

Thanksgiving has rabble-rousing roots

Americans think of Thanksgiving as a holiday uniquely their own. According to popular legend, the Thanksgiving tradition began with the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony in 1621, and we have followed it ever since.

But the image of our dour reverent Puritan ancestors and their Indian friends solemnly partaking of turkey and pumpkin pie isn't very accurate.

Although 1621 was the year of the first American Thanksgiving, the holiday has its origins much farther back in time. And the three-and-a-half centuries since the first Thanksgiving have seen great changes in the mood, meaning and style of the occasion.

Contrary to what we're taught in grade school, the Pilgrims were not grim religious zealots. They wore bright clothes, drank vast amounts of ale, enjoyed sex and played games. It might be therefore expected that their manner of celebration would also be cheery, and it was.

But another older, more important reason explains why the first Thanksgiving was light and joyous. The Pilgrims were still largely medieval people, yeoman farmers out of the Middle Ages. When they left England they took with them their ancient folk customs one of which, Harvest Home, was the direct ancestor of our Thanksgiving holiday.

All past societies have had harvest festivals. An obvious example is the Greeks, who developed wild, raucous ceremonies around the mythical figures of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, and her daughter Persephone, the maiden of fertility.

But Harvest Home was distinctly English. Thomas Tusser, an Elizabethan farmer-poet, wrote of the harvest-time spirit:

In harvest-time, harvest folk
servants and all
should make all together
good cheer in the hall.

The holiday involved contests, merriment, prodigious eating and so much drinking that at one point Henry VIII had to intervene to assure that the crops would get in.

During their first year in America the Pilgrims must have wondered if they would ever celebrate Harvest Home again. Over half of them died that

winter, and their supplies ran dangerously low. But those who survived learned from the Indians how to plant corn and grain, and to hunt the woods, fields, rivers and ocean. When the harvest came in, they celebrated.

Religion wasn't the main theme of the first Thanksgiving, though. Thanks were naturally given. But in the spirit of the past, shooting contests, ball games, eating and ale-drinking were the order of the day.

As the early American diet ran to some 6000 calories daily, the quantity of food consumed at that first Thanksgiving was surely staggering. The main courses were goose and deer, five of the latter being brought by King

Massasoit's band of Indians. Also on the menu were wild turkey (not yet a favored dish), meat pies, frumenty (a sort of fruit pudding), stewed pumpkins (the ancestor of pumpkin pie), cakes and gallons of thick sweet ale.

The five surviving Pilgrim wives spent three days preparing the feast, which, contrary to modern imagination, was never consumed at one formal banquet. Instead, the eating was spread out over several days and, since there were then no tables in Plymouth Colony, took place mainly on the ground.

After 1621 Thanksgiving continued to be celebrated in America, but

in an informal way. It wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that it became a national holiday. Sarah J. Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, had campaigned to make Thanksgiving official. In editorials she asked, "Would it not be more noble, more truly American, to become national in unity when we offer to God out tribute of joy and gratitude?"

President Lincoln finally succumbed to Mrs. Hale's gushing appeals in 1863, proclaiming that the last Thursday in November was thenceforth to be the national Thanksgiving Day. He echoed Mrs. Hale's hope that God would participate in the proceedings.

Thereafter Thanksgiving was an American institution, centering around prayers of gratitude and lavish meals. In 1890, a lady's magazine suggested a "delicate yet elegant meal," eight courses long, which included oysters on the half-shell, soup, salmon with hollandaise sauce, roast turkey, sweetbread salad, pumpkin and mince pies, and cheese, crackers and nuts.

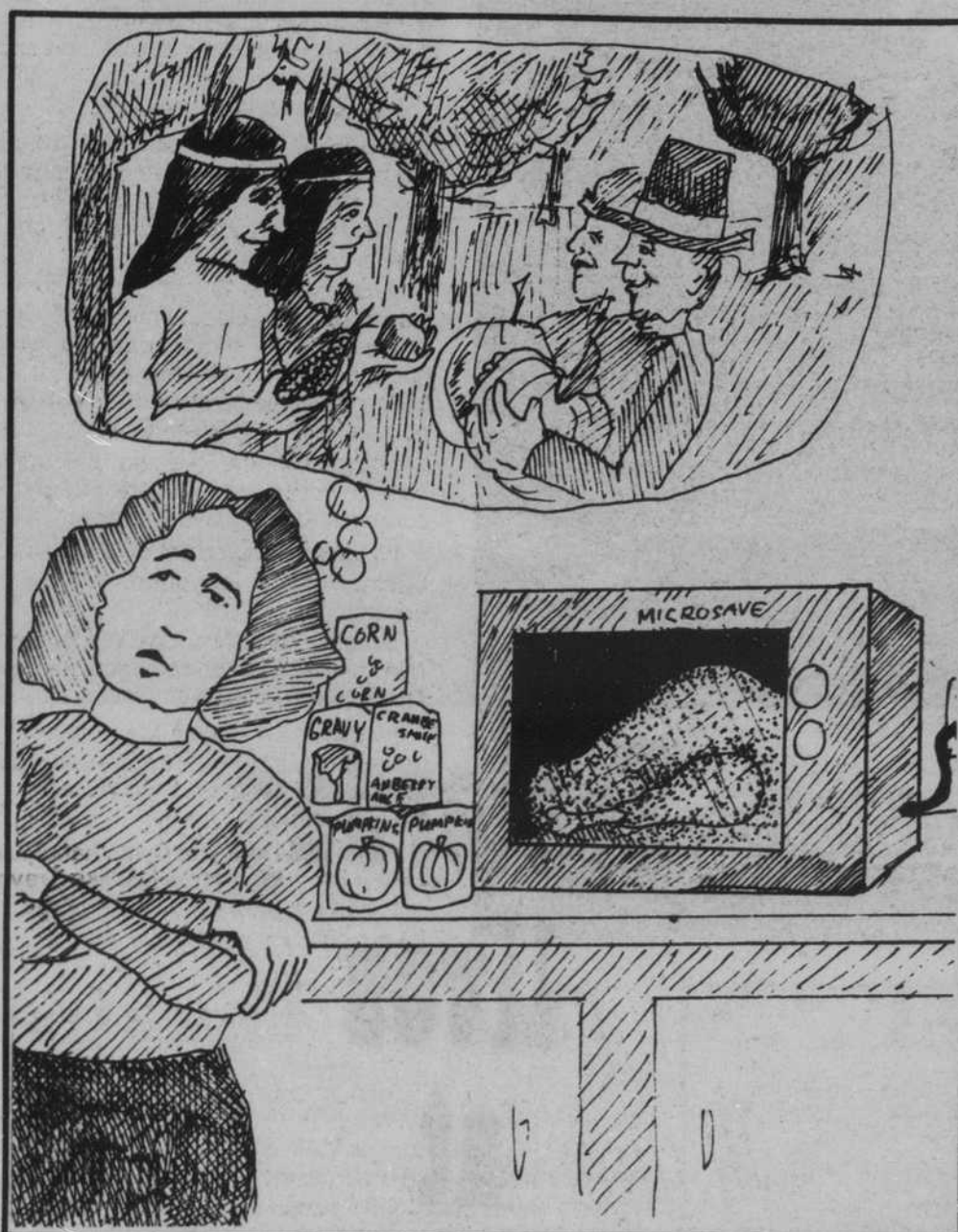
Although Thanksgiving today is basically as it was a century ago, changes have occurred. In 1939 President Roosevelt moved the holiday up a week, to the fourth Thursday in November. The change was intended to promote Christmas buying by adding a week to the Christmas shopping season.

Our Thanksgiving meal has also changed. We no longer have the appetites of the Victorians, not to mention the Puritans and our meals are scaled accordingly. In some cases the menu has been modernized indecently.

An example is the "Weight Watchers Thanksgiving" urged by a modern women's magazine. It features eggplant bisque soup, unstuffed turkey seasoned with dehydrated onion flakes and instant chicken broth. For dessert they suggest cranberry parfait made with artificial sweetener and gelatin.

However most Americans are more dedicated to tradition. In millions of homes across the land this year the harvest will be celebrated in the grand American manner. Whether or not attention is paid to the true origins of the holiday, it is nevertheless a day of national togetherness and thanksgiving.

By Edward Nelson



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