

Cultural Extra - Origin of Thanksgiving Day



Thanksgiving is America's preeminent day. It is celebrated every year on the fourth Thursday in November. For the people in US Thanksgiving is a time for merrymaking, shopping, family reunion, feasts and family dinners. People also take time to thank God for his constant grace and for all the material possessions man enjoys. For many Thanksgiving is also the time to thank near and dear ones and being grateful for their kindness. It has a very interesting history. Its origin can be traced back to the 16th century when the first thanksgiving dinner is said to have taken place.

Journey of Pilgrims

The legendary pilgrims, crossed the Atlantic in the year 1620 in Mayflower. About 102 people traveled for nearly two months with extreme difficulty. This was so because they were kept in the cargo space of the ship. No one was allowed to go on the deck due to terrible storms.

Arrival in Plymouth

The pilgrims reached Plymouth rock on December 11th 1620, after a sea journey of 66 days. Though the original destination was somewhere in the northern part of Virginia, they could not reach the place owing to winds blowing them off course. Nearly 46 pilgrims died due to extreme cold in winter. However, in the spring of 1621, Squanto, a native Indian taught the pilgrims to survive by growing food.

Day of Fasting and Prayer

In the summer of 1621, owing to severe drought, pilgrims called for a day of fasting and prayer to please God and ask for a bountiful harvest in the coming season. God answered their prayers and it rained at the end of the day. It saved the corn crops.

First Thanksgiving Feast

It is said that Pilgrims learnt to grow corn, beans and pumpkins from the Indians, which helped all of them survive. In the autumn of 1621, they held a grand celebration where 90 people were invited including Indians. The grand feast was organized to thank god for his favors. This communal dinner is popularly known as "The first thanksgiving feast". There is however, no evidence to prove if the dinner actually took place.

Turkey and First Thanksgiving Feast

There is no evidence to prove if the customary turkey was a part of the initial feast. According to the first hand account written by the leader of the colony, the food included, ducks, geese, venison, fish, berries etc.

Pumpkin pie, a modern staple adorning every dinner table, is unlikely to have been a part of the first thanksgiving feast. Pilgrims however, did have boiled pumpkin. Diminishing supply of flour led to the absence of any kind of bread. The feast continued for three days and was eaten outside due to lack of space. It was not repeated till 1623, which again witnessed a severe drought. Finally President Lincoln proclaimed last Thursday in November of thanksgiving in the year 1863.