

Legends of the Poinsettia by Betty Barton

When my husband, Jody Barton, told me about how the poinsettia plant was a part of the history of the Barton family, I was fascinated and wanted to tell everyone about it.

One day I was looking through a December issue of *Southern Living* and there was an article about poinsettias and the history of its naming by the Bartons of South Carolina. I wanted to know more about the flower and its history and this is what I learned.

The poinsettia is truly the flower of our Christmas celebration. It was cultivated by the Aztecs of Mexico long before the introduction of Christianity to the western hemisphere.

After colonization by the Spanish, the Mexicans adopted the poinsettia as a symbol of Christmas and of Central America's evangelization. Because of its religious significance, the plant spread by trade throughout the Mexican States.

Not only does the time of bloom hold importance, the color does also. Although the Aztecs viewed the red bracts or leaves as a reminder of blood sacrifices, the Christians and Catholics liked to think of it as the blood of Christ.

The first religious significance was in the 17th century. Since the flowers bloomed during the Christmas holidays, the Franciscan priests near Taxco, Mexico, used them in the Fiesta of Santa Pesebres, a procession of the Nativity.

There were two legends surrounding the flower. One was that a small boy wanted so much to have his very own gift to lay before the Crèche at his church, as was the custom on Christmas Eve. It took prayer and a miracle for him to be able to do this because he was very poor. Legend has it that beautiful plants with scarlet leaves and yellow flowers

in the center came up where he knelt to pray outside the church. He picked the flowers for the Christ-child and laid them at the Crèche.

Another legend was that the mother of a young girl named, Pepeta, was asked to weave a blanket to cover the Baby Jesus in the Manger in the Crèche at the church. The mother became very ill and could not finish the blanket and Pepete could not do it alone. The best she could do was to pick an armful of green weeds. As she prayed, the green weeds were transformed into little flaming red stars with green branches. Today, the Mexicans refer to them as "La Flor de Noche Buena", the flowers of the Holy Night.

¹ www.britishbattles.com

Our U. S. Ambassador to Mexico from 1825 to 1830, Dr. Joel Robert Poinsett was captivated by the beauty of "the Flower of the Holy Night" and called it "painted leaves". He sent cuttings to his friend Wilson Barton in South Carolina. He was my husband's great-grandfather and is now buried in a cemetery outside of Burnet, Texas. He named the wild Mexican plants "poinsettias" after Dr. Poinsett. He then named his eldest son, who was my husband's grand-father, **Joel Robert Poinsett Barton [Thomas Barton b. c1732, md Sarah Wilson - DNA Lineage I.]** The Wilson family and Dr. Poinsett's family grew up together. When the Barton's had a child, they added the name of Poinsett to their given name. Likewise, the Poinsett family added the name Joel to their children's names. For example, Joel Robert Poinsett Barton was the name of my husband's grandfather, his father, and his own name (four generations).

The poinsettia plant is always a significant part of Christmas in the Barton families. It is displayed as a symbol of love and family unity in our homes.

Betty Barton is a retired professor and lives with her husband, Joel R. Barton, in Hilltop Lakes, Texas.

[Thanks to Cousin Skip (Mrs. Taylor J.) Barton for this timely submission]

[In the following issue of the Barton Historical Society Newsletter member Karla Cox Smith submitted this correction: "Regarding the timely article 'Legends of the Poinsettia' by **Betty Barton** [Winter 2007, pg. 2] for the record two facts need to be corrected: **Joel Poinsett Barton** was the eighth child of **Wilson and Mildah Barton** not the first and his name did not include "Robert" although he named his sixth child **Joel Robert Poinsett Barton.**"