grandma's house was eggnog. There was always a store-bought carton of it in the refrigerator. We'd have some as a treat in the afternoon or after dinner—and for some reason the eggnog in Grandma's glass tasted different from ours.

About ten days before Christmas, Grandma dug out her artificial tree. Sometimes she'd get a real one, but that meant pine needles in the carpet. The decorations were a variety of ornaments collected as gifts, handmade at school by us kids, or free gifts from *Reader's Digest* for reordering. Auntie Miriam, the sister of Grandma's ex-husband, Herb Hardin, would give her Avon ornaments every year without fail, along with something beautiful and handmade. Eventually Grandma started collecting ornaments made by Native artists as they appeared more and more in gift shops. Granny Hardin, her ex-mother-in-law, a good Methodist woman, always brought her crochet work along with homemade jams and bourbon-soaked fruitcake, which I learned as an adult was awesome with vanilla bean ice cream. (Grandma stayed close to the Hardin side of the family even though she had divorced Grandpa Hardin in 1957. They were loving people who wanted to help and be involved with the family.)

The three or four days preceding Christmas Eve were all about grocery shopping and last-minute gifts. Grandma always remembered her sisters at Santa Clara Pueblo—Aunt Jane, Aunt Rosita, and Aunt Legoria. It was the same every year: jet black hair dye, pajamas, and slippers. That's what they all gave to each other. She would go to Santa Clara the day after Christmas if the weather wasn't bad. She would have bought gifts for everyone in the second and third generations except, as she put it, "They won't stop having kids and I'm not that rich." (However, she was always thoughtful about gifts for baby showers, weddings, and graduations.)

Two days before Christmas, Grandma would get in her long Cutlass station wagon, sometimes with us, sometimes without, and drive for an hour to South Coors Boulevard in the most

**Pablita Velarde**, *The Flight into Egypt* (detail), ca. 1960, casein on board, 20×24 in. Courtesy Golden Dawn Gallery, Santa Fe. This is one of several Christmas scenes which Velarde painted for the Christmas cards which she would have printed and then would sign and sell.

southwest, undeveloped, poor part of Albuquerque to get the cubed pork for her posole. Ordering it ahead of time was a must, since this cut of pork was the most sought-after pork in Albuquerque. She ordered hers right after the first of December.

At some point during these last few days, Mama would drop me off at Grandma's to "help." That was her way of getting a break to go shopping at the last minute. Grandma's house smelled like Pine-Sol and carpet freshener and posole. She was getting ready for her Christmas Eve party, for which she made her posole, red chile, bizcochitos, and empanaditas. The Hardin side of the family all came, friends of Grandma's, me and mom, Uncle Herby, his wife, and their son, Ralphie.

"Grandma, can we open presents yet?" I would ask.

"Grandma, can we open presents yet?" Ralphie was a copycat.

"No. You just wait until everyone has had some posole. Don't ask again."

I usually persuaded Ralphie to ask again, then he'd get in trouble.

As Grandma served the posole, Ralphie and I were chomping at the bit, waiting to open presents. Everyone who walked through the front door brought each of us a gift, and we knew it. It was torture. Ralphie and I were always way too excited about opening presents to eat anything. We spent the evening scoping out wrapping paper, and the shape and size of the gifts.

OK, as soon as everyone was finished eating, *it was time!* Ralphie and I had to hand out presents to other family and extended family members as well as open our own. Uncle Rolly and Uncle Jack always got Old Spice Cologne. Granny Hardin, Auntie Miriam, and her old maid twin, Auntie Melva, always got body powder, and someone always got a small painting.

Mama always splurged a little with Grandma's gift. In 1972 the Tesuque artist Patrick Swazo Hinds produced a suite of stone-pulled lithographs. This was her present to Grandma. I remember Grandma being so genuinely happy that she put the portfolio away in her closet, and it never saw the light of day



Pablita Velarde with Margarete Bagshaw, ca. 1969. Photographer unknown, from a family photo album. Courtesy Margarete Bagshaw.

until I was sorting through her closet after she died, in 2006. That was where she kept her precious things, safe in her closet.

Once everything was doled out and opened, Ralphie and I were hungry, crying and fighting because everything was too overwhelming.

Things changed when Mama married Cradoc Bagshaw in 1973. He made us wait to

open presents until Christmas morning, and the first year of their marriage I just got up and opened my presents by myself because Mama and Cradoc were grumpy if I woke them up too early. Then I got in trouble for not waiting. The next eight years we did Christmas the Bagshaw way, and I had to wait for my presents from Grandma. It saddened Grandma that our family traditions had been let go and things had changed so much. Mama would make an attempt at cooking Christmas dinner, but Helen Hardin was not into cooking. It was just the three of us, and there was nothing cozy or fun about it. I just couldn't wait to go skiing or back to school. Sometimes a trip to Tucson to visit Grandpa Hardin was a great thing. Grandpa always had a big family Christmas as well. It had the same kind of cozy family feeling Grandma's did, sort of.



Mama died June 9, 1984. I was nineteen years old. Everyone was lost that following Christmas. I went to the Bay area with my stepdad, Cradoc, to see his brother. Greg Tindel, still only my boyfriend, went to Texas to spend time with his family. Uncle Herby went to San Antonio to see his kids. Grandma stayed home and sadly made posole for the few friends and family members that might stop by.

In the late 1980s the warm tradition of Christmas Eve at Grandma's house returned to our lives with new laughter and excitement. I was married and having my own children, Helen and Forrest. They were about the same distance apart in age as Ralphie and I. The tradition returned with some modifications. My children were involved in church Christmas activities, so they had obligations before we went to Grandma's for posole.

I took on a great deal of cooking responsibility; otherwise Grandma would shop, cook, and clean for Christmas past the point of exhaustion. She would inspect my dinners for anything out of the ordinary. Because my husband's family was from south Texas, I started introducing southern dishes like spicy sausage dressing, oyster dressing, broccoli and rice casserole, and pecan pie, as well as whipping up my own piñon dressing stuffed inside a twenty-three-pound turkey rubbed with red chile, garlic, and butter. I don't remember what year it was, but at some point Grandma approved my ability to take the reins of this very important event, to the point that I was not able to go anywhere for the holidays without causing other family members to panic: *Who's going to cook?*

Christmas of 2005, my children Helen and Forrest were growing up, my first marriage was ending, and at forty-one, I started a new journey in my life, going to California for the holiday with Dan, whom I would marry five years later. At eighty-seven, Grandma stayed home to cook, clean, and take care of other relatives and their kids, just like always. I bought her a beautiful honey-glazed ham and all the sides from a specialty store, so she wouldn't have so much to do, but she still made her pot of posole and red chile. They would be her last. Grandma overdid it, stayed up late babysitting, became worn out, and caught a cold which turned into pneumonia. Pablita Velarde, my grandma, passed away January 11, 2006.

I now love purchasing a variety of beautiful farm-raised Christmas trees. We decorate with ornaments that are store bought to supplement those that are handmade by my children, myself, or my mother. Some represent eight decades of style or lack thereof. I still have the beautiful artistic creations, Native and non-Native, collected by Grandma and Mama. I don't have grandchildren to spoil yet and don't know if that will ever happen. Cooking for and with family and friends is the strongest link I have to that very special time with Grandma—doing it the way she taught us and still making our own traditions. ■

**Margarete Bagshaw's** one-woman retrospective, *Margarete Bagshaw: Breaking the Rules*, is at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture through the end of the 2012. She and her husband, Dan McGuinness, operate Golden Dawn Gallery and have opened the Pablita Velarde Museum of Indian Women in the Arts, both in Santa Fe. Margarete Bagshaw's memoir, *Teaching My Spirit to Fly*, was published in 2012 (see News and Notes, p. 16).

## Pablita Velarde's Empanaditas

Margarete Bagshaw found this recipe in Pablita Velarde's papers after her grandmother died. Margarete's comments are in square brackets.



Grandma's posole, with red chile and pueblo oven bread, was her version of comfort food, and it warmed us up any time it was cold. The empanaditas were my favorite—fried little sweetmeat pies with a minced-meat flavor.

**Filling** Make the filling the day before so the flavors have time to sit. Yield 7 to 8 dozen (depending on how big or small you make them).

- 2 lbs of cooked beef (you can use 1 lb beef and 1 lb pork)
- 2½ cups of minced meat [the prepared, store-bought mixture of dried fruit and spices]
- ½ cup of pine nuts (Piñon) or chopped pecans [but some people are allergic to pecans]
- ¾ tsp allspice
- 1 tsp nutmeg
- ¾ cup sugar
- 1 tsp salt
- ¼ cup whiskey (bourbon or brandy)

Boil meats until tender. Let cool, then grind [Grandma used an old-fashioned meat grinder; now we use a food processor]. Add minced meat, spices, nuts, and sugar until filling becomes thick and moist. If filling is too dry, add a little corn syrup. Let sit overnight, but if you have to do it the same day, let it sit at least two hours.

**Dough** Yield 7 to 8 dozen.

- 6 cups flour [add more as needed to achieve stiff, dry texture]
- ½ package of yeast
- 1½ Tbs sugar
- 1½ tsp salt
- 1 egg
- 4 tbs pure lard
- 3 cups of lukewarm water

In a mixing bowl, place yeast, sugar, and salt, adding the water and stirring until dissolved. Add melted lard and egg (beaten) along with flour to make a stiff, dry, dough. Roll out dough ⅛ inch thick. Cut with large round cookie cutter about three inches [in diameter].

Put a couple teaspoonfuls of filling in the middle and fold them in half. Pinch them with a fork so they will seal well. Deep fry in lard or vegetable shortening until they are golden brown. Try sprinkling with a mixture of cinnamon and sugar.

