

First Christmas at Kendall Camp by Carmencita Romanach

Christmas is a very special season of joy especially for Catholics around the world. Along with the religious festivities, going to church and the usual display of a **“nacimiento” in our living rooms**, Cuban families used to reunite and celebrate together the coming of **Baby Jesus with the “Nochebuena Dinner”** on December 24th and later the **“Reyes Magos”** that brought presents to the children on January 6th. Our Cuban family celebrations included not only our parents and siblings but also members of our extended family as well, with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and even close friends and neighbors. It was certainly the best time of the year! We even had some colder days during the season to go along with the Nativity greeting card scenes with snow that we used to send our friends during Christmas.

For many thousands of Pedro Pan children 1961 and 1962 were very sad years, years **that marked our “growing up” in a 45 minute flight** from Cuba to an uncertain future. Our parents had made the ultimate sacrifice to save us from communist indoctrination and we found ourselves away from our parents for the first time, in a different country with no knowledge of the language, trying to make sense of what we had just been through. For the younger ones it was very difficult, for the older ones it was not only difficult it brought the responsibility of taking care of our younger siblings as well. The Christmas season made the pain of separation and the uncertainty of the moment even more unbearable for all.

On that first Christmas of 1961 a wonderful group of Pedro Pan boys, after a few weeks **of “a slow and sad time at Kendall” decided to build an outdoor nativity scene on the Kendall camp premises**, on the corner facing SW 79th St. and SW 114th Ave. The project **“was built from scratch.” Even though they probably didn’t realize** it at the time this was a labor of love for the enjoyment of the other Pedro Pan children at the camp. As one of them wrote, dozens of Kendall residents took pictures next to these two projects and have shared those pictures with their children and grandchildren and told them about our Pedro Pan story.

According to one Pedro Pan, “the two Christmas projects came about because little had been planned beyond a plastic tree for the lobby and presents. On the third week of December, we thought and proposed to build a cutout nativity to be placed at the crossroads in front of the camp, and for a ***Nacimiento indoors.*”**



Fr. Luis Perez was very enthusiastic about the indoor nativity and paid out of pocket for the papier mache figures that were bought on the Woolworth store downtown on December 16th. All the work on the indoor *nacimiento* was done on December 24th and it was placed on a table on the left hand side of the altar. The artistic work included painted paper simulating rockery and a cave.



This group of industrious Pedro Pan started to work on the outdoor Nativity scene on Sunday, December 17th and placed the finished cutouts at the crossroads on December 22nd. According to **another Pedro Pan**, **“one member of the staff people brought in a sheet of Masonite. Unfortunately, he brought pegboard, so after we were done sawing and painting there were holes all over Jesus, Mary, Joseph, as well as the one lonely sheep, although looking at it now it looks more like a beagle.”**

One **Pedro Pan** was responsible for enlarging an *“estampita”* to full size, cutting the board and painting within the lines and nailing the parts. Having the whole thing stand for more than five minutes can probably be considered a Pedro Pan miracle! The rest of **the group helped crushing the paper, passing a nail and of course, “con palabras de consuelo y miradas de compasion” supported the project.** At some point, the group came to the conclusion that the pegboard was not a bad idea after all because its many holes would hold up better on windy days or nights.

Kendall Camp has a very special place in my heart because it was the first place where my two younger brothers and me found shelter upon arrival in Miami. It was a temporary shelter for most Pedro Pan, some of us were there for only a few days, others **a little bit longer as the camp adapted to the growing number of “unaccompanied minors” arriving from Cuba.** For me, those 9 days at Kendall camp in October 1961, with all its uncertainties and also with the deep pain for having left in Cuba everything we cherished and loved, left its mark. Later on in life, every time I visit Kendall camp I feel a deep sense of gratitude and peace within me.

The story of this group of very resourceful Pedro Pan boys that made the best with what they got that first Christmas of 1961 deeply touched my heart. Their names will remain anonymous by their own request but their story is worth sharing as part of our Pedro Pan history.

On November 22, 2013, Miami Dade County will unveil Pedro Pan Street in the former Kendall Camp thanks to the efforts of OPPG’s Historic Committee. The Pedro Pan Street sign will stand very close to that first Nativity scene that our Pedro Pan brothers built for us 52 years ago.