

Thanksgiving

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Those Pilgrim white folks stepped off the boat, they say, and the First People greeted them, and after a few tentative months, celebrated with them on or about the last harvest, and the day came to be called “Thanksgiving”. Well, actually, our Mayflower pals were likely a few months late in that particular instance, but what the hell, close enough.

Wild turkeys look like elegant people in tuxedos. Have you ever seen them? They stand tall and are not at all like those fat brown butterballs with the neat fan of stubby feathers we see in pictures. Ben Franklin advocated them as the official bird of the United States. They are statuesque and comical at the same time. Their feathers are black with a green sheen, and some are striped stark white, and their faces are deeply weird. Whenever I see them I can’t help thinking of a singing troupe. I remember my daughter singing, “Five fat turkeys are we...”, and I imagine them swaying as they sing. They are tenors, of course.

But back to the Pilgrims. So there was corn, we gather, and that must have been weird for all those Europeans who thought corn was just for animals (not seeing themselves as animals yet—that wouldn’t happen until Darwin, or Orwell for the latecomers). And there were turkeys, and maybe even oyster dressing. No Universal Translators – I wonder what the conversation was. Whatever did or didn’t happen, I feel certain that all were spared the spectacle of televised football over the remains of the fowl.

It might be imagined that those poor washed-up white folk who scratched out a living in the early colonies through the coldest of winters and nasty drought were pretty hard pressed for a friend or two. And there were these red guys, all nice and civilized with rules and beautifully appointed clothes and everything, reaching out ever so tentatively. And they ate together. Or so the story goes.

And that’s where the official story ends. We don’t see the next day or the next year or the next decade when the red people became problematic and the white people offed them. Thanksgiving is about peace and friendship, hope and a future yet unblotted. For another view, read Barry Lopez’s *The Rediscovery of North America*.

I remember a particular Thanksgiving when I had just received my Master’s degree, round about 1974. It was the highest level of education in my family, except for my dad, who also had an M.A. Dinner—the stuff of Hoosier nightmares—included tasteless turkey with clotted slug-colored gravy, creamed peas (that’s cream and canned peas), cabbage salad with Miracle Whip, green jello with ambiguous lumps, the obligatory canned green beans with Campbell’s mushroom soup and canned onion rings, and pumpkin pie (the one dish that nobody could mess up).

On that particular Thanksgiving, after all the eating was done and the table was cleared, the men in the family opened the door to the kitchen and solemnly invited me to watch football with them in the family room because I had attained a Master’s degree. I looked at the women in the kitchen—my mom, my girl cousins, my grandma, my bitchy aunt and her farm-wife mother who had been rumored to be a flapper in the 20s but who now had cottage cheese for upper arms and a very bad hairdo. I looked at the men, all smoking and pleated pants and white shirts and ties and bourbon and beer. I said no, thanks, I think I’d like to help wash the dishes.

But of course it wasn't that easy. My aunt and her mother and my cousins fell to dissing my own mother for having a JOB, and wasn't it just the worst thing that women would take work away from men, and women should stay home with their children, and if they didn't, well look where that led. And they glanced under their lashes at me: Master's degree notwithstanding, there I was in tie-dye and it was perfectly clear that I wasn't wearing a bra. My mother and I barked back, but it was my grandma, who had been a bank teller, seamstress, and manager of a grocery store, who chewed them up and spit them out like a jackass eating thistles. "You're just lazy women," she said. "You sit and wait for your mink and let your men die young of tobacco and football and stupid. Stupid, lazy and stupid," and I piped up, "and say, could we turn off that TV?"

And so we arrived at 2002, all these troublesome relatives dead, left to our own devices on this awkward holiday. We designed a middle-aged Norcal faux-Costanoan Thanksgiving With baked salmon we honored the First People who got exterminated here by the Padres instead of the Pilgrims. But out here on the west coast we have no stories about that golden day when we all got along. I met a Hoopa/Yurok woman not too many years ago named Vivian Hailstone, now gone from us as well. She was a storyteller, in her eighties or nineties, and also a maker of the finest baskets and jewelry. She told me spent three months out of every year in the wild looking for supplies for these crafts—grasses, abalone shells, porcupine quills. I remember her telling, without rancor, of the first time she saw a white person. She was about 10 when men rode into camp and took all the adults away and took all the kids to a residential school. They cut off all the children's hair. Now, in that culture, you cut your hair when your parents died. So all those kids through their parents were gone.

So on our West Coast Thanksgiving we thought about Vivian Hailstone. We remembered the measles, influenza, fleas, and the servants of the Catholic Church who cut a mighty swath through the native population. If you go to the cemetery at Mission San Juan Batista, you will see a gravestone for a twelve-year-old Indian girl who died of pox, proclaiming that little life as the Mission's "first gift to the kingdom of God." I gotta say, it weren't the turkeys we sacrificed.

Be well, eat salmon, share joy, offer up not just prayers but action in the name of Thanksgiving.

And turn off the TV.



A fine turkey at Locus Voci.