

A Gracious Plenty

By Susan Camp

When I was in the 6th grade in Florida, I won an essay writing contest on “What Thanksgiving Means to Me”. I read my essay at a Thanksgiving assembly. I remember writing something about “a hardy band of Pilgrims, braving the voyage across the cold Atlantic, to build a new home in a New World.” I wrote that the Pilgrims gave thanks for surviving the first harsh winter in Massachusetts by holding a Thanksgiving feast. That was before we moved back to Virginia and I learned about the real first Thanksgiving at Berkeley Hundred in 1619.

It doesn't really matter who held the first Thanksgiving in America. Colonists in both Virginia and Massachusetts recognized a need to express thanks for safe passage across the ocean and survival in an alien and often forbidding land.

Today the focus of Thanksgiving is on gathering with friends and family to feast on traditional dishes, which may vary by region and cultural background. Roast turkey with dressing and gravy, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie are found on most Thanksgiving tables. In Tidewater, cornbread dressing with oysters might be served, while in Washington State, the dressing might contain locally grown hazelnuts. Persimmon pudding is popular in Indiana and dessert in Florida might include key lime pie. The website of Plimoth Plantation, www.plimoth.org contains interesting facts and trivia on the history of Thanksgiving.

Minnesota is the top turkey producing state, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, producing 44 million birds in 2013. Virginia rates among the top six states in turkey production. The University of Illinois Extension “Turkey Facts” publication states that almost 88% of Americans responding to a National Turkey Federation survey said they eat turkey on Thanksgiving Day. Turkey is higher in protein than beef or chicken and white turkey meat is lower in calories and fat than dark meat. The average weight of a Thanksgiving turkey is 15 pounds.

The 2012 estimate of native cranberry production was 768 million pounds, with Wisconsin producing 450 million pounds. Each cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) contains an air pocket, which allows it to float and bounce when it is ripe. Cranberries grow on vines in marshes and sandy bogs, which may be flooded at harvest time, according to <http://www.foodreference.com>.

The sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is native to the Americas and was eaten by Columbus and his crew in the West Indies. Sweet potatoes are members of the Convolvulaceae or morning glory family and are not related to potatoes, which belong to the Solanaceae or nightshade family. The terms “yam” and “sweet potato” often are used interchangeably, but yams are related to lilies and grasses. George Washington Carver developed over 100 uses for sweet potatoes. North Carolina is the biggest producer of sweet potatoes, with 972 million pounds grown in

2010. The website <http://www.agmrc.org> provides information on sweet potatoes and other agricultural commodities.

A Penn State Extension publication tells us that pumpkins belong to the Cucurbitaceae family, which includes gourds, melons, squash, and cucumbers. Pumpkins are native to Central America and northwestern South America. The four major pumpkin growing states are Illinois, California, Pennsylvania, and New York. Pumpkin production in the United States exceeds one billion pounds per year. Most pumpkin sales occur between Halloween and Thanksgiving.

It is interesting to note that these four traditional Thanksgiving foods are native to the Americas. Whether by plan or coincidence, they are representative of the New World as a land of plenty. Traditionally, in the South, when asked if one would like seconds, it was appropriate to respond, "I have had a gracious plenty." Thanksgiving is about having plenty— food, family, even football. The grace comes into play when we demonstrate our thanks for all we have. Happy Thanksgiving. May you have a gracious plenty.

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