

**BURT WOLF**  
**TASTE OF FREEDOM**  
**THANKSGIVING**



**PARADE**

The word parade comes from an old Spanish word that means “the stop.” It was used to describe the period of time when a foreign army stopped in a town and occupied it. During the occupation, soldiers marched through the streets which gave them a chance to show their strength and impress the local population.

Since the early 1920’s Gimble Brothers Department Store has marched its troops down the streets of Philadelphia occupying the hearts and minds of thousands of people while demonstrating the strength of the U.S. dollar and its power to purchase. Thanksgiving in America is a time when people give thanks for the things that they have and make plans to buy more things. Gimble’s may be gone, but the parade marches on.

The Saturday following Thanksgiving is always the biggest shopping day of the year. America is a nation that works hard and shops hard and Thanksgiving is the beginning of America’s most important shopping season. It is also a time when Americans give thanks for everything else they have, and they do that with friends and families. The basis for all the shopping is not to buy things for yourself, but to buy things for people you love. Americans shop and they share.

Thanksgiving in the United States is actually a combination of two ancient traditions. Even though it is called Thanksgiving, it is really made up of a fall harvest festival as well as a thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving days have been part of European tradition for hundreds of years. The King would



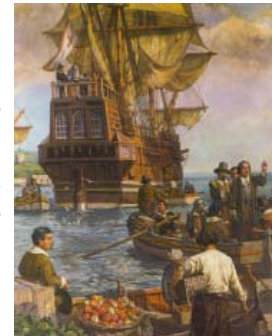
proclaim a holiday and ask everyone to give thanks for something that had happened—a victory in battle, the end of a plague, a member of the royal family reaching the age of 21 without being arrested on a drug charge. They were

one-time occasions, held because of a specific event. Prayers of thanks might be offered at official services in a place of worship, but these were not religious occasions—they were secular and political feasts.

Harvest celebrations were also part of European tradition. The crop had been brought in and people who lived on what they grew could see that they would have enough to eat until the next growing season. The harvest feast was an opportunity for a society to relax from the intense physical labor of the field and spend some time thinking about the end of the yearly growing cycle. The difficult work of reaping, picking and threshing was replaced with a party — of eating, drinking and romance.

**THE FOUNDING MYTH**

During their first winter in Massachusetts, half the colonists that reached North America on the Mayflower died. When spring arrived the survivors built eleven wooden houses and planted American corn, peas and barley. In the fall of 1621, there was a harvest and a crop to live on. The 55 men who survived, out of the 111 who arrived, decided to have a harvest feast.



The only eyewitness account is taken from a letter written by Edward Winslow to a friend in England. It reports that William Bradford, the first governor of the Massachusetts Colony, sent four men out to hunt for fowl and they came back with enough food to last a week. They brought in wild turkeys, ducks and geese. Fishermen arrived with eels and clams. The women baked breads, cakes and puddings. The chief of the local Native American tribe arrived with ninety men and stayed for three days which were spent feasting and entertaining each other. The letter also mentions that they all took part in a series of recreations that exercised their arms—which might just be where someone got

the idea of Thanksgiving football.

Harvest feasts were part of Native American tradition—the Indians were joining an event they shared and understood. They also realized that their presence



meant less food to go around; accordingly, the Native Americans went hunting and brought in more meat to share. They also introduced the pilgrims to the oyster.

At the time of the harvest feasts, which was in October, Governor Bradford proclaimed a Thanksgiving Day, to be held in November. At that time, the surviving colonists would give thanks for their continued existence.

Americans combined the Pilgrims harvest feast and their day of thanksgiving to produce our founding myth of Thanksgiving in the U.S. And the elements that made-up these two separate occasions have been blended together to become our present Thanksgiving. The feast takes place in the fall, the family gathers together, and there is a great deal of eating and drinking.

The idea of overeating on Thanksgiving goes back for hundreds of years. Harvest time was an extremely demanding period for the field workers. In medieval



times he was usually a tenant farmer who needed help from every member of his family in order to get the work done—backbreaking labor for hours on end. On the last day of the harvest, when

all the work was done, the landowner would reward his tenant farmer and the farmer's family with a great meal—good food and lots of drinks. Everyone would celebrate and thank the forces of nature for their bounty. Workers were often presented with the gift of a goose, which is where we get the custom of giving conscientious workers a turkey.

### WHAT'S COOKING?

Before the Reformation, Christmas was celebrated with enormous amounts of food, barons of beef, mince pies, plum puddings, ornate gift giving and twelve days of partying.

The Reformation condemned elaborate celebrations—high living was out. The Pilgrims would have celebrated Christmas in the new Protestant manner—staying at home, eating very little, praying and hardly speaking. But once you get into the good

life it's hard to give it up. The Pilgrims decide that an elaborate celebration was inappropriate at Christmas but high life was fine at the harvest. So the great and glorious meal was shifted to the harvest festival.



Thanksgiving is part of the end of summer/beginning of winter passage that starts with Halloween. The colors of the Thanksgiving foods are those of fall: gold and red. The particular foods associated with Thanksgiving are foods that became widely popular during the 1800's—turkey, pumpkin, Indian pudding, sweet potatoes, maple syrup and cranberries.

Before the Reformation the traditional main course at Christmas was a Great Bird— a peacock, a crane, a heron, a goose or a duck. When the turkey - which is native to the Americas - arrived in Europe in the 1600's, it was included in the Great Bird category.

The custom of eating Great Birds at Christmas died out. But they were still popular at harvest feasts, where the turkey had its greatest acceptance and eventually displaced the goose. During the 1700's, the idea of a Christmas feast began to return and the turkey came along as a central element in the meal giving it a spot on both the fall harvest and the Christmas tables.

Benjamin Franklin wanted the turkey to be designated as the national bird and was deeply disappointed when the eagle was chosen. In a letter to his daughter, he stated his opinion.

*I wish the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country. He is a bird of bad moral character; like those among men who live by swindling and robbing, he is generally poor, and often lousy. The turkey is a much more respectable bird and a true original native of America.*

- Benjamin Franklin, 1784

Recently Americans have seen the introduction of the **TERDUCKEN** — a chicken cooked inside a duck, which is cooked inside a turkey, thereby producing a meal with



four breast and six drumsticks. Clearly the terducken offers a great selection of parts, accordingly, the end result is a main dish that reflects the Nation's respect for freedom of choice.

**STUFFING** is also part of the Thanksgiving tradition and for good reason. Stuffing a food has always been an important part of festival recipes. It's a way of making a dish "fancy" without necessarily making it expensive. The work that goes into the stuffing of the turkey is clearly visible to everyone at the table. A stuffed turkey is more satisfying than an unstuffed bird because it shows more work, adds more food, and extends the number of flavors. It also sends a very clear message that life is plump, full, and bursting with abundance.



At any feast, guests are always trying to do two things: make an effort to show that they are united— one big family, sharing many common bonds, and at the same time trying to show that they are individuals and distinct from everyone else. At Thanksgiving, the turkey and the stuffing symbolize each of these elements.

The turkey is the main course and stands for our being united—everyone wants a turkey at Thanksgiving. The stuffing is unique to the family or the person who is doing the cooking. The stuffing is often made from an old family recipe that illustrates the family's origin, history, or wealth — it is a statement of individuality. The universal turkey containing the individual stuffing — it says, "I belong to a group but I am an individual."

**CRANBERRIES** also play a significant role at Thanksgiving. Traditionally, people prefer to eat special dishes at an annual feast and to taste those foods only in connection with that particular event. The food becomes part of what makes the festival special, and Thanksgiving is no exception. For many years cranberries were exclusive to the Thanksgiving meal. Some people made their cranberry relish from fresh cranberries, but most people bought cranberry jelly in a can and served it in a dish. The hockey puck shape and dark red color were very distinctive. Giving food a unique shape and serving it only in connection with a particular celebration is an old technique for making a food exclusive to a specific occasion.

**MOLDS** are often important at feasts: they give shape to a food and make an association between the shape and the celebration. The Thanksgiving Jell-O mold has been a popular form for almost a hundred years. It's festive, colorful and "individualized" by the shape of the mold and the particular fruits or marshmallows that are imprisoned in the gelatin. Each cook has their own aesthetics in connection with these sculptures.

**CANDIED SWEET POTATOES** are also a traditional dish at the Thanksgiving meal. The recipe became popular during the Civil War as a symbol of unification—sweet potatoes are thought of as a mostly Southern vegetable, the maple syrup used to sweeten them is associated with New England.

One of the things being celebrated at Thanksgiving is the wholeness of the family—whether or not the family is actually whole. The idea is reflected in the "wholeness" of the pies and cakes and molds.

Family picture-books are trotted out and reviewed. People reminisce and tell stories about former Thanksgivings. A common theme is cooking disasters and near-disasters that have taken place in previous years. The stories show how families weather problems, behave well, forgive each other and eventually come through with good humor.

### NON-TRADITIONAL THANKSGIVING MEAL

Thanksgiving is a way for immigrants to celebrate being in America and to share that celebration with everyone in the nation—from the descendants of the people who arrived here on the Mayflower to a family that arrived here last year.

When families immigrate to the United States, they often keep to the foods of their native countries. They also tend to continue their traditional holidays. The one American event that gets incorporated into the holiday cycle of almost every new arrival is Thanksgiving. It usually includes all the traditional foods—turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pie, sweet potatoes, cranberries and popcorn, but often with unusual twists that reflect their original homeland.

### SETTING A DATE

The first Thanksgiving Day held by European settlers in North America took place in Newfoundland in 1578. It gave thanks to God for the survival of an expedition headed by Sir Martin Frobisher. No harvest was involved.



The first nationwide Thanksgiving in the United States took place at the end of the Revolutionary War. After the Constitution was signed, sealed and put in place, George Washington called for a Thanksgiving Day on Thursday, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1789.

The feast of Thanksgiving, as it's known today, was the work of Sarah Joseph Hale of Boston. She was the editor of the *Godey's Ladies Book*, a periodical with the largest circulation in the country—over 150,000 people

received each edition. Sarah was one of a group of American women who saw themselves as the protectors of men and the promoters of social stability.

In 1827, she started using her editorial page to urge the nation to set aside a day each year during which the nation gave thanks to God for the blessings of the year. For 37 years she wrote articles in the magazine, and letters to Presidents, Governors, and members of Congress, explaining the need for an annual Thanksgiving. In the course of these years she fixed on the last Thursday of November — recalling Washington's 1789 Thanksgiving.

The Civil War finally persuaded Abraham Lincoln that the idea was a useful one. In October, just weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg, he proclaimed that the last Thursday of November 1863 would be a day of Thanksgiving for the prosperity and freedom that had been achieved in America, and to express the hope that the two year-old war would soon end. One of the chief objectives was to encourage a sense of unity in the nation—Americans who were traveling or living abroad were encouraged to join in. Every year since then, Americans have celebrated Thanksgiving Day.



At one point, President Roosevelt was lobbied by business interests to make the date earlier so that the Christmas shopping season would be longer. But it was too late; the public had accepted the last Thursday in November as a tradition. As a matter of fact, public displeasure against the date shift was so strong that Roosevelt had the old date formalized by Presidential Proclamation. And, in 1941, Thanksgiving was finally sanctioned by Congress as a legal holiday, on the *fourth* Thursday in November.

Presidents still make an official proclamation of Thanksgiving about six weeks in advance but no one seems to take notice. They also receive an official Thanksgiving turkey which they immediately give to someone else. The political risk of being seen eating an animal you know is too great.



### THE RITUALS OF THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving is a celebration of America's prosperity and yet it is a holiday where gifts are not given. That is because Thanksgiving is in part a harvest feast—the EARTH does the giving and the people the receiving.

In spite of the fact that Thanksgiving involves a great

deal of work and preparation it is a comparatively passive feast and has become more so in recent years. There used to be many more Thanksgiving customs—a raffle of turkeys on Thanksgiving Eve, more family sports and games like those that were part of the "original feast" in Massachusetts. These days, television has taken over—the ritual now involves watching Thanksgiving Day parades and sporting events on your television.



Americans go home for Thanksgiving: they fly or drive enormous distances to do so. The government has tried to make things easier by establishing Thanksgiving as an official four-day weekend. And the fact that the United States was the first nation to celebrate an annual Thanksgiving Day makes it even more firmly and specifically American.

Thanksgiving Day parades take place in the morning and most of the characters in the parades are toys. And the parades always end with the arrival of Santa Claus, who marks the start of the Christmas shopping season. The day ends with sporting events which are



part of the patriotic fabric of America. Together the parades and the sporting events present a spectacle of Abundance and Patriotism.

And between the two there is the Thanksgiving feast, where Abundance is actually consumed and Patriotism honored.

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**THE BOOK OF THE YEAR: A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR SEASONAL HOLIDAYS**  
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