

# THANKSGIVING

## A NORTH AMERICAN HOLIDAY

Robert Lunaburg



This article brings several ideas together in an effort to describe why holidays play such an important role in culture. It focuses on the traditionally accepted American Thanksgiving holiday, but many of the concepts described here have universal application to holidays around the world.

The first idea centers around the somewhat obscure concept referred to as “The Herding Instinct.” Many fields of science have recognized the act of animals joining together in large numbers to perform unplanned group activities. Studies have even identified brain centers that pertain to this. “The Herding Instinct” is exhibited when the action of one member of a group, reacting to some form of danger, is immediately followed by like actions from others not necessarily directly influenced by the danger. Birds and butterflies flying south for the winter is another example; when one feels the urge to begin the migration and all others in the vicinity follow. When it comes to human beings, the act of panic buying or selling via the stock market has been associated with the herding instinct. The point here is that it’s natural, almost instinctive, for human beings to want to do things together, and doing things together is a central behavior associated with all holidays.

Another important point here is that the herding instinct, as defined, is initiated by a local stimulus. In other words, one form of herding instinct behavior may never happen in an environment void of the initiating situation. An example of this is when grazing animals in one area never migrate, like wildebeest, because they are never confronted with loss of grass and water.



### HISTORY

Thanksgiving is thought of as a truly American holiday, because it is said to have originated in North America. Here again we must separate the idea of holiday, which is a universal practice, with how people behave during a particular holiday.

The North American Thanksgiving is thought to have originated in a Virginia Colony December 4, 1619 when the group's charter required that the day of arrival be observed yearly as a "day of thanksgiving" to God.

A second, and much more popular origin, associates the holiday with a group of religious pilgrims who celebrated by giving thanks to God for a bountiful fall harvest in 1621 at Plymouth plantation in the current state of Massachusetts, after suffering the loss of half their population during their first winter (1620-1621).



The Wampanoag Indians, a friendly tribe, helped the pilgrims survive through a very bad winter and into a bountiful fall harvest in 1621. The feast, as the holiday was celebrated then, honored Chief Massasoit and the Wampanoag Indians for their assistance plus the grace of God for His bountiful blessings on those who survived.

Historians believe that first feast consisted mainly of goose, venison, lobster, perhaps cod, and maybe turkey, with vegetables; perhaps pumpkin, and corn meal pudding. Meat was thought to be in greater abundance than vegetables.

The day continued to be celebrated sporadically throughout the colonies on differing dates up until President George Washington declared a day of thanksgiving to celebrate December 18, 1777 to commemorate winning the Battle of Saratoga which was the decisive battle that signaled the beginning of the end to the American revolutionary war against England. His decree affected and unified the day for all thirteen colonies.

In 1863 Sarah Hale, a private citizen, began seventeen years of petitions to make the last Thursday in November the official day of celebration for the Untitled States of America. In 1863 president Abraham Lincoln declared the last Thursday of November Thanksgiving day commemorating Civil War Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg.

Things went along, with some states opting out from time to time and November Thursdays being used by others. In 1939 President Franklin Roosevelt designated the next to the last Thursday in November as the National Holiday. His reason was to formally signal the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. For some reason this created much confusion over the exact day in November this meant, so in 1941 Roosevelt changed the day to the fourth Thursday in November. Somehow this fixed the confusion and is the day our current Thanksgiving falls on.

Two more activities have been added to highlight the day; one a sporting event, the other a parade. Two professional American football teams, the Detroit Lions (National Football Conference), and the Dallas Cowboys (American Football Conference) traditionally play another team from their conference on Thanksgiving. At the time, American football games were always played on Sunday. Then since Roosevelt coupled the day with the beginning of the Christmas shopping season, stores decided to punctuate the event with large parades including floats, marching bands, and dignitaries.

One can conclude that Thanksgiving is now a blend of feasting, non-denominational religious thanks, and bawdy commercialism. In any event it is what it is, a National Holiday.

## **TODAY**

Most North American children, these days, first see Thanksgiving as a warm and enjoyable party day when friends and family get together to feast and relax. My early memories of the smell of a traditional Thanksgiving meal cooking are stored, brought up and reinforced each year. Most of these combined smells and foods are not part of everyday meals therefore they are especially well-received anytime provided. In fact, it is a tradition for many homes, including ours, to celebrate Christmas day with the same meal.

The broader meaning of Thanksgiving is subsequently brought to children outside the home through church, school, and commercial activities.

The photo below shows a part of our family just before partaking of a typical Thanksgiving meal at our house. The table is set with the *good* china. There is more than enough food to feed everyone for the better part of five days, and no one in the picture wanted to wait anymore before diving into the feast.

However in our home, it is traditional to offer prayers of thanksgiving before the meal. At this time we attempt to recount and offer thanks for the many blessings and special events we experienced throughout the year.



Then it's on to the feast. And what a feast it is. The meal usually begins with a small dish of mixed fruit. But the star is a fine roasted turkey (the traditional Thanksgiving meat) which is stuffed with a wheat bread, onion, celery, and sage dressing. This dressing comes to us courtesy of a Pennsylvania Dutch recipe. In other parts of the country like the southeastern United States, other ingredients may be substituted for the above, like corn bread stuffing instead of wheat bread.

Mashed white and candied sweet potatoes are served along with string beans, plus another surprise vegetable. We make giblet gravy for the turkey and mashed potatoes from the turkey's roasting juices, along with its heart, liver, gizzard, and neck meat; another Pennsylvania Dutch tradition.

Fresh baked dinner rolls help sop up the extra gravy we take during the meal, while cranberry sauce provides a palate-stimulating tart accent to all the other flavors. Then, as if all that wasn't enough, we have pumpkin and apple pie with ice cream for dessert.

Everyone overeats to the point of discomfort, which in turn requires that we all retire to a comfortable chair and watch a football game on TV...at least all the men that is. It was our tradition for the ladies to clean up while the men lounged. Needless to say, in these days of equality among the sexes, cleanup is more and more done by everyone or no one right after the meal. Cooking the meal in our tradition has always been a definite unisex communal effort; I do the turkey, dressing, and gravy while everyone else does the rest.

While the specific underlying stimulus for the holiday has changed through the years, the basic idea of taking time to be thankful for our blessings hasn't. And too, the herding instinct for everyone to continue the celebration is very much present today as it was in the past.

## **THE TURKEY**

This leaves us with one last question. Why turkey, especially when that bird played so very much a minor role in the first thanksgiving?

To begin with, the turkey was an abundantly available wild bird of above average size. Unlike today's domesticated varieties the males sported beautiful plumage, and were considered highly intelligent as birds go. They flew as well as geese and ducks, often because of their numbers, darkening the skies as they went on their way.



It is presumed that because the turkey was a large bird and not migratory, it therefore was available throughout the year. And because it was large enough to feed more than one family it became the logical pick for the holiday.

It is interesting to note Ben Franklin's (one of the nation's founding fathers) opinion of the turkey. He wrote the following in a letter to his daughter;

"For my own part I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen the Representative of our Country. He is a Bird of bad moral Character. He does not get his Living honestly. You may have seen him perched on some dead Tree near the River, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the Labour of the Fishing Hawk; and when that diligent Bird has at length taken a Fish, and is bearing it to his Nest for the Support of his Mate and young Ones, the Bald Eagle pursues him and takes it from him.

"With all this Injustice, he is never in good Case but like those among Men who live by Sharping & Robbing he is generally poor and often very lousy. Besides he is a rank Coward: The little King Bird not bigger than a Sparrow attacks him boldly and drives him out of the District. He is therefore by no means a proper Emblem for the brave and honest Cincinnati of America who have driven all the King birds from our Country....

"I am on this account not displeased that the Figure is not known as a Bald Eagle, but looks more like a Turkey. For the Truth the Turkey is in Comparison a much more respectable Bird, and withal a true original Native of America... He is besides, though a little vain & silly, a Bird of Courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his Farm Yard with a red Coat on."



-- from a letter written by Benjamin Franklin to his daughter

Today's turkeys have been bred for their white breast meat, can't fly, and are considered to be one of the dumbest creatures to have ever walked the face of the earth. All this happened because over time they became the preferred meat for Thanksgiving dinner, and commercially, size mattered, but brains and plumage didn't.



So there you have it. Like most traditions, the North American Thanksgiving Holiday has much in common with other holidays. It punctuates a time when many people get together for a common purpose, is very much felt in the moment, and arose from a vague history of changing influences and practices. But through it all at least one common motivation generally persists. Giving thanks to a higher being for our blessings has always been the main motivation for our Thanksgiving Day celebration.

\*Family Photo by the author. All other graphics came from open source Internet Sites.