Thanksgiving: A Favorite U.S. Holiday

Background

Thanksgiving in the United States is a time to gather with family and friends, share a traditional meal and express gratitude for the good things in life. It can also be a time of service to others in the community.

Celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, the American Thanksgiving holiday traces its origins to harvest festivals. It was customary to express gratitude for a bountiful harvest in the cultures of both the English settlers--called the Pilgrims--who sailed from England in 1620 and the Native Americans they encountered.

A three-day harvest celebration held in 1621 in Plymouth Colony, in what is now Massachusetts, is generally considered to be the first American Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims had arrived the year before on the ship Mayflower. They were short of food and it was too late to plant crops. Half the colony died during the winter of 1620–1621. In the spring, local Wampanoag Indians taught the colonists how to grow corn (maize) and other native crops. They helped them master hunting and fishing and showed the colonists how to cook cranberries, corn and squash.

The colonists had bountiful crops in the fall of 1621. They invited their Wampanoag benefactors to feast on wild turkeys, duck, geese, fish and shellfish, corn, green vegetables and dried fruits. Wampanoag Chief Massasoit and his tribe brought venison.

Harvest festivals eventually became a regular affair in New England. Thanksgiving was observed on various dates in the states until 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November as the national Thanksgiving holiday.

In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt signed a law fixing Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November.

Gathering Together and Helping Out

Many Thanksgiving traditions are reminders of that 1621 harvest celebration. Sheaves of wheat or

Top: Traditional North American harvest cornucopia of pumpkins, squashes, gourds and maize. Inset: Early woodcut of Plymouth Colony settlers meeting Wampanoag Indian chief Massasoit.

PHOTOS, TOP: © PHOTOSPIN, INC.
INSET: © NORTHWIND PICTURE ARCHIVES

corn are often used as decorations. Foods eaten at the first feast are still served at Thanksgiving dinner: Roast turkey, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie. But as the U.S. population becomes more diverse, so does the Thanksgiving meal. Nowadays, next to the Thanksgiving turkey might be a dish of tamales, tabouli salad, couscous or sauerkraut.

U.S. troops stationed overseas are served a Thanksgiving meal. When Americans at home sit down at the table and give thanks, they often express gratitude for their freedom and the sacrifices made to preserve it.

Many people volunteer to prepare and serve Thanksgiving meals to the needy. Others donate to food drives, work at food warehouses or deliver groceries to soup kitchens, churches and other charitable groups.

Families may watch the annual televised Macy's Department Store parade in New York or American football games played around the country. The day after Thanksgiving marks the beginning of the Christmas shopping season.

One whimsical modern practice is the annual "pardoning" of a turkey by the U.S. president, thus sparing the bird from the dinner table. The bird goes on to live out its fortunate life at a petting zoo.

Native Americans

The congenial harvest celebration of 1621 was followed by a long, painful relationship between Native Americans and European settlers. Many Native Americans in the United States see Thanksgiving as a "National Day of Mourning." However, others enjoy a traditional Thanksgiving meal at home or in large community gatherings with family and friends.

Native American history and culture are frequently discussed in schools around the Thanksgiving holiday and during November, designated National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month.

Today there are three primary communities of Wampanoag people in Massachusetts. Two groups are federally recognized tribes. According to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, the Wampanoag people live within their ancestral homelands and largely sustain themselves as their ancestors did by hunting, fishing, gardening and gathering. Many Wampanoag artists practice traditional basketry, wood carving, pottery and other crafts.

Members of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe play a drum at a tribal celebration in Mashpee, Massachusetts.

Top Left: A volunteer serves Thanksgiving dinners to the poor at a Greenwich Village community center in New York City. Top Right: A turkey parade float moves down Central Park West during the 2009 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York.

PHOTOS, TOP LEFT: © AP IMAGES/JOHN SMOCK
TOP RIGHT: © AP IMAGES/CHARLES SYKES
INSET: © AP IMAGES/VINCENT DEWITT