

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Dia de los Muertos Celebration at the Museum

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Frontier Times Museum

Halloween is not the only day of the year spirits return to visit the living. In South Texas, Mexico and parts of Central America, on Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, altars are created to welcome spirits of passed love ones back to earth. The Day of the Dead traces its earliest roots to the Aztec people of central Mexico. On special days throughout the year, the Aztecs placed skulls in their temples to honor their dead. Once the Spanish conquered the Aztec empire in the 16th century, the Catholic Church moved these celebrations to the Catholic holidays of All Saints Day and All Souls Day on Nov. 1 and 2. The holiday combines indigenous traditions and symbols, such as the use of skulls, with the Catholic belief of an afterlife.

The centerpiece of the Mexican celebration is an altar, or ofrenda, built in private homes and cemeteries to welcome spirits back to the realm of the living. Alter offerings include favorite foods such as tamales, and treats the departed loved ones enjoyed in life such as pastries, alcohol and cigarettes. Other items that might adorn an alter are family photos and a candle for each dead relative, as well as pictures of saints, particularly the Blessed Virgin Mary and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Small toys and candy are placed for the spirits of children. Marigolds and marigold petals are traditionally used because their scent is believed to guide the wandering souls back home. Water is placed on the altar to quench the thirst of the departed after a long journey and salt which stops the souls of the dead from being corrupted by earthly temptations. The offerings are to keep the spirits happy so they will in turn provide protection, good luck and wisdom to their families.

Texas artist Joan Estes will create an elaborate Dia de los Muertes altar exclusively for the Frontier Times Museum. Estes will also install a series of original artwork that depict the calaca, or skeletons, in various poses and costumes. In addition to Estes' altar, the museum staff will create a community altar where everyone is invited to bring a personal offering, such as a photograph, favorite food, or token of a loved one who has died. Estes' artwork and the two altars will be on display in the museum's Doane Western Art gallery from Oct. 11 through Nov. 5. Your ofrenda may be brought by the museum anytime during these dates. To celebrate this unique holiday, the museum will host a free Family Activity Day on Saturday, Oct. 22 from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. with children's activities along with Mexican cookies and aqua frescas. Come visit and celebrate those who have gone before us in a shared space that will offer healing, comfort and reflection.