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Meet Our Museum Podcast: Thanksgiving

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Audio-only Podcast online at: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/thinkfinity/podcast/thanksgiving.mp3>

Codes:

MR = Matt Ringelstetter

RG = Rayna Green

“ “ =interrupting, pause

[] = not speaker's words

MR = The Thanksgiving holiday is one of America's most cherished traditions. If you're like most Americans, the holiday brings to mind the smells of turkey and pumpkin pie, sitting down for a meal with friends and family, and ideas of pilgrims and American Indians sharing their harvest with one another. Today in the History Explorer Podcast series, curator Rayna Green will discuss Thanksgiving and the meaning behind harvest celebrations including some information you might not have known about the holiday. She'll also talk about what it means to study food and what food can tell us about American history.

RG = I'm Rayna Green and I'm a curator at the National Museum of American History. My areas of expertise are really in Native American history and culture, American Indian/Native American (those are interchangeable terms, you can use them all) and my other area of expertise is food and history of American food. So I combine my interests in American food history with my interest in Native American history and they come together in all kinds of ways. I've always been interested in what people think about as Thanksgiving and Thanksgiving dinner and the foods that they think and believe that

the Wapanoag people; the Indian people in Massachusetts (what became Massachusetts) and the first settlers of Massachusetts from Europe had on that so-called first Thanksgiving Day. It's interesting to talk about because there are a lot of surprises in not only the food that people ate but the reason they got together on that day. I'm interested in what people have been taught and what people think and what they still think when they go to a thanksgiving dinner at grandma's house or a thanksgiving dinner in their own house and they're sitting down to that typical American dinner of turkey, almost always turkey, pumpkin pie, and cranberry sauce. I have to tell you that those three things are pretty good especially the pumpkin part of it and the cranberry part of it. Cranberries were a native plant. They are a plant native to North America and Indian people used those cranberries. They used them in all kinds of ways. They didn't exactly make what we think of as cranberry sauce, but they did eat cranberries and cranberries were a great source of nutrition; particularly of vitamin C for them, and they dried cranberries, but Indians didn't make cranberry sauce with them. Pumpkin. Another really interesting thing. Native people, of course, had pumpkins. In fact they're the ones who taught the Pilgrims, and the Puritans, and all the settlers who came here to grow those things. Squash, pumpkin, by the way if you don't know, is just a kind of squash, and there are many, many, many kinds of squashes and almost all of them would be good for making pumpkin. They didn't make pie out of it. Native people themselves didn't have wheat here in North America so they couldn't have made pie dough. So, no pie crust, my favorite part of the pie actually besides the pumpkin stuffing. They also wouldn't have had and didn't have sugar as we know it then. What they did *have* I'm talking about maple and maple syrup and maple sugar. They did have that as a sweetening and would have put it with squash but incidentally they would have also put it with meat and they might have put it with beans and it would have added not only a sweetening but a number of vitamins and a little nutrition of all kinds into that food. Here we have all these things that we think we know nowadays and that actually Native people were eating at that time and they taught many of the settlers to grow squash and pumpkins, in particular. Of course the big thing that I'm sure everyone learned in school about was corn. Corn, beans and squash are the three native crops that everybody knows about pretty much and native people were the master cultivators of corn which of course they didn't have in Europe. The other thing

that is fairly interesting with that first Thanksgiving is that it really isn't *the first* Thanksgiving. The English people who came here would have had harvest celebrations just like that in their communities in England, in France, wherever people grow things, they had harvest celebrations. Indians had harvest celebrations too. When they got their crops in, it was of their habit to have a harvest celebration.

The fact is that the so-called first thanksgiving and by the way, the one in MA was really pre-dated by one in New Mexico much earlier by all kinds of harvest celebrations in New Mexico much earlier and actually in Virginia as well. Were they having a harvest celebration on this thing that got memorialized by Governor Bradford and many of the so-called, the people we call pilgrims? Was that really a thanksgiving? Was that the first Thanksgiving? The answer is probably no. These guys (who had been) had decent relations but their relations were...their political relationships were and their social relationships were interrupted almost all of the time by conflict between the two groups usually over resources, over water, over hunting grounds, over land, over who controlled land, and who controlled the resources so they were almost always from the very, very beginning in constant disputes over this; over this land, over this water, over these hunting grounds, over all these resources.

And this particular gathering in which they came together was sort of not planned ahead of time. It wasn't a gathering where they had agreed to sign a treaty or anything like that where they had agreed in advance to do that. In fact, this was kind of an impromptu that is almost an accidental gathering, where a couple of different groups got together and had some good conversation and agreed to sit down and take meals together. They did them in order to establish better relations between one another and to share what you have. For almost all people to share food together is a way universally in the world of agreeing of trying to make better relationships. So, they had this sort of accidental gathering and they said sure let's get together, let's talk, and let's share food. So they all brought to the table, they actually may have been...it was more like sitting on the ground, what they had on hand. They brought what they had on hand, so they would have brought, for example, the most common form of meat the most common form of game that they had which was venison; deer meat, not turkeys. There were

turkeys in MA, but they're extremely difficult to hunt and you have to organize turkey hunting parties and it would have been a difficult task to sort of run out to the local 7-11 and bag a turkey and bring it back and get it cooked. But venison was, in fact, handier and people had it in all kinds of forms; dried for long preservation and then fresh venison that they may have cooked. They would have had lots of fish. Most people are surprised that fish would have been a much more common nutrient a much more common food than turkey, but they had plenty of fish. River fish and ocean fish, fish they could catch in the nearby bay. All kinds of fish. They're very likely to have had eels. Eel was very common then and the rivers were filled with eels and they were highly favored by the English and Indians caught them and ate them, so they're very likely to have had fish of all kinds. They may have had some smaller birds but probably not turkey. The Indians, probably in many instances, were able to bring more game to the table than the pilgrims at that time that had not yet quite been able to support themselves very well yet because they simply weren't farmers. Most of the people who came here weren't farmers in their lives back in England. Most of the French who came here in their lives back in France were not farmers and certainly the British who came here were not farmers and they had to learn to farm to survive and they had to learn to farm things that would grow here and were appropriate.

But at this point in this very early day, 1620ish or thereabouts, or just after that they didn't have those crops available. So we have a very different picture really of first of all why they had thanksgiving, why they had anything that resembled what we later think of as thanksgiving and why they were getting together and what they ate there.

MR = Rayna you've talked a lot about food and you've worked a lot on foods whether it be American Indian culture in food or just foods in general. What kinds of questions arise when you take food and you're going to study and learn something from foods?

RG = You know, when we think about food, we're thinking not only about a food stuff, oh okay grapes is something I've done some work on, or cranberries or turkey for that matter. We're not just talking about the food stuff, but we're talking about how it's used and how people think about it and what it means to people. We're talking about what

table it gets put on or we're actually even talking about whether people have a table to put it on. I'm as interested in who's at that table like the thanksgiving story and what they're thinking about each other as I am about what food is on it and we can use the food as a way of looking at history. We can use food as a way of looking at our society. We can use food as a way of looking at how people interact with one other. Actually, those are the things that interest me more than the food itself. Although I am actually very interested in the food.

I grew up in a family for whom...well we raised our food. I'm a farm kid, a ranch kid and we raised our meat and we raised much of our...many of the vegetables we ate and we loved to cook. So I love the food and I also know that it can be about something more than just the food itself.

MR = Now back to the harvest festivals. You mentioned that there had been others before thanksgiving and I'm sure there were others around North America during the first thanksgiving and then afterwards. Why thanksgiving, why was that harvest festival taken and promoted. Why do we have it today?

RG = That's actually a terrific question. Why do we celebrate this thing called thanksgiving now and how did we get there from 1620, 1621 or 1622? How did we get there? Well, Americans, the people who came here, settlers, didn't have many of these celebrations certainly not between themselves and Indian people over and over again after certainly not after the first one. Governor Bradford wrote in his journal which was later published and became very well known as one of the first accounts by the new immigrants, the immigrants then, to North America and that actually became fairly well known but not 'til several hundred years later. We first really start looking at this holiday or creating a holiday called thanksgiving somewhere around the Civil War. Lincoln and many people thought that perhaps...they were looking for ways to in the middle of this awful conflict between people when the civil war began they were looking for ways to bring people together and they sort of created this instant holiday as a way of getting people to think more about civility and about peace and about coming together in harmony rather than in war or in battle. So, thanksgiving was declared an official

holiday in...just really during the 1860s and Abraham Lincoln is kind of at the center of that. But it really didn't catch on. Not too well at all. But later toward the turn of the 20th century, 1900 or thereabouts, Governor Bradford's journal gets picked out and it gets picked up and people became very interested in it just as another time of huge immigration into this country is taking place in the late 19th century. Enormous immigration and people are... these Americans who haven't been Americans but for really a couple hundred years. Remember there are no Americans until 1776 really, officially. And so a couple hundred years later, wow, or even 100 years later, 1876, here come new waves of immigrants and lots of people were very concerned about it and really you would hear a lot of things then that were just very much like what we hear now about people's concerns for new immigrants. But they were coming in waves from Europe and they weren't the kinds of people who came before. They were Italians, they were Spanish, and they were all sorts of people many of whom came here from Eastern Europe and from other parts of Europe. They did not speak English and lots of public officials were very concerned about this and they drew together and tried to figure out ways to again Americanize these people and one of the ways that a very interesting woman did one of the things a very interesting woman did was to target the schools as the kind of centers of civilization as it were, American Civilization, and to make these foreigners come in and be Americans with everybody else. And to do that, they had to create a mythology and they developed school books and they developed public ceremonies that were publically celebrated that were to give people a sense that there was an American culture that they could all join in on. Thanksgiving was one of them. So they literally kind of created this mythology. Some of the other mythologies are still around, Pocahontas saving Captain John Smith, is one of the stories that was put in the school books and passed around and gave people another mythology about early America. The first Thanksgiving is certainly one of them. There are a number of others. So here you have this really interesting reason why people kind of developed this public holiday and it took hold and became fairly common and is incredibly common.

MR = Thanks to Rayna Green for taking the time to speak with us. For the History Explorer Podcast series, this is Matt Ringlestetter. Join us again next month as we take another look at what goes on here behind the scenes at the National Museum of

American History. Podcast made possible by a grant from the Verizon Foundation.
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