

GENERAL SCIENCE

Tradition of Giving Thanks

Deeply rooted in native tradition, the unique American custom of Thanksgiving is legally a hundred years old this year.

By BARBARA TUFTY

► **BELOVED CUSTOM** in America for celebrating the autumn harvest and giving thanks to the Creator, Thanksgiving Day was officially announced as a legal annual holiday exactly one century ago—242 years after the Pilgrims first celebrated their hard-won harvest.

Before 1863, Thanksgiving was celebrated locally at different dates, depending on whether the autumn was a mild or frosty one, or when the last load of corn was stored in the barn. Some people felt strongly that the day should be inspired by religion and not by politics, and ignored many efforts of governors and Federal Government to set a national date.

Through determined actions of individuals such as Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale, and an increasing sentiment of Americans everywhere, however, a date was finally set, to be proclaimed annually by the President of the United States. On Oct. 3, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln issued a National Thanksgiving Proclamation, establishing the event with these opening words:

"The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been

added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of almighty God."

Legal Holiday

That act established the United States as the only country where the deeply religious harvest ritual is celebrated each year as a legal national holiday.

Since Lincoln's proclamation, the fourth Thursday in November has been set aside for traditional feasting and thanks—except for two controversial years in which President Franklin Delano Roosevelt set the day to the third Thursday, in an effort, at the behest of commercial interests, to lengthen the time between the festivities of Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Although this was a sensible proposal, school officials, traditionalists, politicians, football coaches and housewives protested and uproared against the change, until once again the date was settled as being on the fourth Thursday.

Another reason that makes this unique festivity so dear to American hearts is the fact that many native fruits of the first Thanksgiving are still served on today's tables.

As silent tribute to the early Indians who first taught the white man how to plant, reap and prepare these fruits, the list

of American indigenous plants is long. Foods such as cranberries, potatoes, beans, squash, corn, pineapple, chestnuts, peanuts, Brazil nuts, cashew nuts, tobacco and chocolate now seem so much a part of international harvest that we forget they originated in the Americas.

Other foods set on that famous groaning board during the first Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims included the fruits of the sea—oysters, lobsters, eels, clams and fish. Fruits of the land included wild geese, ducks, deer, and the greatest Thanksgiving symbol of them all—the turkey.

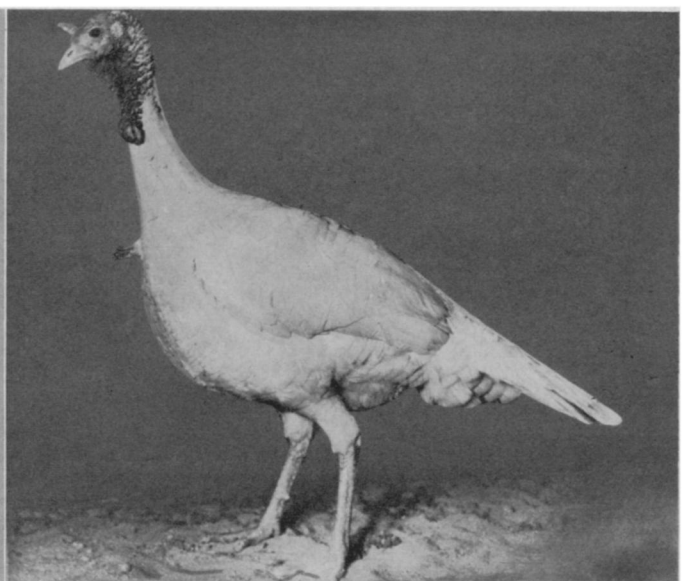
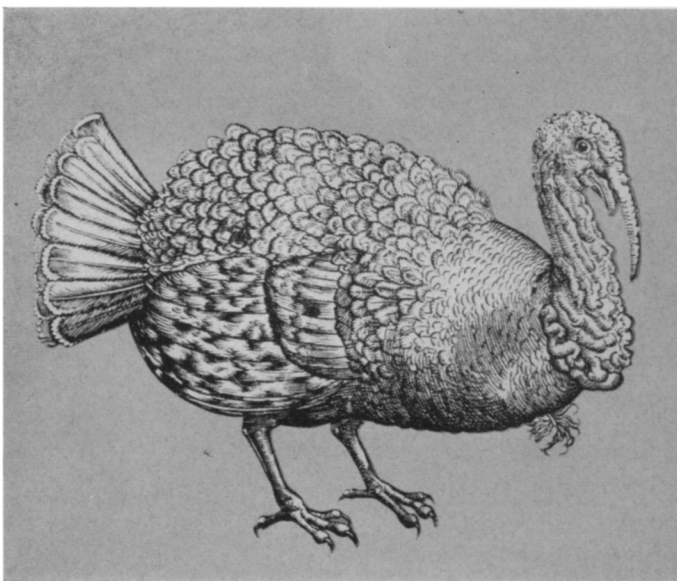
Traveling Turkey

The tender domesticated turkeys we serve today are not direct descendants of the small wild turkeys that were served in 1621. They are thoroughly American, but with a remarkable history of world travels.

One of the more advanced Indian civilizations, the Aztecs in Central America, had tamed a wild turkey species which the conquering Spaniards seized and carried home to Spain. At that time, Spaniards were trading with Mohammedans who held the southern coast of the Mediterranean. The birds were carried to the two great Moslem centers, Mecca and Constantinople.

From the latter place they were shipped through the lower Danube Valley, across northern Greece and into parts of the Turkish empire. Eventually they turned up in Austria and Germany, then France and England, and finally back again on American shores.

During these peregrinations, many Europeans thought the birds originated in Turkey, and hence gave them that name. To



THANKSGIVING FARE—First printed picture (left) of the venerable turkey appeared in the four great natural history volumes published in the 16th century by Konrad Gesner. Today's popular Beltsville Small White turkey (right), bred by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is a modern cross between the Bronze and White Holland, mixed with Black, wild and White Austrian.

add to the complications of the story, the turkey was also believed to have originated in India.

The first printed description and picture of the turkey appeared in the middle of the 16th century. In a large four-volume work on natural history, the German-Swiss scholar, Konrad Gesner, stated in simple Latin that the bird was known as the "India or Calcutta fowl." It is nice to know that the Turks in Turkey call the turkey an "American bird."

America has produced a million more turkeys this fall than last year—a triumph of patient growers who report that the birds are so incredibly stupid they will starve with food in front of them; become so hypnotized by bobbing their heads back and forth as they drink water that they drown themselves; and can stampe themselves to death, frightened by a sudden loud noise or a piece of paper fluttering in the wind.

This was the bird that came close to being designated the national bird of the United States, instead of the rapacious American bald eagle. Both Benjamin Franklin and John James Audubon felt the small, bright-eyed wild turkey should be elevated to the status of the national symbol.

Today Thanksgiving is a legal holiday in all states, territories and possessions of the United States, by annual proclamation of the President and governors of the states. It is a day observed by family reunions, bountiful feasts and home festivities, and by church services with appropriate scripture reading and hymns, proclamations and sermons.

Our northern neighbors in Canada have long observed a day of Thanksgiving, although it falls on no special day. England had her first national experience of the event during World War II, in 1942, when the churches throughout England were turned over to the U.S. Army for the Thanksgiving service. For the first time in 900 years, Westminster Abbey was out of British hands, as the Stars and Stripes were carried through the church and placed on the altar to open the service.

Origin of Harvest Feast

The origin of a thanksgiving feast at harvest time may go back about 120 centuries, to a time when man first began to understand the value of agriculture—or raising crops by his own labor rather than picking what he could find growing wild.

As the years and centuries passed, man became more skilled in cultivating his crops and in feasting and rendering homage to the spirits who caused the fruits of his harvest to grow.

Many early ceremonies included invocations, secular and religious dances, offerings of the first or last fruits of harvest—and sometimes human sacrifices.

The Old Testament includes many references to harvest festivals, when the fruits were gathered and consumed in ceremonies offering thanks to the Lord. The Feast of the Tabernacle is an ancient time of rejoicing.

Even before Biblical times, ancient people of the Mediterranean area held festivals in honor of the Earth Mother. The benevolent

goddesses of oats, rye, wheat and other basic foods have been honored through the centuries.

Long before the Egyptians learned to measure a year, they gave thanks for the grain crops harvested before the floods of the Nile. During the harvest festivals to their great goddess Demeter, the Greeks would declare a truce on any war they might be holding.

The Romans gave thanks every October to Ceres, the goddess of grain, and celebrated the event with music, dancing, sports, processions and a feast at which a sow and the first cuttings of harvest were offered.

Throughout Europe today, the centuries-old custom of dressing and ornamenting the last sheaf of harvest like a doll is still practiced. This spirit of the crop is called by many names: Corn Mother in Germany, Mother Sheaf in Brittany, Old Wife in Scotland, Grandmother in Prussia and Baba in Poland.

The ancient combination of festivity, feasting and a quietly deep sense of religion remains preserved in the traditional holiday that Americans will celebrate on Thursday, Nov. 28. On this day, festivities will retain something of the old to recall their origin and tradition, and something of the new to show their continuing strength and adaptation to the modern world.

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Nature Note

A favorite dish flanking the Thanksgiving turkey is a bright red sauce, made from a small red berry found in marshy bogs in low-lying coastal country.

Cranberries, which grow wild from Newfoundland to the Carolinas and westward to Arkansas, have an acid tang that supplements the bland turkey meat well. Our European forefathers learned to appreciate the berry under the tutelage of the Indians. Accustomed to having gooseberry sauce with their Christmas goose, they soon found that cranberry sauce with the native American turkey was an improvement over the old habit.

The American cranberry may be round, oblong or pear-shaped, varying from pink to dark red. The bush blooms in June and the berries ripen in September.

Native variations of this berry are the cowberry, foxberry or mountain cranberry of the eastern U.S., the southern cranberry or red huckleberry of the southern mountain ranges, and the fruit of the cranberry tree or highbush cranberry (viburnum) used as a substitute in Canada and the northern U.S.

As though it would be cruel to leave Europe without a representative of this choice genus, a very small relative of our cranberries does grow on the low, sandy lands of northern Germany, called the "Preisselbeere" or "Prussian berry," which is said to be sweeter than the American cranberry.

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