



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

In honor of the late Ted

For the past couple of years we have raised our own turkey for Thanksgiving.

We do this for several reasons, not least of which is that we keep making genuine efforts to raise or harvest our own food. Anyone who does this realizes that it is an uphill fight, and we are grateful we don't need to rely on it. The cold fact is that we would likely be dead, or in a near-death spiral, without Melvin's or Ray's. But we do try conscientiously, and for some reason we think it might be important.

The immediate benefit of raising one's own food is that it tastes better. Much better. Secondly, we know what it was fed or, more importantly, what it wasn't. That's true even of our vegetables, though I managed to sabotage a large portion of our garden this year in a moment of pure stupidity, a gargantuan lapse in judgment that cost us many pounds of vegetables. Lesson learned.

The third reason is likely spiritual, though some might call it fanciful: We find tremendous satisfaction in trying to feed ourselves. A dinner consisting entirely of one's own efforts is a treat indeed.

It's also a decidedly anti-establishment move, and allows us to indulge the occasional illusion that we are bucking the system.

The first two turkeys we raised were bronze turkeys

named Chad and Dave, after two of my former law-enforcement partners. Like their human namesakes, the turkeys were outgoing and convivial, tremendously intelligent, and capable of masterminding an occasional prank.

Turkeys are, for some reason that remains a mystery to me, notoriously difficult to sex as chicks, and so one takes a leap in questions of gender. Chad and Dave, turns out, were hens. They made enormous eggs, which helpfully eliminated any lingering questions. The real Chad and Dave remained interested in the welfare of their namesakes right up until the end, demanding occasional proof-of-life photos, which were obligingly sent. But the end did come, inevitably.

I take care of the sad end of that business myself. That is a necessary part of the equation and the learning curve and I won't say I enjoy it. I don't. There is a lot of wisdom in the old cavalry saying: *never name something you might have to eat*. But it is the responsible man's move, and something I learned at a young age, when one of my chores was helping to dispatch the occasional broiler.

We christened this year's turkey, also a bronze, Ted. We did this because, like the Texas Senator who was much in the news at that time, our Ted was decidedly lacking in a sense of humor and also bore a strange resemblance to Count von Count, of Sesame Street. It seems impossible, but life is full of strange truths. So Ted it was, and Ted it remained, even after we learned that Ted, too, was a hen.

I can admit that I'm not as fond of Ted as I was of Chad and Dave. Ted lacks — though as you are reading this it should be understood in the past tense — any sense of humor at all. For two months this summer Ted rose early and raised a

racket more annoying than a barnfull of roosters. Ted is — was — quite full of herself, harassing the chickens, hissing like a goose at strangers, and puffing up like a common thug every time I stepped into the pen. Ted wore out her welcome.

At least this is what I tell myself.

The first Thanksgiving, though it wasn't called that, lasted three days, and consisted of goose, venison, and lobster. This was a harvest festival, marking the victory of mere survival after half of the colonists died in the winter of 1620. Its success was, of course, largely the genius of Squanto and his Wampanoag buddies, who shared their skills. That was an act of generosity that no doubt came as a big relief to the Pilgrims who, as spring arrived, were starving, freezing, and suffering from scurvy. If the historians can be trusted, the Mayflower bunch — basically Deadheads in a sea-going van — were running out of sugar, and didn't even have an oven, so the first big party was lacking for pies.

Hard times, indeed. Fortunately, almost 400 years after Squanto saved the day, we won't have scurvy, and we will have pies. Early Thursday morning Ted will be in the smoker, and come dinner-time will grace our table.

And so once again it comes full circle. Ill-mannered and humorless — quite frankly she was a very rude bird — Ted still managed to enrich our lives each day, and by her passing to teach us lessons in sacrifice, grace, and humility. It's possible those have always been the best reasons to gather with family and friends to celebrate a harvest, to pray for continuing bounty, and to heap praise where it is deserved.

So for that alone we should be — and we most certainly are — especially grateful for Ted.

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