

Why It's Called a Turkey

by Richard H. Hopper

THE LARGE, red-wattled bird associated with Thanksgiving is native only to the eastern part of North America. Americans call this bird a *turkey*; Britons do too, along with everyone who speaks English or languages strongly influenced by English. In Nigeria, formerly a British colony, turkeys are bred for food and called *turkeys* in both the Ibo and Hausa languages. The Japanese, who have borrowed many English words, call the bird a *taki*.

Yet in no other language does the word for turkey sound or look like *turkey*. Here are some examples:

Spanish: *pavo*; Dutch: *kalkoen*; German: *Truthahn*; Greek: *galo*; Arabic: *diekrumi*; Russian: *ingimka*.

And, of course, the question inevitably arises: What do they call a turkey in Turkey? The word for turkey in the Turkish language is *hindi*. The word *turk* in Turkish is of Tartar origin and means "brave"; thus Turkey is the land of the brave.

Since the wild turkey was used for food by many American Indian tribes and domesticated by the Aztecs at least five hundred years ago, it is worth seeing what the American Indians called their largest bird—the bird Benjamin Franklin proposed for the United States national winged symbol, only to be turned down because it was felt the turkey lacked the dignity of the bald eagle. Here is the word for turkey in the languages of several eastern tribes:

Powhatan (Virginia): *monanow*; Delaware: *tshikenum*; Algonkian (Long Island): *nahiam*; Narragansett (southern New England): *nahenan*; Natick and Wampanoag (Massachusetts): *neyhom*; Abnaki (Maine): *nahame*;

Iroquois (upper New York): *netachrochwa gatschinale*.

It would seem that for an animal as conspicuous, important, and distinctively North American as the turkey, the English settlers at the Plymouth Colony would have borrowed the Wampanoag name *neyhom* from their neighbors. After all, such Indian words as *moose*, *raccoon*, *opossum*, *coyote*, *peccary*, and *jaguar* have come into the language unchanged. Why then do English and English-related people persist in calling a *neyhom* by the outlandish name *turkey*?

The first Europeans known to have seen turkeys were the Spaniards of Cortes's expedition, which landed in Mexico in 1519. Returning ships took some of the birds to Spain, where they multiplied as domestic fowl. Within a few years people had taken turkeys north and east. In France the birds were called "chickens of India" or chickens *d'Inde*, from which the modern French word *dindon* for turkey is derived. Likewise, the Turkish word for turkey, *hindi*, seems to indicate an origin in "the Indies," and probably some Turks knew that the birds had come from across the Atlantic. But as poultry breeders took them farther north, ideas as to the new fowl's origin became much vaguer. One of the earliest German names for the turkey was *Kalekuttisch Hün*, whence came the present Dutch and Scandinavian words *kalkoen* and *kalkon*; the Germans had the idea that the turkeys came from Calicut, in southern India. And it is a matter of record that the birds were well established in Britain by 1541 and were called *turkeys* at that time. Clearly, Britons thought that turkeys came from Turkey.

Perhaps they confused the newly

arrived birds with African guinea fowls, already in England and mistakenly thought to have originated in Turkey. In due time the true origin of guinea fowls became known; so the word *turkey* was reserved for their larger cousins.

Another theory suggests that the birds were captured in one of the series of naval battles fought between Turks and Spanish in the sixteenth century, brought back to Turkey, and there spotted by Englishmen who began calling them "birds of Turkey."

A third hypothesis holds that the English regarded the turkey as a sort of pheasant, just as the Spanish lumped the turkey with the peacock and called both *pavo* or *pavon*. The word *pheasant* (*faisan* in French and Spanish) comes from the Phasis River in what was once Turkey. The English knew pheasants and peacocks came from the East; no doubt this funny-looking new bird did too, so why not credit it to the Ottoman Empire?

IN ANY EVENT, the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century English bred these birds that they thought came from Turkey and so were well acquainted with them by the year 1620. Thus, on that first Thanksgiving Day at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621—featuring Gov. William Bradford, Miles Standish, Priscilla Mullins, John Alden, and all that crowd—when the Wampanoag chief Massasoit came forward and offered a wild bird for the feast, saying, "This bird is mighty good eating, folks—it's called a *neyhom*," the Pilgrims no doubt made a reply something like this: "Gee, thanks, Chief. We'll pluck this bird and roast it right away. These birds are well known to us in England; we call them *turkeys*." ☆

