



Thanksgiving always sneaks up on me. It's not that I don't know it's coming the last Thursday of each November; it's that I'm conditioned to think of it as a winter holiday, and winter never seems to arrive in time for it.

When I was a child in school, Thanksgiving was portrayed as a cold day, with the Pilgrims marching to the Meeting House across white fields against a background of evergreens, bough-laden with snow.

In the picture books, men and boys wore tall gray hats with black bands around them just above the wide brim. The bands were fastened in front with a square metal buckle. Their coats and knicker trousers were of the same somber gray, and their hose, stretching to their knees, was black. On their feet black shoes were buckled with another square fastener similar to the one on their hats.

Over his shoulder the man carried a musket, apparently to be used to shoot game or perhaps marauding wolves the family might encounter between home and church.

The lady and little girl were attired in gray dresses, their skirts sweeping the ground. Around their necks, and criss-crossed in front, a plain white kerchief was tucked in at the waistband. Their bonnets were gray, of the same fabric as their clothing, and the faces, even of the children, were shown to be stern and sober.

The illustrations depicted a man, a woman, one child dressed exactly like the man, although he carried no weapon, and another child dressed exactly like the woman. Their Meeting House, seen in the distance, resembled the West Parish Congregational Church in West Barnstable.

How realistic this picture might be, I seriously question today. While it's probable fabrics available to our Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers lacked much variety in color or basic style, I wonder if individuality wasn't somehow expressed, even in the Puritanical days of the first Thanksgiving.

The captions of the pictures I remember explained the seriousness of the occasion. The people were gathering together to give thanks for having survived their first year in the New World and for a rich harvest after months of hunger and hardship.

That they were grateful for survival, I can well believe, for of the band that debarked at Plymouth from the good ship Mayflower in November, 1620, more than half died during the first year.

But for the aid of kindly and friendly Indians living in the Plymouth woods at the time, none of them could have made it through the first winter. Their colony of Plymouth would have disappeared with hardly a trace, as many another such tiny colony must have disappeared before the New World was populated by refugees from religious prosecution in Europe.

When I think of the Pilgrims as individuals, however, I can't believe they weren't just as singular as is each of us in our time.

In any group, whether of children in a Sunday School class, a scout troop, a kindergarten — teenagers at a dance, a party, in a library — adults of any age, there are always identifiable individual types.

There are those who do most of the talking, those who sit back and listen, those who are always late, those who are habitually early, those who fool around, those who take things seriously, those who demand attention, those who do most of the work, those who conform, those who need to be different.

It's the nature of humans to differ, one from another, perhaps in small and hard-to-see ways, but the differences are evident if we look for them.

Perhaps the Puritan mores forbid outward display of such differences, but it's my conviction they were there to be recognized nonetheless.

A dimple-cheeked girl would smile at every opportunity to show her most charming feature. A boy could no more disguise his mischievous disposition than he could hide his red hair and freckled snub nose.

A woman with a good husband and strong healthy children, one who

had worked spinning the wool, weaving the cloth, and sewing the clothing her family wore, who had toiled beside her man in the field harvesting their crop, who had preserved the fruits and vegetables needed to see her family through the bitter months to come, would walk proudly to the Meeting House.

Her husband who had built a snug solid cabin, hunted his own meat, hung it, salted it down or smoked it, and felt safely supplied with wood for the winter, would carry his musket with a hint of a swagger.

The children in such a family, just as children today, would emulate the carriage and attitude of their parents.

Conversely, the woman whose loom had not been busy, whose crops had failed, who knew the meaning of a meagre larder, would huddle beneath her kerchief. Had her husband been one of those buried during the first terrible winter, she might be grieving still.

On the other hand, she might, by now, be seeking his successor. Depending on her need and self-confidence, her attitude would show in her gait, her behavior, her appearance, and her glance.

Young strong people would appear resilient and optimistic about the future. Old people, and those weakened by illness, would look frightened, saddened, lonely, depressed, worried and concerned. It would show.

Just as people today reflect how they feel about themselves and their situations, those people crossing the snowy fields to give thanks for survival and a good harvest after a year of suffering and hard work revealed their feelings to any observant person.

As we gather together this Thanksgiving to express appreciation for the good things in our lives, let's assume the role of the observant person. Let's become watchful for signs of how others among us feel. Let's be aware of our neighbors who are saddened by the loss of loved ones, who are depressed, worried and frightened.

Thanksgiving Day gives us more than an opportunity to be grateful. It's a chance to extend a comforting hand to the bereaved, an encouraging word to the fearful, to share an uplifting thought with the depressed. It's a day to praise — not only the Lord for the blessings he has showered upon us — but also a friend and neighbor for his efforts to do his best to carry his personal trials with dignity.

We all have things to be thankful for. And we all have problems that, at times, seem insoluble. A warm and friendly greeting — such a small thing — may give enough of a lift to help some other person feel his blessings outweigh his burdens.

Even if this holiday does seem to come suddenly and before its time, we don't need much forethought to be ready to give thanks and to give someone else a reason for feeling thankful.

Have a nice day. And don't eat too much turkey!