

Christmas in the Park: A San Jose Tradition

**Carol McCullough
486 Matadero Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94306
(650) 213-8113**

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What began as a small Christmas display in front of a mortuary has become a San Jose tradition. In 1948, Donald Lima, Sr. erected a simple nativity scene outside his mortuary on Willow Street in San Jose. The original Lima display has grown into Christmas in the Park, an elaborate, popular collection of individual Christmas displays that draws thousands of community members to see it every year. The exhibit has endured location changes and heated debates. But it has survived the difficult times. In fact, decades after its humble inception, the display has continued to be an integral part of Santa Clara County Christmas festivities.

The Beginning

Donald Lima, Sr. was a showman in the wrong business. Well, perhaps not the *wrong* business, considering 1981 reports that showed that his mortuary was the 6th largest in California. But he didn't avoid attention or publicity -- at least that seems to be implied by his acquisition of a \$95,000 bus that played a 21-gun salute to honor deceased military personnel and his having a 30-foot windmill installed at Cedar Lawn Cemetery.

Don Lima had Santa Clara county roots. He was born in Palo Alto in 1923 and raised in the "Goosetown" area of San Jose (residents of "Goosetown" alone among San Joseans had permission to have livestock and fowl on their property). In a 1999 *San Jose Mercury News* article, Gus Lima said of his father, "He liked helping people. He had a huge heart."

By 1948, Lima had already established his own mortuary business on Willow Street in San Jose, having attended the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science. That year, he decided to set up a Christmas display in front of his business establishment to give a more positive spin to the public's perception of a funeral home. Gus Lima remembers a photograph from that year in which his sister was in a manger as part of the nativity scene in front of the mortuary.

Originally just a nativity scene, the display expanded. Some of the displays were now animated. Lima found people to help make the characters displayed. Some were made, and some were bought. The original characters were, according to Gus Lima, "one-dimensional figurines;" eventually, "mannequins" were added. The figures were made of all different materials, including plastic. San Jose residents started contributing to the Christmas exhibit by providing displays of their own and helping with setup. Setting up

the display was also a family affair: Lima's children Carly, Joe; and Don, Jr. were among those recruited to help. The display was stored in garages at the mortuary, and offsite storage facilities were also used.

Native San Josean Edward Allegretti remembers the display from his childhood, having been driven to see it annually (starting in the 1960s) by his parents: "The mortuary was decorated with Christmas lights, while the nativity scene and other Christmas[-]type items were on the front lawn," he says, adding, "For that time, it was one of the largest Christmas light displays in town." Ed Bautista of the City of San Jose was quoted in a 1999 *San Jose Mercury News* article as saying, "Everybody in San Jose went to this [exhibit]." Allegretti concurs: "It was well[-]received by the community and it seems everyone knew about it and drove over every year to see it." Regarding the way people learned about it, Gus Lima said, "It spoke for itself," says Gus Lima, "it was word of mouth." People would traditionally look at the trees and the lights in the Willow Glen Area, Lima said.

More and more people came to see the Christmas display -- so many that traffic became a problem, both for people who were just trying to pass through and for those who had business at the mortuary. There had even been some theft of display pieces. At the height of its popularity the display stretched two miles in either direction, according to Gus. It was after 1970 that Lima gave the exhibit to the City of San Jose.

A New Chapter: City Hall

Having outgrown its original location in front of Don Lima's mortuary, the exhibit was adopted in 1970 by the City of San Jose. Lima's displays were now showcased in front of City Hall. After quite a few years at that location, the exhibit was forced to become dormant because the city couldn't afford to run the display.

City Plaza Park

The exhibit could once again bring pleasure to Christmas revelers in 1980, when it was resurrected by a committee of volunteers. Aided by the city's Parks and Recreation Department, the volunteers gave it a home at City Plaza Park (now the Plaza de Cesar Chavez) in downtown San Jose.

In 1981, the city introduced its first holiday parade to accompany the display now known as Christmas in the Park. Since then, the parade has grown enormously, having expanded from an event boasting one band and a small number of floats to what, as of 1999, was deemed the largest Northern California holiday parade.

On December 6, 1988, Don Lima died of cancer, having seen his creation grow by leaps and bounds. Before he was buried, his funeral hearse transported him around the Christmas in the Park display.

The Creche Controversy

In 1994, the Christmas in the Park nativity scene was removed from the display and relocated to St. Joseph's Cathedral, not far from the exhibit. Protest ensued in the form of thousands of calls and letters to the Christmas in the Park board; in contrast, just one phone call affirmed the decision. The office of Mayor Susan Hammer also received phone calls from people who were unhappy about the decision. A group of evangelical Christians expressed their disagreement with the creche's ouster by staging a "living nativity" scene in the Plaza de Cesar Chavez. Some citizens took to forming their own protest group called Citizens for Return of the Nativity Scene. Just before the board announced its intention to return the creche, group representative Deborah Kamboj told the *San Jose Mercury News* she planned to start circulating a petition to return the nativity scene.

As a result of the flood of protest, the board held a special meeting at Leninger Center on Thursday, December 1, 1994. After convening for an hour and a half and voting unanimously to revoke their previous decision, they announced that they would bring back the nativity scene. The nativity scene was indeed returned, but not to the southern end of the park, where it had stood for 15 years. Instead, it was placed inside the plaza (a less conspicuous location).

There seems to be some mystery surrounding the question of who was ultimately responsible for the decision. According to *San Jose Mercury News* reports, Mayor Susan Hammer said that she and her office had no part in the decision to take the nativity scene out of the display; however, she did ask her chief aide, Gary Robinson, to

talk to Jewish leaders who had reservations about the idea of displaying the scene in the park. As it turned out, these Jewish leaders had not requested a meeting with the Board; rather, the board, a group of 26 volunteers responsible for organizing the annual Christmas display had invited Lil Silberstein, Ruth Sporer, and another Jewish leader in the community to attend a meeting in October to talk about the manger scene.

Although Silberstein refused to tell the *Mercury News* what she said at the meeting, the *News* reported that some board members said that input from Jewish leaders had weighed heavily in their decision to remove the nativity scene.

According to another article, some active and former board members (all of whom refused to give their names) said they had been concerned about their ability to receive funding from the City if they failed to remove the nativity scene. These individuals, according to the article, claimed that Mayor Hammer's office did indeed have something to do with the decision to remove the nativity scene. A December 2 *San Jose Mercury News* article described Silberstein and Sporer as "close supporters of the mayor."

Another article from that paper, also dated December 2, says that "the board's decision to exile the baby Jesus from the city-owned park had drawn an endorsement from Hammer." Yet on December 1, the mayor issued a statement expressing her approval of the board's decision to return the creche. A December 3 *San Jose Mercury News* article quoted Sporer as saying she was "very disappointed" that the board had made the decision to reinstate the nativity scene. However, it seemed that the goal was tolerance and ensuring that people got along, as Silberstein said (quoted in the *Mercury News*), "I'm glad the issue has been put to rest for the moment. I think there is much room for greater understanding between people, between cultures, between religions and between races."

In the same article, Sporer was quoted as saying, "I don't want people to end up saying that the Jews were the Grinch that stole Christmas."

Representatives from the Jewish community have not been alone in voicing objections to the nativity scene. A few years after the 1994 nativity uproar, the American Atheists began protesting. The protest followed an unmet request that the City and Christmas in the Park banish the nativity scene from the display. The following year, a protest was held the day of the Christmas parade "in order to attract more attention and educate the greatest number of people," according to Dave Kong, California State Director of the American Atheists. The American Atheists were granted a display space in the scene (in the 2000 display there were trees decorated by many different local organizations), which included a Solstice tree.

Not too long before the creche controversy began, the City had bought a \$500,000 statue of Quetzalcoatl, a representation of an Aztec god, which was placed in the southern portion of the park. Knowing this just added to the ire some citizens experienced. A 1994 *Mercury News* article said, "Several religious groups opposed placing the statue in the park, saying it was a religious and pagan idol." In the same article, Kamboj (of the Citizens for Return of the Nativity Scene) said, "A lot of us feel that, yes, we're a diverse city, but if they can have the Quetzalcoatl statue down there, why can't we have our nativity scene?"

Dan Pulcrano, who was publisher of Metro Newspapers in 1994, opposed using tax money to establish exhibits of a religious nature and rejected both the Quetzalcoatl statue and the nativity scene in the park.

In a letter to the editor in the *San Jose Mercury News*, Joe Lima (a son of the display originator) wrote:

The whole issue of removing the manger scene from Christmas in the Park to another location because it is offensive is very upsetting to me. The word 'offensive' bothers me.

You may not believe in something, but to label it 'offensive' and automatically remove it is not right. The entire nativity scene takes up less than one percent of the Christmas in the Park display. What is the meaning of Christmas? Have we lost it?

My father, Don Lima Sr., started the display at the Lima Family Erickson Willow Street location for the public's enjoyment. It was never his intent to use it as a religious statement. He donated the entire Christmas display as a unit, including the nativity scene, and the city of San Jose accepted it gladly.

In the spirit of the original donation, I think it only fair to keep it intact. For those of other religious beliefs, I suggest that they display scenes of similar significance to them during their important holidays. To do so would be enlightening to those unfamiliar with non-Christian traditions and it might promote better understanding among us all.

Let's return to the spirit of the season -- goodwill toward all.

It is clear that there existed (and probably still do) powerful emotions on either side of the issue. Although it was impossible to satisfy everybody, the City listened to the majority response and acted on it. The community (at least those who felt strongly enough about the issue to call or write) wanted the nativity scene, and they got it.

Looking Below the Surface: The Symbiotic Relationship of Community and Display

Christmas in the Park reflects the playfulness of childhood, the excitement and anticipation of waiting up for Santa, giving and receiving gifts, playing with toys, singing Christmas carols -- all the things that say "Christmas" to anyone intimate with American popular culture. It also reflects the birth of Christ, which is for believers both a sacred mystery and the central meaning of the holiday. Throughout the years, new displays have been added, including Victorian-style Christmas scenes, a Nutcracker display, elves, trains, characters from Mother Goose stories, miles of lights, and more.

The Christmas in the Park display is not so notable for what it is but what it evokes and what it inspires in people. It has the power to bring adults back into a world of childlike innocence and simplicity — a stark contrast to busy Silicon Valley lives full of complexity, competition, entangling concerns, and mundane daily routines. Perhaps that's the real attraction of Christmas in the Park. Christmastime reminds that our busy workday cares aren't really as important as we think they are and helps us readjust our priorities. Christmas in the Park can be seen as an escape and a sort of readjustment meter. The author of an uncredited 1994 *San Jose Mercury News* piece perceives a dichotomy in the world of Christmas in the Park:

There's something slightly surreal about Christmas in the Park: carols mixing with the roar of incoming jets, elegant hotels towering over rustic wooden displays — four singing skunks, three dancing dolls, a pair of parachuting penguins.

But there's also something immensely charming about it, something that draws thousands of people into the chilly paths of Plaza de Cesar Chavez every night. Nothing brings far-flung, multi-cultured San Jose together like Christmas in the Park, to stroll, to kiss, to push phalanxes of baby strollers, to sip hot chocolate and stare at the 30,000 lights....

The juxtaposition of the almost scandalously simple with the devastatingly sophisticated seems to jar the writer, but perhaps that simplicity is just the thing for which people long — and it seems they are especially reminded of their desire at Christmastime, when blessings are counted, when Christians contemplate the meaning of the holiday, and when there is a strong focus on family and friends and on doing things together.

Just as children in the 50s and 60s went with their families to marvel at the festive Lima Christmas displays, so did new generations of children. In a 1999 letter to the editor in the *San Jose Mercury News*, Hugh Smith tells of a Christmas adventure he had with his granddaughter:

One night last week, I took my granddaughter into town to see one of the movies at the Tech and to see Christmas in the Park.... We got off at the Convention Center stop, and made it to the movie in time. Then we had an enjoyable evening seeing the lights, and buying a burger at Johnny Rockets, playing old tunes for only a nickel, just like in the good old days.

The tradition seems to facilitate a merging of the present and past. Seeing the lights and all the characters was, it seems, an activity that families shared when they visited the original Lima displays. Today, the display appears to retain that ability to draw families together for a festive celebration of Christmas.

One might be surprised that, because San Jose is such a big city, it could continue to present such a display. Perhaps it's because San Jose has a small-town heart even though it's not a small town: In a 1999 *San Jose Mercury News* letter to the editor, Hugh Smith of San Jose said, "A few years ago, I took a lady friend from L.A. to see Christmas in the Park. She was in awe. She said, 'In L.A., they could never do this, because people would steal it.'"

Although Christmas in the Park may seem idyllic — perhaps even perfect — it has not been immune to theft. In addition to the theft that preceded the display's bestowal to the City of San Jose, there was a notable incident in 1986. That year, the taking of wheels from a parade float threatened to put a damper on parade festivities. But the docents from the San Jose Historical Museum who had been slated to stand on the float adapted by walking the route instead.

Although criminals have attempted to mar the smoothness and tranquility of the otherwise peaceful world of Christmas in the Park, the spirit of endurance has prevailed. This kind of attitude seems to fit with the zealous, almost patriotic fire of the sentiments expressed by the *Mercury News*'s Barbara Vroman:

There's a story around town that one of the candidates for president of San Jose State last year walked out of the Fairmont Hotel, took one look at Christmas in the Park and dropped out of the running. If it's true, I say good riddance. Anybody who doesn't appreciate Christmas in the Park doesn't deserve to live here.

Traditions are not easily shaken. It seems Christmas in the Park is no exception.

Although not a native of Santa Clara County as her husband was, Mary Lima contributed to what has become a San Jose holiday staple. Even after her husband's death, she was involved with securing finances for the display. Quoted in the obituary for Mary Lima, JoAnn Cymanski, her daughter, said, "It was their [Donald and Mary's] dream to see it one day fill the park — it's amazing how it grew." She continues: "Mom loved her city and couldn't do enough to make this just a wonderful place." What had started as a simple nativity scene has evolved into an elaborate presentation that cost, in 1999, a total of \$150,000 to \$180,000 to operate. Now stored on Center Road in San Jose, according to Gus Lima, the display boasted 70 individual

animated displays and 200 decorated trees in 1999. In 1985, a mere twenty-five percent of the park was needed to display Christmas in the Park. By 1999, the display had expanded to cover the entire area. That year it was estimated that it took a total of 22,000 hours of volunteer work to put the display together. In 1999, it was estimated that about 400,000 people come to see the display.

Christmas in the Park is more than animated characters and a nativity scene. It is the essence of Christmas for San Jose, a long-standing tradition that, if the patterns of the past continue, will continue to enjoy longevity and popularity. It is the essence of Christmas in San Jose.

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