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LEGENDS OF THANKSGIVING

Although what we consider to have been the first Thanksgiving was celebrated in the New World in the 1600s, a long-standing tradition of harvest festivals was likely the true origin of the holiday. Additionally, many Americans subscribe to a mythological version of that first Thanksgiving that may not be accurate at all.

Bountiful harvests have been celebrated with thanksgiving rituals for thousands of years—by the ancient Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Chinese, and even the ancient Egyptians.

The ancient Greeks honored Demeter—the goddess of all grains—with an annual autumn festival known as *Thesmophoria*. During this multi-day celebration, offerings of seed corn, fruit, cakes, and pigs were made to the goddess, in hopes that she would grant the people a good harvest.

The Roman festival *Cerelia* honored the goddess of corn, Ceres. Held each year at the beginning of October, Ceres was petitioned with offerings of pigs and the first fruits of the harvest during a celebration that included parades, music, games, and a feast of thanksgiving.

The ancient Chinese harvest festival of *Chung Ch'ui* coincided with the full moon of the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the calendar year. Considered the moon's birthday, this day was celebrated with "moon cakes" which were stamped with the image of a rabbit—since it was a rabbit's face that the Chinese saw on the moon in the night sky. Anyone who caught sight of festival flowers falling from the moon during the three-day festival were believed to be rewarded with good fortune. The thanksgiving meal consisted of fruits, roasted pig, and moon cakes.

For the ancient Egyptians, the annual harvest festival—held in spring during the Egyptian harvest season—honored Min, the god of vegetation and fertility. Before the great feast, the Pharaoh participated in a parade, and sports, music, and dancing were also featured in the celebration.

The harvest festival of *Sukkoth* is also celebrated at this time of year, as it has been by Jews for over 3,000 years. Known as both *Hag ha Succot* (the Feast of Tabernacles) and *Hag ha Asif* (the Feast of Ingathering), Sukkoth falls on the fifteenth day of the month of Tishri—five days after *Yom Kippur*—and is named for the huts (succots) that Moses and Israelites inhabited as they wandered for forty years in the desert. This

eight-day festival is marked by family feasts of apples, corn, grapes, and pomegranates.

Legends differ as to the origins of the traditional thanksgiving feast in the United States. The most commonly held belief is that the first Thanksgiving was held in Plymouth, following a devastating first year in the New World. However, other historians argue in favor of a first Thanksgiving evident in Virginia, claiming that this event was written out of the history books during Reconstruction following the Civil War.

Regardless of where the first Thanksgiving meal took place, the traditional harvest meal was an ancient historical custom with which the early settlers would have been familiar—rather than a solemn occasion marked by religious piety, the celebration would have instead been full of "revelry, sports, and feast."

While no modern Thanksgiving table would be complete without a roasted turkey, it is very likely that this particular bird was not on the menu at the first American Thanksgiving. While early accounts mention "fowl" and "wild Turkeys," these probably referred to ducks, pheasant, or geese. As Indian corn was used only for cornmeal, corn on the cob was likely also absent from the table. Strike pumpkin pie from the repast as well—the first feasters had no flour.

Thanksgiving did not immediately become an annual tradition. The harvest following the first Thanksgiving was poor, and with increasing numbers of settlers (read: mouths to feed) each year thereafter, the pilgrims never celebrated another Thanksgiving.

For the next two hundred years, the holiday was irregular at best. In 1777, the new nation first celebrated Thanksgiving together in all of the states, but only as a one-time holiday.

Abraham Lincoln designated the last Thursday in November as a national day of Thanksgiving in 1863, though Franklin Roosevelt moved the holiday to the fourth Thursday in November in 1939.

In Canada, Thanksgiving is celebrated on the second Monday of October.

Sources:

- Holidays.net
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- Snopes.com
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