

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XLI

ISSUED IN SEPTEMBER 1960

No. 9

Copyright 1960 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



Thanksgiving in America

Since the dawn of history man has offered thanks to his gods for abundant crops and for protection from adversity. The Canaanites celebrated the harvest season by feasting and drinking and the Hebrews observed the seven-day "Feast of Tabernacles" at the close of the harvest season. The harvest festival of ancient Greece was celebrated each November by the married women in Athens in honor of the goddess Demeter, whose fruitfulness was symbolized by poppies, ears of corn, baskets of fruit, and little pigs. The Roman festival of Cerelia was held on October 4th in honor of the harvest deity Ceres. In England the autumnal festival was called Harvest Home, a custom dating back to Saxon days.

Despite such precedents, Thanksgiving Day as it is observed in the United States is a purely American holiday. It stems from our Pilgrim forefathers of New England, those hardy, God-fearing souls who signed the immortal "Mayflower Compact" before stepping ashore at historic

Plymouth Rock. The names of William Bradford and John Winthrop, of John Alden and Priscilla Mullins, of Samoset, Squanto, and Massasoit, are all associated with the beginnings of the Plymouth settlement. Felicia Hemans captured something of the spirit of the colony in "The Landing of the Pilgrims" while Henry Wadsworth Longfellow portrayed the romance of the times in "The Courtship of Miles Standish."

The landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock occurred just a few days before Christmas in 1620. They remained aboard the *Mayflower* until the last of March while their homes were being built. The winter was extremely severe and the courageous little colony saw its numbers dwindle from 101 to 55 settlers because of cold, hunger, and disease. In the spring the survivors sowed their crops and watched with anxiety the progress of their plants, upon whose successful harvesting their very lives depended. In the fall their hearts were gladdened as they saw the granaries fairly bursting with grain. Thankful for the prodigal returns of a bountiful nature, Governor William Bradford ordered a three-day feast and celebration to which Chief Massasoit and his Indians were invited.

Many Americans like to trace the beginnings of Thanksgiving to this three-day festival of the Pilgrims in 1621. Others contend that the first religious thanksgiving services date back to July 30,

1623, when the colonists held a public service of prayer and thanksgiving following Miles Standish's return from a journey, bearing food for the hungry colonists and the good news that a ship had been sighted bearing in their direction. Be this as it may, in the years that followed Thanksgiving became more and more firmly entrenched in New England. According to one author:

Sometimes it was appointed once a year, sometimes twice, sometimes a year or two were skipped, — according as reasons for giving thanks presented themselves or not. Now the reason was a victory over the Indians, then the arrival of a ship with supplies or "persons of special use and quality," and yet again a bountiful harvest. The frequent appointments for the last cause finally made August the customary month. Beginning with 1684, the festival became a formal and annual one in Massachusetts. Her example was soon followed by all the New England colonies.

It was during the Revolutionary War that Thanksgiving first took on the earmarks of a national holiday. In 1777 the Second Continental Congress set aside Thursday, December 18th, as a day of "solemn thanksgiving and praise" for the "signal success" of the American troops in overcoming Burgoyne. The following year Congress directed its chaplains to prepare a report recommending that the several States set apart December 30th as a day of general thanksgiving throughout the United States for American victories and for the French alliance. In 1779 the second

Thursday in December was set apart as a day of "general thanksgiving" for good health, abundant crops, and continued victories over Great Britain. In 1780, December 7th was designated as the day of "public thanksgiving and prayer," while in 1781 public thanksgiving was offered on December 13th. After expressing thanks for the victory at Yorktown, the 1781 proclamation asked for "wisdom and integrity" in the "speedy establishment of a safe, honorable and lasting peace." The following year Congress passed an act requesting the "several states" to provide that Thursday, November 28, 1782, should be observed as a day of thanksgiving and prayer. December 11, 1783, and October 19, 1784, were set aside for public prayer and thanksgiving in gratitude for the return of peace.

No specific day had evolved as Thanksgiving Day, but December was the favorite month. Only once, in 1782, did Congress suggest the last Thursday in the month of November but this proposal was amended in its final form to read specifically Thursday, November 28th. During the next five years, independence having been won and peace established, Congress did not see fit to set aside a day for national thanksgiving.

George Washington issued the first presidential Thanksgiving proclamation on October 3, 1789, in response to a congressional request that he set aside a day of public prayer and thanks-

giving. The "Father of His Country" wrote the following classic proclamation:

Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowl-

edge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally, to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

It would be difficult to determine how many people in the United States carried out the spirit of this Thanksgiving Day proclamation. In his diary Washington himself recorded: "*Thursday, 26th.* Being the day appointed for a thanksgiving, I went to St. Paul's Chapel, though it was most inclement and stormy — but few people at Church." Was the slim attendance responsible for Washington's failure to issue any other Thanksgiving Day proclamation during the remaining seven years he was in office? Or was it felt that the successful launching of the ship of state under the constitution alone merited such a proclamation?

John Adams issued only one such proclamation during his administration when he set aside May 9, 1798, as a time for "fervent thanksgiving" for prosperity, religious and civil freedom, and for the improvement of vexing foreign relations with France. James Madison, at the request of Congress, signed a proclamation on November 16, 1814, setting aside Thursday, January 12, 1815, as a day of prayer that the War of 1812 might soon be concluded and the blessings of peace be speedily and happily restored. The Treaty of Ghent was actually signed on December 24, 1814,

but news of its consummation was not received by the people of the United States in time for their Thanksgiving celebration.

No other national Thanksgiving Days seem to have been proclaimed until Civil War times. One reason, perhaps, was the influence of Thomas Jefferson who firmly believed that the national government had no right to tell the people when they should attend church. He had expounded his views on the subject to a minister in 1808 when he declared:

I consider the government of the United States as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises. This results not only from the provision that no law shall be made respecting the establishment or free exercise of religion, but from that also which reserves to the States the powers not delegated to the United States. Certainly, no power to prescribe any religious discipline, has been delegated to the general government. It must then rest with the States, as far as it can be in any human authority. But it is only proposed that I should recommend, not prescribe a day of fasting and prayer. That is, that I should indirectly assume to the United States an authority over religious exercises, which the Constitution has directly precluded them from. It must be meant, too, that this recommendation is to carry some authority, and to be sanctioned by some penalty on those who disregard it; not indeed of fines and imprisonment, but of some degree of proscription, perhaps in public opinion. And does the change in the nature of the penalty make the recommendation less a law of conduct for those to whom it is di-

rected? I do not believe it is for the interest of religion to invite the civil magistrate to direct its exercises, its disciplines or its doctrines; nor of the religious societies; that the general government should be invested with the power of effecting any uniformity of time or matter among them. Fasting and prayer are religious exercises; the enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises, and the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and the right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the Constitution has placed it.

Perhaps the lion's share of the credit for the final acceptance of Thanksgiving Day as a national religious festival should be attributed to a woman — Mrs. Sarah J. Hale. While editor of the *Ladies Magazine* between 1828 and 1836, Mrs. Hale began advocating the celebration of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday in November. When she became literary editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1837 she increased the tempo of her campaign for a national Thanksgiving Day, writing Presidents, Governors, and others in high office. Her final plea entitled "Our National Thanksgiving" appeared in the September, 1863, issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*. After quoting Nehemiah viii:10, and pointing out the "salutary effect of appointed times for national reunions" Mrs. Hale noted that in 1859 thirty States had observed Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November and concluded:

Would it not be a great advantage, socially, nationally,

religiously, to have the day of our American Thanksgiving positively settled? Putting aside the sectional feelings and local incidents that might be urged by any single State or isolated Territory that desired to choose its own time, would it not be more noble, more truly American, to become national in unity when we offer to God our tribute of joy and gratitude for the blessings of the year?

Taking this view of the case, would it not be better that the proclamation which appoints Thursday, the 26th of November, as the day of Thanksgiving for the people of the United States of America should, in the first instance, emanate from the President of the Republic — to be applied by the Governors of each and every State, in acquiescence with the chief executive adviser?

Perhaps it was in answer to this, and more personal appeals, that President Lincoln issued his first national Thanksgiving Proclamation on October 3, 1863, setting aside the last Thursday in November as the day. Lincoln's proclamation read:

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequal magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and to provoke aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has

prevailed everywhere except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the

Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity, and union.

Almost a century has elapsed since Abraham Lincoln issued his first national Thanksgiving Proclamation. In the years that followed other presidents have called upon the American people to unite in prayer to Almighty God in times of war — McKinley, Wilson, F. D. Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower. Despite hardship and adversity, whether at war or at peace, citizens of the United States unite in expressing their gratitude to Deity at Thanksgiving time.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN