

To celebrate, or not to celebrate: a historical look at Thanksgiving.
By Genevieve Vahl

Thanksgiving: a holiday sodden with tradition. The brisk fall air nips at your nose as you walk up the steps lined with pumpkins leading to the warm glow inside. A sensory overload as family members race to greet you. Smells of fresh baked apple pie and roasting turkey fill your nostrils while laughter and football hum in the background. Thanksgiving holds beloved memories and traditions families stand by. A day for people to share what they are grateful for, for people to express their gratitude to loved ones around them. Yet for Native Americans, Thanksgiving holds a different, more somber significance.

“...I always joke that October through November hold the ‘Native American Triple Crown’ – Columbus Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving – all of which misrepresent Native Americans in some way,” said UW Madison’s School of Education assistant dean for student diversity programs, Aaron Bird Bear.

Thanksgiving: a holiday sodden with tradition. Yet, a nasty history for Native Americans. Many forget to acknowledge the struggle Native Americans faced during the colonization of their ancestors. They are reminded of the gruesome exile of their people annually on this day. Getting swept up in the modern celebrations of this national holiday, Thanksgiving has a dark history left silent during the conversations around the table. Thanksgiving is unjustly celebrated without understanding its history. Many have even come to mourn this day in respect of the disturbing history many of us fail to recognize.

In Elementary School, we are taught the English arrived in America on the Mayflower. They land on the east coast, making friendly connections with indigenous people and feast for three days in celebration of the Fall harvest.

“And just as Christopher Columbus never set foot nor eye on the North American continent, and yet somehow “discovered it,” the connection between 1621 Plymouth and the US celebration of Thanksgiving is purely, but significantly, mythological,” said Bird Bear.

What they failed to teach our naive, innocent souls is the bloodbath of a war that erupted between the two parties. They failed to teach us the colonization and exploitation of the native people by the white settlers. A disturbing history left untold, I will reveal the truth behind this holiday we ~celebrate~ every year.

The year is 1620. The English Puritans have been struggling to practice their faith legally. Wanting freedom from The Church of England, they set sail in September across the Atlantic in hopes of religious autonomy in ‘the new world.’

Winter quickly approached. Illness ran rampant amongst the colony. Half the population of settlers died during their first winter on the Cape. Surrounding native groups had lived in the

area of the Plymouth Colony some 10,000 years before the English settled. These people knew the land and environment well. Squanto, an English-speaking Native American from the Patuxet tribe, who had been sold into slavery in Spain but escaped to England to come back to his homeland, taught the English how to plant corn and where to hunt and fish. Without these teachings, the English would have never survived the winter.

This sparked good relations between the English and the Natives for some time. Together the Natives and the English collaborated on a feast, what we now recognize as the first Thanksgiving. The two parties enjoyed an evening together, indulging in their Fall harvests.

Now this is where the story usually ends; the pilgrims and the Natives happily feasting at a big table together with cornucopias decorating the table. Wrong. Although this infamous moment shared between the settlers and the Natives showed peace at the time, it does not disqualify their tensions from changing going forward. Did you really expect colonists to peacefully coexist with native people and accept their ways of life as equals to theirs? I didn't think so.

As the English got increasingly more comfortable with the area and their native 'friends,' the colonies began to expand. Natives began to grow concerned as more English settlers arrived on ships and more land was being occupied by white settlements. Promises and treaties made by colonists were broken. Interracial sensitivities against the Natives grew. English culture dominated the Natives'. Tensions between the neighboring groups rose.

It is now 1675, 50 years since the first white settlements in the Plymouth Colony. Tensions peaked when three men from the Wampanoag tribe were tried and killed in the Plymouth Colony. Native Americans finally had enough. The ensuing conflict known as the King Philip's War became the bloodiest conflict per capita in American history.

The United Colonies banded together the largest colonial army of 1,000 militia and 150 Indian allies. They rendezvoused in the Rhode Island territory to fight against the largest surrounding Native American group, the Narragansetts. The war began on a stormy winter night in the middle of December. The militia secretly attacked the Narragansetts in their main fort. They set fire to the village, destroying and killing everything in their path. The surrounding frozen swamp served as a getaway for some lucky Narragansetts. However, 300 Narragansetts women, children and the elderly were killed in the tyrannical ambush. Despite their compromised forces, the Narragansetts did not let the English get away unscathed. Over the next year, the two sides went back and forth burning, destroying, and killing the opposing towns and villages. The English eventually killed the Native American leader and mounted his head on a post for the next 25 years acting as a warning against any other attacks against them by the natives.

The bloodiest war in American history per capita. Six hundred English colonists killed and twelve towns completely destroyed. Three thousand Native Americans killed and many more captured and sent into slavery. The few remaining Native survivors were forced off their lands by the expanding colonies.

Yet, this war is rarely discussed. A horrific historical conflict left out of school curriculums. Yes it is morbid. Yes it is disturbing. But it is history. Something we cannot deny. Think about the Native American ancestral history completely wiped out of history books? We are taught about the ~one~ time English colonists were not imposing their white supremacy over Native Americans and we celebrate. We forget the rest of Colonial - Native history native americans around the nation are reminded of every year on Thanksgiving. .

“Thanksgiving attempts to obscure the brutality, direct warfare, reservation internment, cultural genocide and genocide that were required to colonize the continent through promoting a mythological holiday portraying American Indian and non-American Indian people who are happily getting along and ‘sharing,’” describes Bird Bear.

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