

ZOOLOGY-BOTANY

Turks, Bearing Gifts

Central Europe Received Corn and Pumpkins From Turks, So at First Called Them Turkish Corn, Turkish Cucumbers

By DR. FRANK THONE

WHEN the Thanksgiving turkey has departed into the interior, never to return, you may possibly raise a grateful incense-wreath to his memory from the end of a Turkish cigarette.

Did it ever occur to you to wonder why these two most thoroughly native-American products, turkey and tobacco, should have been thus dedicated to the Turk, who had nothing to do with the discovery of America? And did you ever know that two other prominent parts of the feast, pumpkin and corn, were once also called Turkish?

Such is the case. In 1542, exactly fifty years after the discovery of America, a German botanist named Leonhart Fuchs published what was then the best book on plants in existence. It is still rated as a classic of botany. In this book, which was printed in Latin, as well as in his German translation of it, published the following year, Fuchs included the first printed pictures of pumpkin and corn plants. These pictures he labeled "Turkish cucumber" and "Turkish corn."

In the text he explained the names: "Another species is called Turkish cucumber, doubtless because it came into our country first from Turkey." And some pages further on: "The plant here considered has been brought to us only recently from Turkey, Asia and Greece; therefore it is called Turkish corn. Thus far it has no Latin name other than *Turcicum frumentum*."

Conqueror's Course

But why should these American products have got into Central Europe by this roundabout way, picking up false names on the road? The reason is easy to understand, when we recall the politico-military situation in Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. In 1453, the Turks had conquered Constantinople, after centuries of fighting. They then rapidly pushed their European holdings up the Danube and over

toward the Adriatic, until by the end of the century they could challenge even Venice, then supreme naval power in the eastern Mediterranean.

As a new sea power, they came into contact with the first fruits of the Spanish and Portuguese trans-Atlantic explorations, and soon introduced corn, pumpkin and turkey into the rich agricultural lands that slope toward the Black Sea. Tobacco they planted in what is now Bulgaria, where much of the world's supply of "Turkish" tobacco is still grown. Thus these far-travelled Americans entered the German-speaking lands by the back gate, so to speak, disguised as Turks! Corn and pumpkin have long since regained their birthright, but the poor turkey-bird still has to wear the red fez.

Perverse Misnaming

We may regret the misnaming of the turkey, that noblest American of them all, after a nation that had no part in his discovery, and only served as a middleman for his introduction to the peoples of northwestern Europe. But we must not place any blame, either upon the bird himself or upon his earliest sponsors. They did their best to give him a name of his own, and only the perverse course of linguistic history defeated them.

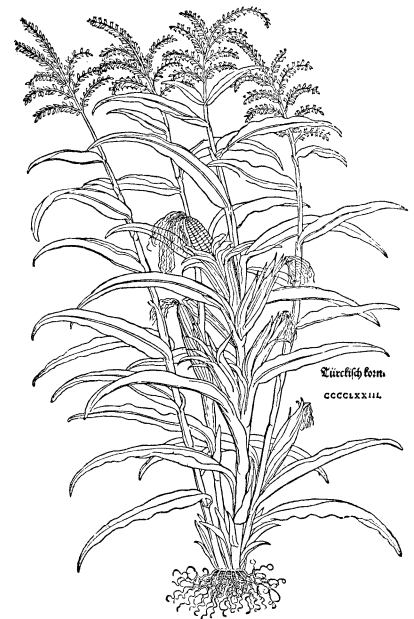
The first name the turkey bore, after his arrival in Europe, was "fowl of the Indies." Within 25 years after the first voyage of Columbus that name was common in a half-a-dozen western European languages, from England to Italy, according to the early sixteenth-century zoologist, Conrad Gesner, who described and pictured the turkey in his ponderous three-volume natural history set, *Historia Animalium*.

Gesner's artist was not the most skillful in the world, perhaps; yet his drawing of the turkey is entirely recognizable, and not to be mistaken for any other bird. He is all there, from featherless red head and neck to spreading tail. The latter to be sure is shown perhaps a bit short—on the printed

page it looks as though the woodcut had threatened to be too wide, and was kept down to the right size at the expense of his tail-feathers.

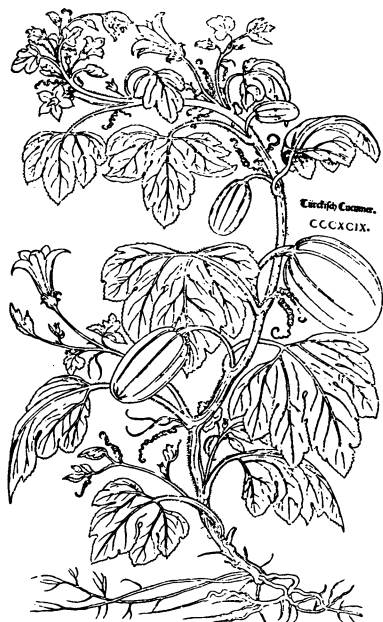
Gesner, being a learned man, wrote in Latin, the language of learning of his day. He wanted a Latin name for the bird, and supported the suggestion for *Gallopavo*, which, he says, other scholars had put forth previously. But that name itself is a compromise or hybrid, being made of the Latin names for a rooster and a peacock.

The learned zoologist dissented with colleagues who had confused the "India fowl" with the "Guinea fowl," already well known in Europe, and had attempted to call it by the same Greco-Latin name, *Meleagris*. However, his protest proved unavailing, and more than two centuries later the great Swedish naturalist Linnaeus, lawgiver of modern scientific naming, fastened upon the poor bird the title *Meleagris gallopavum*—one name stolen, the other a hybrid of two species to which it is not at all closely related. And the common English name today and apparently forever, turkey, is another wrong guess.



"TURKISH CORN"

Within 50 years after Columbus' voyage, this American plant had been given a false name in Germany.



"TURKISH CUCUMBER"

Like corn, the American pumpkin was for a time needlessly ceded to Turkey. The flatter-shaped pumpkin was called "Sea Cucumber."

Four hundred years and more of honorable endeavor of bearing the White Man's gustatorial burden, and still no proper name of his own. Bitter indeed is the turkey's fate!

Where the pumpkin goes to, on Thanksgiving Day, is not open to any doubt, especially if there are any boys at table. Where the pumpkin came from is still disputed among botanists, many holding that it is strictly American, but some holding for an Asiatic origin.

However that may be, the Indians of North America, especially in Mexico, were in possession of both pumpkins and squashes when the white men came, and they made many and appetizing uses of these stout vegetable cousins.

One rather elaborate method of "fixing" a pumpkin, widely practised in Mexico, is described by Miss Emma Reh, a young American woman who has travelled into many by-roads in the southern republic, studying Mexican life. The Indians, she says, pierce the rind of pumpkin with many symmetrically arranged round holes, after the manner of "plugging" a watermelon. They they boil the whole fruit in honey—the only sweet the Mexicans had before the coming of the Spaniards. Then, when the pumpkin is thoroughly im-

pregnated with sweetness, they fill up the holes with wooden stoppers, and hang up the tempting specimen to sell.

Less elaborately prepared are candied pieces of pumpkin and squash. Sometimes the flesh is given a preliminary treatment with a wood-ash lye solution, to make it firmer. Pumpkin flowers are often boiled and eaten as especially dainty vegetables. Pumpkin seeds, toasted and salted, are the "peanuts" of the Mexican peon.

Even the standard American joke-smith's town of Punkinville has its Aztec equivalent. In the Mixtec region of Oaxaca there is a town called Silacayoápan. Its name is derived from the Aztec word *chilacáyotl*, which means a species of striped pumpkin or squash.

Turkeys still rule the roost in the villages of upland Mexico, as they did in the days of the Spanish conquistadores, 400 years ago. When the soldiers of Cortez first invaded the Aztec empire they found that the subjects of Montezuma had an abundance of domestic plants—corn, beans, peppers, chocolate, pumpkins and squashes—but only one domestic animal, the turkey. After they had taken over the land, the Spaniards introduced European animals which the Mexican natives now use for food; but even so the turkey is still their great standby.

The turkey fits into rural Mexican life intimately, as one who has always been of the family. In Zapotec villages, the final ratification of a marriage is always followed by the "dance of the turkey," in which the bridegroom takes a big gobbler by the wings and dances through the streets with him to the home of his new parents-in-law. Turkeys must have figured in early Mexican ideas of an earthly paradise, for the ancient name of Yucatan means "land of deer and turkey"—"ulumul ceh ulumul cutz."

The Mexican art of cooking a turkey, however, would leave American housewives a little dazed. The specially prized dish is known as turkey molè. Molè is a dark, sweet sauce, and its preparation is a high art, as well as something of a mystery. Into the molè go chocolate, garlic, cinnamon, sugar, chile, tomato, toasted squash seed, tortilla crumbs, and a number of other ingredients, all rubbed to powder on a metate, the archaic Mexican grinding stone.

The turkey is cut into joints and parboiled. Then it is transferred to the simmering sauce and the cooking finished in that. Experienced turkey-molè eaters swear by the dish, and at fiesta times a really skilled molè cook is sought after over wide regions.

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BEAUTIFUL, BELLIGERENT, BELOVED

Mexican villages in the interior have turkeys everywhere, not only the relatives of our fine bronze turkeys but also the white variety prized by many raisers in this country. These two belligerent gobblers were snapped by an American woman in a seldom-visited town in the mountains. Then she had to beat a hasty retreat, for the turkey-gobbler goes to war like a battleship, broadside-on, and these two were rapidly bearing down on her with hostile intent.