

Thanksgiving out among the colonized...

A day after Thanksgiving last year, the Omaha World Herald carried a story about the Mesquakie reservation in Tama, Iowa, and feelings about the holiday on the part of some of the tribal people there. Apparently the assignment was to gauge attitudes in light of expressions of resentment in some quarters about the national observance of yet another “colonizing” imposition on Native peoples -- Thanksgiving.

Native people quoted in the newspaper article said essentially that the celebration to them was simply an annual getting together of family and friends. They didn't feel themselves compelled to pray, feast and celebrate, and they held no bitterness. On the other hand, some said, they have plenty to be thankful for.

I suppose that their response pretty much reflects the majority in Indian Country – on the reservations and off.

Wannabee tribal elder, Roger Welsch, recalls that Alfred “Buddy” Gilpin, Jr., of the Omaha tribe “scoffed at the idea of a special day, or hour, or moment set aside for prayer and thanksgiving because in his own words, ‘For us every moment of life is a prayer of gratitude.’”

My expert source on things historical, Nancy Gillis – executive, historian, teacher and Hunkapi sibling, tells a different story of the first Thanksgiving than that which American tradition has cooked up.

As Nancy tells it, “Thanksgiving is often depicted in an idyllic scene with starched-and-buckled pilgrims devoutly in prayer over a bountiful spread of turkey with all the trimmings, joined at the table by a small number of Indians, often shown wearing Plains tribal garb.” But, in reality, she says, “it was an uneasy three-day meeting of the settlers and Wampanoag Indians to work out a peace and mutual-support agreement.”

She cites the notes of on-the-scene witness Edward Winslow who tells of three days “characterized by the smell of gun powder mingled with the aroma of roasting meat,” during which “great quantities of beer and wine were consumed.” In Winslow's notes, he makes no mention of giving thanks to God or to the Wampanoags, who brought almost all of the food.

So, the case might be made that the event doesn't merit historical significance, certainly nothing to celebrate in such sanctimony. Nevertheless, I maintain that it isn't something that warrants resentment and boycott either.

Native tribes have always celebrated thanksgiving in their harvest festivals (as did most European peoples). And it is one festival where Americans should take note that most of the fare on Thanksgiving tables today have origin in Native America.

The American natives had been self-sufficient for centuries before the white man arrived, and it was the food the Natives discovered and developed that nurtured the new nation through its infancy, to the profound regret of many of our people.

Since the dawn of warm-blooded life, at autumn man and beast have stocked up for survival through the winter months. Many people still try to relive that tradition, in hunt and in harvest, although super markets are more reliable providers. It represents the spirit of something that we have lost and that we always seek to find: the harvest and the hunt, and the salting and preserving of the bounty.

Brother Louie LaRose tells of a great role-reversal that plays out every fall hunting season on the Winnebago reservation here in Nebraska: the white hunters come out with bows and arrows, and the HoChunks with their 30-30s.

The weapons that the white archers use for hunting are something different than the small-but-powerful bows that a warrior would use to put an arrow clean through a bison bull from a horse on a dead run. The monsters used today are lightweight, forged-aluminum bows with kinds of counterweights and pullies and sights, and incorporating the latest technology to generate supersonic arrow speeds and pinpoint accuracy. Venison-on-the-hoof don't stand a chance, nor do stump dumb turkeys. Add to this electronic sound effects that can attract any critter on the ships log of Noah's arc, and camouflage that, except for the neon orange hats, could make a man look like part of a forest. This all seems unsportsman-like, especially to the critters being hunted.

Nevertheless, the meat brought home tastes as good, I suppose, as it used to in more interesting times and places.

Out here in the West, foods preserved for winter by the Lakota has always been good and nutritious, as shown by the statuesque warriors that dominated the Northern Plains over the years. Buffalo meat and venison were staples, but there were also fish, fowl, wild turnips and wild fruit. Corn and beans could be had from the annual Lakota "harvests," which always followed by a few weeks the harvests of neighboring Pawnee or Omaha villages.

Meats, berries and tubers were dried and cooked to supplement the hunted game, and nourished the camp throughout the winter.

In my growing up years, feasts back home have almost always included delicious soup made of papa saka (dried meat), wastunkala (dried corn), and timpsila (dried wild turnips), served with fried bread (some call frybread) and hot wakaliapi (coffee), and followed by wozapi (berry pudding). What wasn't eaten at the meal was taken home in syrup pale.

And the papa saka itself made for a delicious take-along snack. Sliced thin by grandma's butcher knife, which was honed down to a thin, razor-sharp blade, the meat was dried in the sun, crisp as a taco shell. One strip of papa saka could be chewed for an hour; and as you chewed, it would swell, releasing tasty juices that were sealed in by the sun. Some of the papa saka would also be pounded into a stringy pulp and mixed with dried berries, suet, and sugar for a treat called wasnah (what some other tribesmen and wannabees call pemmican).

Ah, for those wonderful times. Oh well, I wish you a happy Thanksgiving dinner with whatever you can cook up, with whomever joins you, wherever you are.

PS: There is a paparazzi, a stalker, if you will, who tracks my columns in Indian Country Today, and makes interesting – sometimes downright mean blogs at the end of the essays on line. These are sometimes interspersed with snide remarks questioning my ancestry. Happy thanksgiving to you, too, Wambli, you sneaky Sioux. Now behave yourself.

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