

VILLAGE VIEW

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This holiday week Americans throughout the nation will celebrate Thanksgiving Day on November 26. Americans have much to be thankful for, yet on almost every front, we hear complaints rather than appreciation.

We might do well to go back in our imaginations to Pilgrim times when the first Thanksgiving Day celebrated the harvest. It was the fall of 1621, and the Pilgrims had been living on the shores of Cape Cod Bay for almost a year; half their number had succumbed to the rigors of the previous winter, but those who survived were thankful not only to find themselves alive, but to have reaped a harvest they could count on to carry them through the second bitter winter they knew was coming.

Although they had no government programs to sustain them should their stores be inadequate or destroyed, although there was no unemployment insurance to draw upon if they could find no job that suited them that paid wages acceptable to them, although there was little promise of security within or without their isolated little settlement, they gave thanks for those things they did have.

It's easy for Cape Codders to envision what those things were; it takes under an hour to drive from most parts of the Cape to Plymouth where you can walk through Plimoth Plantation and see how those people lived, how they worked, how they cut their wood and sawed it into boards with one man standing on a rude scaffolding and another in a pit while each worked one end of a saw. You can see how food was stored, how it was cooked, and you can imagine without difficulty what it must have been like to keep house, hear and raise children, clothe and feed a family. You can, if you will, put yourselves in the position of those people who lived in Plymouth and gave thanks in Plymouth, three hundred and sixty years ago.

The Pilgrims were not different from us; they had the same thoughts and feelings, the same hopes and dreams, the same loves and hates that we have. Perhaps they had more fears; certainly they had greater cause to fear.

Their settlement stood on the edge of the beach, near the place the ship that brought them from England had landed and left them. The icy waters of the bay and the rough seas of the Atlantic Ocean separated them from their homeland and discouraged any thoughts of returning to the relatively-civilized society they had known in earlier days.

At their backs grew the forests, inhabited by wild animals and a strange race of humans who were native to this unknown land, people they referred to as Indians. In the forests were bears and wolves and wild cats. Fortunately, there were also deer, rabbit, squirrel, and wild turkey. In the marshes were water fowl and in the sea, fish. Meat was plentiful. But there wasn't a supermarket or butcher shop or bakery, nor was there a clothing store nor anyone from whom to order fuel.

If a man expected to eat, he had to shoot or catch and dress the animal. If he expected to be clothed, he needed to care for his sheep and shear their wool; then it was up to the women to spin it into yarn, weave it into cloth, and sew it into garments.

If a man expected to live in a warm house and protect his family from cold, he needed to chop down trees, build his shelter complete with fireplace, and furnish fuel to feed the fire. Women and children helped, but not because they were

given an allowance or spending money. They helped because they knew if they didn't, they'd starve or freeze to death.

When the children were not needed at home to help their parents, they were permitted to attend school. An opportunity to get some education was a privilege, not something to be avoided. Attending school wasn't much fun in those days.

Rest rooms were unheated outhouses, lacking amenities such as flush toilets and running water. Schoolrooms were heated as homes were, with fireplaces. Scholars gathered wood to fuel those fires, drew water in buckets from wells, and learned quickly to read and write or failed to learn at all. Childhood was short and not especially pleasant. Work and religion took precedence over fun and games. On the Sabbath Day, children as well as their parents devoted several hours to religious services. Failure to participate was a punishable offense and that punishment was severe.

The first governor of Plymouth Colony, John Carver, died in Plymouth's first grim winter; his successor, William Bradford, ruled the colony for the next 35 years. Punishments were meted out for the smallest infraction of rules.

A culprit might be put in stocks. There he would sit with his hands and feet locked in place, publicly shamed. Or the ducking stool might be employed; this device involved a seat on the end of a long plank mounted on a fulcrum. The offender was strapped to the stool and repeatedly immersed in the icy waters of a pond or bay, up and down, up and down, while he choked and spit and gagged. For serious crimes a person could be banished from the colony and sent out into the wilderness to fend for himself. For the crime of bearing false witness, public whippings were the practice.

Today such punishments would be deemed cruel and unusual. A person so sentenced, however, might well think twice about repeating his action. And, once he had taken his punishment, he was free to return to the community (except in the case of banishment) and was expected to conform in the future. His banishment cost the community nothing; he continued to contribute to the support of his family and the welfare of the colony as a whole, and he was expected to see the error of his ways, and mend them.

This was the way of life for which the Pilgrims gave thanks. What did they have to be thankful for? They were among the living, their larders were filled with enough food to carry them until another growing season, and they had hope and faith. Not a one of them but knew that sickness might befall him. Medical care was crude, at best: the strong and lucky survived; the weak or unfortunate died.

In 1981 there are many who are poor, many who protest reduction of government services, many who bewail lack of employment opportunity, many who feel their rights are being abrogated because they are being forced to stop depending, to some extent, on services for which they pay nothing, to which they contribute nothing, and which they've grown to expect will be always available to them. Television brings their faces and voices into our living rooms from where they sit, in a barroom, and bemoan their lot because the federal government is curtailing some benefits and offering opportunities to put aside funds for the future.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving Day, 1981, we may well ask ourselves whether we Americans today, or those Pilgrims in Plymouth in 1621, have more for which to be thankful. Perhaps the Pilgrims actually had better reason; those people, so like us in so many ways, had a quality many Americans today apparently lack. They were self-sufficient. And they had hope and faith in their hearts that they could survive the winter.