

1934

EC5508 Early and Recent Thanksgiving Proclamations

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IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS

U. of N. Agr. College & U. S. Dept. of Agr. Cooperating

W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln

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Circular

5508

EARLY AND RECENT THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS

Thankful for What?

by

Edna Jaques

Not for the mighty world, O Lord, tonight,
Nations and kingdoms in their fearful might--
Let me be glad the kettle gently sings,
Let me be thankful just for little things.

Thankful for simple food and supper spread,
Thankful for shelter and a warm, clean bed,
For little joyful feet that gladly run
To welcome me, when all my work is done.

Thankful for friends who share my woe or mirth,
Glad for the warm, sweet fragrance of the earth,
For golden pools of sunshine on the floor,
For love that sheds its peace about my door.

For little friendly days that slip away,
With only meals and bed and work and play,
A rocking-chair and kindly firelight--
For little things let me be glad tonight.

EARLY AND RECENT THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS

To give thanks is to recognize the existence of a power which is greater, wiser, stronger, and more beneficent than man. To be truly thankful is not merely to express satisfaction for the possession of material things, but it is a recognition of the goodness, joy, peace and constructive forces at work in the world. The giving of thanks is a triumph of a humility which acknowledges that while men may plant, build or invent, the very intelligence by which they work is the gift of their Creator.

Thanksgiving is not to be confined to the one day of the year which is celebrated, nor to those good prosperous years when money and material wealth are accumulated.

"Thanksgiving Day" calls the American nation to renew faith and courage and to put that faith into active compassion and consecration. Mankind is privileged on this day to sing praises and gratitude to Him from whom cometh "every good gift and every perfect gift".

Origin of the Custom of Thanksgiving

The celebration of a thanksgiving day did not originate in America. The custom of observing a harvest feast goes back to remote ages and is found among all nations. The ancient Egyptians observed harvest festivals and made them elaborate and impressive with sacrifices and ceremonies. Ancient India also observed harvest feasts.

Perhaps the earliest harvest festival recorded is the one mentioned in the Bible. In the book of Judges (9:37) it is written that the Canaanites "went out into the field, and gathered their vineyards, and trod the grapes and held festival, and went into the house of their God and did eat and drink." Later the Hebrews had the feast of the Tabernacles. In Deuteronomy (16:13), Moses commanded them, "Thou shalt keep the feast of tabernacles seven days after that thou hast gathered in from thy threshing floor and from thy winepress; and thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy man-servant, and thy maid-servant, and the Levite, and the sojourner, and the fatherless, and widow that are within thy gates." During this festival, people came together in great numbers at Jerusalem; no work was done and the time spent in feasting and celebration.

In November the ancient Greeks held a harvest feast known as the feast of Demeter, in honor of their Goddess of Agriculture. The ancient Romans worshipped the same deity under the name of Ceres, in October each year. In ancient Britain, the Druids held their harvest festival on the first of November. The Scots observed a festival known as the "Kern". In England, it was known as the "Harvest Home". Some of the American Indians held autumn festivals not unlike these early observances.

Christian countries in all ages have had days of thanksgiving for special occasions. England held one in 1588 to celebrate the defeat of the Spanish Armada. In Leyden, Holland, for many years, the people observed October 3 as a day of thanksgiving because that city had been freed from the Spaniards in 1574. This was a popular holiday among the Dutch and probably suggested the idea of a

thanksgiving celebration to the Pilgrims who lived in Holland ten years before coming to America.

Probably the first thanksgiving service held in North America was that conducted by an English minister named Wollfall on May 27, 1578. Wollfall was a member of the Frobisher expedition which landed on the shores of New Foundland. The first record of a thanksgiving service within the present boundaries of the United States was that held on the coast of Maine in August, 1607, by the members of the Popham colony. This account is taken from an old record--

"Sundaye being the nineth of August, in the mornings, the most part of our hole company of both our ships landed on this island, where the cross standeth, and thear we heard a sermon delyvred unto us by our preacher, giving God thanks of our happy meetings and safe aryvall into this country; and so returned abroad again."

The First Thanksgiving of the Pilgrims

Some authorities say that the pilgrims held a thanksgiving service as early as December, 1620, soon after the landing of the Mayflower. This was merely a service to thank God for his protection and their safe arrival to their new home. The thanksgiving day such as we now celebrate was originated by Governor Bradford of Plymouth Colony. The Pilgrims landed in November, 1620, and were subjected to a gruesome New England winter, during which food and shelter were both inadequate. Eighteen wives and mothers came with the colony, but by spring only four remained. The pilgrims had become so decreased by spring that the survivors planted corn over the new graves so the Indians would not know how few remained.

When spring came, they all became busy and planted a crop. The primary problem of the colony had been to get enough to eat, so it is not surprising that they watched the growth of their crops far more carefully than that of a new baby. Their very lives depended upon the success of that first crop. Their labor, skill, and energy were taken as a matter of fact, but whether the seed would germinate and crops mature in a strange and alien soil was in the hands of God. The essentials for success were necessary fertility and the right sequence of sun and rain.

The harvest, in our sense of evaluation, would probably be called meager and scanty, but to them it meant security against starvation and was a "bountiful harvest". There was great rejoicing when the crop was gathered and Governor Bradford issued a thanksgiving proclamation. He sent four men out in search of wild game to supplement the food on hand. They returned with quantities of game consisting largely of wild turkeys. This probably is the reason why the turkey is considered a necessary feature of the Thanksgiving dinner.

The first big Thanksgiving festival lasted almost a week. A large number of friendly Indians including their famous chief, Massasoit, came and were entertained for three days. The Indians then went out and killed five deer which they brought back and gave to Governor Bradford, Captain Miles Standish and others.

The early years of the little Plymouth colony were often threatened by famine. The summer of 1623 was a dark one for a six-weeks' drought had almost

destroyed the crops. About the middle of July, Governor Bradford appointed a day of fasting and prayer. Soon a fine rain came which lasted for several days. This revived not only the crops but also the spirits of the pilgrims. Captain Miles Standish who had been on an expedition to secure provisions, brought back the word that a ship which had been expected from Holland would soon arrive. Because of these blessings a day of thanksgiving and prayer was held on July 30, 1623.

Some historians claim that this was the origin of our Thanksgiving Day, because it was a religious as well as a social celebration and the one in 1621 was an occasion for merry making and festivity. Both celebrations no doubt had their influence on our present tradition.

The first Thanksgiving held after the first harvest was a great event. It was an occasion of special significance, for it meant that they were freed from immediate starvation and they had proved that they could raise a living in this western country. The people felt thankful and they kept thanksgiving. But when other harvests came along with monotonous regularity, they ceased to feel that spontaneous gratitude which marked that first occasion.

Mention is made of such festivals being observed; however, there does not appear that the celebration was regularly observed.

Other Early Celebrations

The legal institution of Thanksgiving Day dates back to 1637 when the Plymouth magistrates ordained "that it be in the power of the governor and assistants to command solemn days of humiliation and also for thanksgiving as occasion shall be offered." They empowered to the governor to appoint such solemn days at any appropriate time whenever there was something special to be glad or sorry about. It is recorded that autumn thanksgivings were held in 1638 and 1639, then there were none until 1646. In 1654, 1656, 1659, and 1661, thanksgiving days were named. It was evident that there was a definite tendency toward a fixed holiday.

In the other colonies, celebrations varied. Rhode Island did not hold any until the days of the American Revolution until certain days were appointed by the Continental Congress. Virginia and New York seldom observed the event.

It was during the dark days of the Revolutionary War that the day lost much of its local color and became more national in scope. These Thanksgiving days were recommended by the Continental Congress:

Thursday, July 20, 1775
Thursday, May 17, 1776
Wednesday, April 22, 1778
Thursday, May 6, 1779

Wednesday, April 7, 1780
Thursday, May 3, 1781
Thursday, April 25, 1782

Another date which was to be fixed by the several states was ordered by a resolution of the Congress.

With only one exception, the Continental Congress suspended business on these proclaimed days. General Washington ordered observance by the Continental Army on Thursday, December 18, 1777 and also at Valley Forge on May 7, 1778.

Washington Proclaims a National Day

Just before the Congress adjourned in September, 1789, Elias Boudinot of New Jersey presented a motion in the house of representatives that President Washington be requested to recommend "a day of Thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by the people of the United States in acknowledgment of the favors of the Almighty God and especially His affording them the opportunity peaceably to establish a constitution of government for their safety and happiness." This motion was adopted and on October 3, 1789, Washington issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation written by a president of the United States. November 26, 1789, may be considered as the first national Thanksgiving Day.

"The First Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation"

"Whereas: It is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His Will, to be grateful for His Benefits, and humbly to implore His Protection and Favour; And where's both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me 'to recommend to the People of the United States a day of Public Thanksgiving and Prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful Hearts the many Signal Favours of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a Form of Government for their Safety and Happiness'.

"Now, therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday, the Twenty-sixth 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 favourable Interpositions of His Providence in the Course and Conclusion of the late War; -- for the great Degree of Tranquility, 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 Favours which He hath been pleased to confer on 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, directly and faithfully obeyed; -- to protect and guide all Sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to bless them with good Government, Peace and Concord: -- to promote the Knowledge and Practice of true Religion and Virtue, and the increase of Science among them and us; -- and generally to grant unto us all mankind such a Degree of temporal Prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

"Given under my Hand at the City of New York, the third day of October, in the Year of our Lord, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighty-nine.

(Signed) -- George Washington"

Other Early Proclamations

President Washington issued a second Thanksgiving proclamation in 1795 when the Whiskey Insurrection was suppressed.

In April, 1815, by the request of Congress, President James Madison appointed a national thanksgiving of Peace. Many of the early presidents issued proclamations as the occasion demanded, but it was usually left to the governors of the various states to decide if there should be a day and when it was to be observed. About 1830, the governor of New York named a day and the custom was soon followed by other northern governors. In the South, the day was practically unknown until 1855. The Civil War put an end to thanksgiving celebrations in the South and also in many of the northern states.

President Lincoln, moved by Union victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, set aside Thursday, August 6, 1863, as a day of National Thanksgiving, inviting people "to assemble on that occasion in their customary places of worship, and in the forms approved by their own consciences render the homage due to the Divine Majesty for the wonderful things He has done in the Nation's behalf," and to invoke His influence "to guide the counsels of the government.....and to visit with tender care and consolation 'those who had suffered the vicissitudes of war,' and finally to lead the whole nation through the paths of repentance and submission to the divine will back to the enjoyment of Union and fraternal peace."

Efforts of Mrs. Sarah Hale Rewarded

Even though thanksgiving had been observed from earliest times, it took twenty years of the continued efforts of one woman to get a regular national holiday set aside in the United States. Sarah Josepha Hale, the widow of David Hale, a Philadelphia lawyer, and the mother of nine children, became editor of the Ladies' Magazine which she edited until it merged with Godey's Ladies' Book and with which she continued until 1877. (She is remembered also as having written "Mary Had a Little Lamb") She was a woman of foresight and energy and found time for many activities besides her regular work. Early in 1840 she began to advocate a national thanksgiving holiday and its celebration on the same day all over the country. Mrs. Hale wrote editorials in her magazine and personal letters to the presidents and governors in behalf of a national day. It was in 1866, that President Andrew Johnson recommended that the last Thursday in November be set aside for the national holiday, the day which Mrs. Hale had recommended for so many years. This day was received so well, that the next year President Johnson named that day "in conformity with recent custom that may now be regarded as established on national consent and approval."

Some Recent Proclamations

The writing of an annual thanksgiving proclamation has put a sharp test upon the ethical sensitiveness of presidents. The proclamations have seemed to touch the pulse of the nation's activities and to reveal the nation's attitudes.

In 1928 President Coolidge urged the people to thankfully recount our material blessings, then to thank God that "our spiritual progress has kept pace with our material gains."

In 1929, just a very few days after the financial crash of the country and before its importance was understood, President Hoover in his proclamation mentioned "the fruits of industry have been unexampled in quantity and value, both capital and labor have enjoyed an exceptional prosperity..... New experiences and new knowledge in many fields have been recorded from which a deeper wisdom may grow. We should accept these blessings with resolution to devote them to the service of almighty God." At that time the nation did not comprehend the scope of the "new experiences and new knowledge" which was to follow. In 1929, the keynote of the governors' proclamations of the various states was the prosperity of the nation. Governor Fred W. Green of Michigan, said: "The only fear of the future is that we may suffer from a plenty."

In 1930, President Hoover thanked God that "As a nation we have suffered far less than other peoples from the present world difficulties."

In 1932, The Washington Bi-Centennial made it appropriate for President Hoover to quote the first Thanksgiving proclamation ever written by a President of the United States, the one which President Washington proclaimed in 1789.

The Presidential Proclamation of 1933

Thanksgiving Proclamation

By the President of the United States of America

"I, Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America, do set aside and appoint Thursday, the thirtieth day of November, 1933, to be a day of thanksgiving for all our people. May we on that day in our churches and in our homes give humble thanks for the blessings bestowed upon us during the year past by Almighty God. May we recall the courage of those who settled a wilderness, the vision of those who founded the nation, the steadfastness of those who in every succeeding generation have fought to keep pure the ideal of equality of opportunity and hold clear the goal of mutual help in time of prosperity as in time of adversity.

"May we ask guidance in more surely learning the ancient truth that greed and selfishness and striving for undue riches can never bring lasting happiness or good to the individual or to his neighbors.

"May we be grateful for the passing of dark days; for the new spirit of dependence on one another; for the closer unity of all parts of our wide land; for the greater friendship between employers and those who toil; for a clearer knowledge by all nations that we seek no conquests and ask only honorable engagements by all peoples to respect the lands and rights of their neighbors; for the brighter day to which we can win through by seeking the help of God in a more unselfish striving for the common bettering of mankind.

"In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

(Signed)

- Franklin D. Roosevelt"

Nebraska's Proclamation for 1933

Governor Bryan issued the following state proclamation:

"In accordance with our annual custom, our laws, and the proclamation of our president, Thursday, November 30, has been set aside as Thanksgiving Day.

"We are grateful to Almighty God for the resources of Nebraska--both the material resources, the rich soil that, aided by a healthful climate and plenty of good growing weather, produces bountiful crops regularly, and the character resources of courage, industry and integrity that have developed our state from a prairie wilderness to one of the leading food producing states of the nation. We are determined that our development shall continue. Our schools shall be fostered and protected so that with our churches and our homes they may continue to build the high type of character that will do much to guarantee the future of our state. Our streams shall be so harnessed as to insure sufficient water supply at all times to our fertile land and to furnish power for our growing cities and industries. And we look forward hopefully to the changes in our economic conditions so earnestly sought by our courageous president giving us a wider market for our foodstuffs and cost of production plus a reasonable return on the money and labor invested. Thus shall our people receive the larger share of happiness and financial security to which we are entitled.

"Now, therefore, I, Charles W. Bryan, Governor of Nebraska, do hereby set apart and proclaim Thursday, November 30, as Thanksgiving Day and urge that our people give fitting observance to this day by attendance at such public services as shall be held and by acknowledging our gratitude for the blessings we have received as a state and nation."

Why Be Thankful?

What do we have to be thankful for this year? The past year has had its quota of blessings. It is human nature to take for granted the supplying of physical needs. Yet as life becomes more simple and plain, we become more grateful for daily sustenance, for food, for shelter, for the very air that we breathe, for the rain, and for the sun. We become more appreciative of the beauties of nature and the joy of human companionship which makes life most worth living. Man has been known to be so absorbed in the pursuit of fortune that he sometimes forgets to be grateful for life itself.

Adversity teaches us to be interested in others' welfare; to appreciate the work we have to do, to share with others and to be grateful for that privilege. To be truly thankful is to try to give others a reason for being thankful too.

(Prepared by Leona S. Davis, State Extension Agent, Home Management)