

THANKSGIVING THOUGHTS

A reflection of Thanksgiving traditions.

Whenever we Americans speak of Thanksgiving, naturally we think of the Pilgrims and their first Thanksgiving feast with the Indians. Actually, however, the idea of thanksgiving goes back to at least the beginning of recorded history. The Chinese observed a Moon Festival, which marked the end of the harvest season thousands of years ago. The Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, which lasted eight days, is still celebrated by the Jewish people. The ancient Romans and Greeks had harvest festivals which featured sacrifices to Ceres and Demeter, their respective goddesses of agriculture. Even the Anglo-Saxons held harvest-home celebrations. Throughout the history of the world, whenever there have been bountiful harvests, victories in battle, or safe journeys to new lands, there have been days of thanksgiving.

In 1621 the Pilgrims of Plymouth, too, felt the need to celebrate after a successful harvest season. We all know the story of the hardships they had endured during their Mayflower voyage and during the first winter they spent in America. They had faced cold, hunger, hostile Indians, sickness, and by spring more than half of the 102 Mayflower passengers had died.

Yet, when spring came there was new hope. Each family had a home, and Squanto, the friendly Indian, taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn. When the Mayflower returned to England, not one of the remaining Pilgrims was on board. The crops did very well, and after the fall harvest, a day of thanksgiving was set aside for feasting and celebration. Ninety Indians shared in this three day feast, which was followed by races and other athletic contests. Although the Pilgrims were very pious people, there is no record of any religious service included in this first Thanksgiving. This was solely a time for the enjoyment of God's gifts.

There wasn't another Thanksgiving celebration at Plymouth Plantation until 1623, and this was believed to be the real start of our present holiday, since it was both religious and social. This was the proclamation which Governor William Bradford issued in Plymouth Colony:

To All Ye Pilgrims

Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as He has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience; now, I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the daytime, on Thursday, November ye 29th of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and

twenty-three, and the third year since ye Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His Blessings.

William Bradford

Ye Governor of ye Colony

There is no evidence that Thanksgiving was regularly observed in the Plymouth Colony after 1623. The idea did spread to other settlements as they came along, but there was no colony-wide observance. There were many celebrations of thanksgiving during the next 240 years, but there was no annual day of thanks until Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national holiday and established a yearly observance in 1863 after the Battle of Gettysburg. It is interesting to note that a woman was instrumental in having this national observance established. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of Godey's Lady's Book, (but probably better known for her famous poem "Mary Had a Little Lamb") campaigned for seventeen years for a Thanksgiving Day through her editorials in each autumn issue of Godey's and by her letters to presidents, governors, ministers and housewives. Mrs. Hale became victorious at the age of 75 when President Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday of November as a national holiday. This date stood until 1941 when Congress changed it to the fourth Thursday of November.

Today when we celebrate Thanksgiving Day we still observe some of the traditions the Plymouth Pilgrims originated during their Thanksgiving rites and festivities. We attend church services where our ministers stress our religious heritage and we offer our thanks to God for his bounteous blessings. Then we share a luscious feast of turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pie with all the trimmings with family, friends, and, sometimes even with strangers. And of course, it wouldn't be Thanksgiving Day if the men didn't gather around the TV to watch football! We could equate these games to the athletic games held following that first Thanksgiving gathering, except the men today don't get nearly as much exercise.

We owe much to the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, for they planted the seeds of courage, hope and the devotion to freedom, which is our greatest heritage.

But we must also give credit to the countless other pilgrims of many races and creeds who have come to the United States through the centuries. Some have come looking just for adventure, some for religious or political freedom, and some for new opportunities for themselves and their families, but they have all brought with them many religious and festival customs which help to enrich our holidays and observances. As one writer put it, "America is like a mince pie. Lots of things go into the making of it." People of all races and faiths have brought a bit of their own kind of life into America. Each had a special flavor, and the mixture is something you can't equal anywhere else in the world.

I'm sure that William Bradford didn't realize the full scope of his words when he said, "Out of small beginnings great things have been produced; and as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone to many, yea, in some sort to our whole nation."

Prayer for Thanksgiving

We thank thee for our daily bread,
For faith by which the soul is fed,
For burdens given us to bear,
For hope that lifts the heart's despair.

We thank thee Lord, for eyes to see
The truth that makes, and keeps, men free;
For faults—and for the strength to mend them,
For dreams—and courage to defend them.

We have so much to thank thee for,
Dear Lord, we beg but one boon more;
Peace in the hearts of all men living,
Peace in the whole world this Thanksgiving.

~Joseph Alexander

Carrie Scott
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