**The History of Thanksgiving Day**

In the United States, the fourth Thursday in November is called Thanksgiving Day. On this day, Americans give thanks for the blessings they have enjoyed during the year. Thanksgiving is usually a family day, celebrated with big dinners and happy reunions.

The first American Thanksgiving was held in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1621. The people of Plymouth had come to America from England in 1620. In their native land they had been called Puritans because they wished to “purify” the Church of England. Before 1600, some of them decided that they could not reform the Church from within, so they broke away and formed their own churches. When English officials began to persecute them, they fled to Holland.

Several years passed. The Puritans living in Holland were threatened by religious suppression and war and were saddened to see their children growing up Dutch instead of English. They wanted to keep their native language and traditions and to be free from religious persecution. Once again, they thought of moving. This time they considered America. In an unsettled land they would finally be free to live as they chose. Some English merchants agreed to finance their journey in return for a share of the profits produced by the new colony. So, after traveling from Holland back to England, a small group of Puritans, together with some other passengers, set sail for the New World. The Puritans began to call themselves "Pilgrims" because of their wanderings in search of religious freedom.

It was September of 1620 when their ship, called the Mayflower left port with 102 men, women, and children on board. This was the worst season of the year for an ocean crossing, and the trip was very rough. Yet, during the voyage, the travelers suffered only one death. Since there was also a birth aboard ship, the Mayflower was still carrying 102 passengers when, after sixty-five days at sea, she landed in Provincetown Harbor, inside the tip of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The party had planned to land further south, nearer to the only other English colony in America, which was in Jamestown, Virginia. But errors in navigation and adverse winds brought the Mayflower to New England.

The Pilgrim leaders knew that they were in unsettled territory which had no governing body. They also knew that in order to survive, every society needs a means of establishing and enforcing proper rules of conduct. Partly to protect themselves from rebels within their own ranks, forty-one men aboard the Mayflower held a meeting to choose their first governor and sign the historic Mayflower Compact, the first formal agreement for self-government in America.

For about a month longer, the Pilgrims lived aboard ship and sent out scouting parties to explore the coastline of Cape Cod Bay. At Plymouth, the scouts found a harbor with excellent fishing, some cleared land, cornfields, little rippling brooks with pure, fresh water, and a high hill that could be fortified. The site had once been an Indian village, but a smallpox epidemic a few years earlier had killed the entire Indian population. The scouts steered their small boat back to the Mayflower and reported their discovery. A few days later, the Mayflower sailed across Cape Cod Bay and anchored in Plymouth Harbor. Coming ashore in their small boat, the Pilgrims landed (according to tradition) on a large rock later named Plymouth Rock. This was the beginning of the second permanent English settlement in America.

The Pilgrims were poorly trained and poorly equipped to cope with life in the wilderness. During their first winter in the new land, they suffered tremendously. Poor food, hard work, infectious diseases, and bitterly cold weather killed about half of them. By the end of this terrible first winter, only about fifty Plymouth colonists remained alive.

One spring morning in 1621, an Indian walked into the little village of Plymouth and introduced himself in a friendly way. Later, he brought the Indian chief, Massasoit, who gave gifts to the Pilgrims and offered assistance. The Indians of Massasoit's tribe taught the Pilgrims how to hunt, fish, and grow food. They taught the Pilgrims to use fish for fertilizer in planting corn, pumpkins, and beans. Because of this help from the Indians, the Pilgrims had a good harvest.

Governor William Bradford was following an ancient tradition when, in the fall of 1621, he issued a proclamation establishing a day of thanksgiving to God. The Governor also decided to use this religious occasion to strengthen the bond of friendship between the Pilgrims and their Indian neighbors. So he invited Chief Massasoit and his braves to share the Thanksgiving feast.

The Indians gladly accepted and sent five deer ahead. The Pilgrim men went hunting and returned with turkey and other wild game. The women of Plymouth prepared delicious dishes from corn, cranberries, squash, and pumpkins.

The first Thanksgiving dinner was cooked and served out of doors. Although it was late autumn, huge fires kept the hosts and guests warm. Massasoit and ninety Indians joined the Pilgrims for the first Thanksgiving feast. The celebration lasted three days! On the first day, the Indians spent most of the time eating. On the second and third days, they wrestled, ran races, sang, and danced with the young people in the Plymouth Colony. The holiday was a great success.

Many of the traditions of the modern American Thanksgiving come from that first Thanksgiving celebration more than 350 years ago. The modern Thanksgiving turkey is much like the ones that were hunted in the forests around Plymouth. Squash and corn, which were also harvested by the early Pilgrims, appear on the Thanksgiving table. Pumpkin pie and Indian pudding (a custard made from corn) are traditional Thanksgiving desserts.

The first Thanksgiving lasted three days. Today, for many Americans, it is a four-day holiday. Schools are closed on Thanksgiving Day and the day after. Many adults have both Thursday and Friday off from work. Relatives from other cities, students who have been away at school, and many other Americans travel large distances to spend the holiday at home. Thanksgiving is a time for family and friends to gather and share time together. It is a good time to reflect on the past and create memories for the future.