



.....**STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH**

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Gosh, can it really be that time of year already? Thanksgiving is upon us and as I write this many turkeys have left the grocery store and is likely being prepared for the many feasts that will occur across this great Nation. I hear many people say “Happy Turkey Day” and I used to take a little offense to that, but if you think about it, that turkey is a big part of the celebration. In actuality this bird has long been the holiday's star! Let's explore the world of the turkey this week.

As Americans sit down to supper this Thanksgiving, the centerpiece of their celebratory dinners will, most likely, be a turkey. Why exactly the Turkey has been the star of “Turkey Day” since at least the mid-19th century is a matter of much debate, particularly given the consensus amongst historians that the Pilgrims and the Native Americans probably didn't focus on the bird at the “First Thanksgiving” in October of 1621. They were just simply thankful. Thankful for surviving the conditions in the new land that they decided would be their new home – leaving everything else behind them, including families. They were thankful for the new friends they made and the help that was afforded to them by the Native American Indians - including the very first Ag Agent (whose name was Squanto) who helped secure crops and animals for harvest.

If you think about it, beginning with the American pilgrims, Thanksgiving has always focused on celebrating the harvest and the abundance of food we are able to share with our friends and family. This year is no different. We can celebrate a great harvest and harvest weather this year, and what better way than with fellowship and food? Food in reality is a part of our lives every single day. We rely on it for nourishment. We look forward to it on holidays. And we share it with those we love most. It seems that it even becomes more important this time of year. The time of year that everyone loves.

The history of the Thanksgiving turkey is a bit of a mystery. Nobody knows exactly how this particular bird earned a place of honor at the table each November, but historians have a few different theories. Thanks to letters and records kept by early American settlers, we know that when the colonists sat down to dine with the Wampanoag Indians, beef and fowl were on the menu. This historical meal would later become known as the first Thanksgiving. We do know that George Washington first advocated for Thanksgiving Day on Oct. 3, 1789 and that finally President Abraham Lincoln officially proclaimed Thanksgiving a national holiday in Nov. 1863. In 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving Day forward one week, as it is presently celebrated. No matter what, thanksgiving is a National Holiday and for good reason.

For a historic item of interest is that the Plymouth Plantation recounts the history of the First Thanksgiving, as Governor Bradford's description of the Pilgrims' first autumn in Plymouth makes it clear, “there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc.” Historians also note a letter written by pilgrim Edward Winslow which mentions a turkey hunting trip before the meal. So from the very beginning the turkey was an important part of this truly American tradition and that great American bird that has become the centerpiece of this tradition – the turkey!

Turkey? What an odd name for a big bird. I always wondered where that name came from. From what I can determine there are several theories about how turkeys got their name. One story claims the Christopher Columbus heard some birds say “tuka, tuka”, and his interpreter came up with the name tukki, which means “big bird” in Hebrew. Some other historians believe that Columbus thought that the land he discovered was connected to India, and believed the bird he discovered (the turkey) was a type of peacock. He therefore called it 'tuka,' which is 'peacock' in Tamil, an Indian language, even though the turkey is actually a type of pheasant. Which I guess I didn't know. Another theory is based on the Native American name for turkey which is supposedly 'firkee', which if true makes sense. Simple facts, however, sometimes produce the best answers—when a turkey is scared, it makes a "turk, turk, turk" noise. Now that makes sense to me. I have scared a lot of turkeys in my day and I can say that that would make a pretty good description of the sound – a “turk” ish sound.

How about some quick Thanksgiving and turkey trivia? Did you know? The main drink of choice at the time of the first Thanksgiving was beer, as they felt the distilling would kill any bacteria as the water was not good. The first Thanksgiving lasted three days and involved 90 American Indians and 53 Pilgrims. As far back as 1000 A.D., Native American Indians raised turkeys for food. Aztec Indians in Mexico raised them as early as 200 B.C. Turkeys are the only breed of poultry native to the Western Hemisphere and that Benjamin Franklin proposed the turkey as the official United States' bird. Only tom (male) turkeys can gobble, hens (females) cluck or click. Turkeys have great hearing, but no external ears. They can also see in color, and have excellent visual acuity and a wide field of vision (about 270 degrees), which makes sneaking up on them difficult. However, turkeys have a poor sense of smell (what's cooking?), but an excellent sense of taste. Domesticated turkeys cannot fly. Wild turkeys, however, can fly for short distances at speeds up to 55 miles per hour. They can also reach speeds of 25 miles per hour on the ground. Turkeys can have heart attacks from being frightened.

The first Thanksgiving Day football game was played in 1934 between the Detroit Lions and the Chicago Bears. In 2014, 235 million turkeys were raised in America with 45 million turkeys cooked and eaten just during Thanksgiving. Americans will consume about 16 pounds every year in all holidays. Sleepy after the big meal? Turkey contains an amino acid called "Tryptophan" which sets off a chemical chain reaction that calms you down and makes you sleepy. I do wish everyone a very Happy Thanksgiving! Enjoy your time with family and friends and count your blessings!! Be thankful!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or UNL Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, UNL Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email to: dlienemann2@unl.edu or go to the website at: <http://www.webster.unl.edu/home>