

# Thanksgiving Combines Myths, Traditions and Truths, CU Professor Says

November 24 2009

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Over the centuries Thanksgiving in America has meant many things to many people. What we consider the traditional Thanksgiving holiday today has been around only a few decades, according to Chris Lewis, an American Studies instructor at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Though Thanksgiving celebrations took place periodically throughout our nation's history, the Thanksgiving celebration we know today didn't become a tradition until the 1930s, said Lewis.

"One of the things I think that really strengthens it is both the Depression and [World War II](#)," said Lewis. "Rituals and celebrations like this bring the country together and as a result they become engrained in our

collective imagination. So after World War II America regularly celebrates Thanksgiving."

Today Thanksgiving is celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November because that is the day Congress declared, in 1941, to be the official day to celebrate Thanksgiving.

What is considered to be the first Thanksgiving feast at Plymouth Plantation in about 1621, between the Wampanoag Indians and the Pilgrims, was not the celebration of thanks as we think of it today, said Lewis. Instead, it was a celebration of the annual harvest and it most likely took place in late September.

"It happened not in our traditional Thanksgiving month but earlier in the harvest season, probably mid-to-late September," said Lewis. "The first Thanksgiving is in fact a celebration of the harvest and instead of turkey, cranberries, pumpkin pie and sweet potatoes, they eat venison, wild fowl and corn."

And the oft-told story of the Pilgrims and the Indians celebrating and befriending each other is more myth than truth, said Lewis. The two groups tolerated each other out of necessity.

"The Wampanoag wanted to like the Pilgrims, not because of some simple liking of the Christian English, but because they wanted to make a military and political alliance with them because they are afraid of the growing strength of the competing tribe, the Narragansetts," said Lewis. "And that means helping them with their harvest and trading with them, and the Pilgrims need the help of the Wampanoag because they come during the wintertime and they barely get their crops in after surviving a difficult time."

What Lewis finds interesting is that the major origin of the holiday,

which is Abraham Lincoln's declaration of a day of thanksgiving in 1863 during the Civil War to celebrate Union victories and to pray for the troops in the field, is not associated with the Civil War and a divided country, but rather an obscure unity between Indians and New England settlers.

"What I like to tell my students is that our [Thanksgiving](#) holiday is a kind of cultural ritual that embodies both real people and real history but with cultural symbolism and mythology," said Lewis. "We are not really celebrating the real actors and the real characters, we're celebrating or re-enacting a union between Indians and English peoples that we would like to think somehow symbolizes the hope of American society and the hope of freedom and unity in that society."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Thanksgiving Combines Myths, Traditions and Truths, CU Professor Says (2009, November 24) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-thanksgiving-combines-myths-traditions-truths.html>

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