

Thanksgiving Turkey: The Second Greatest Story Ever Told



By *Chuck Dinerstein* — November 16, 2017



Thanksgiving depicted by Norman Rockwell

PILGRIMS were well acquainted with turkeys. Conquistadors captured them 200 years earlier and brought them home as royal treasures. They were adored by the Renaissance elites, kept in gardens, and commemorated in art along with the other noble animals, horses, and dogs. However, unlike their fellow noble animals, turkeys went from art on the wall to art on the table.

At first, turkey was a gourmet treat just for elites. Later it was an aspirational dish for the middle class, used to commemorate a special day (Christmas). When European settlers arrived in America, they found turkeys aplenty and as close as an arrow or musket shot away.

Today, we have domesticated turkeys. But why, if they were so naturally plentiful? In a word, hornworms.

[Hornworms](#) ^[1], which are caterpillars (that eventually turn into moths), could eat their way through the life of a farm family in a few weeks, especially before chemical pesticides made defending one's crop and livelihood possible. Hornworms were at best crippling, at worst a catastrophe. But turkeys love hornworms, viewing them as a Shake Shack delight. One turkey could clean and protect 1000 plants; 50 turkeys more than 100,000. Turkeys were a form of sustainable pest control. And when the farming season was over, those turkeys yielded feathers for ornaments and mattresses and food for the table.

SARAH was a writer. She wrote novels, the first published by a woman in the U.S. She wrote

poems, including one about Mary and her little lambs. She was an early abolitionist concerned about the way slavery tore families, dividing instead of uniting the country she loved. Sarah wrote letters, lots and lots of letters, to congressmen and Presidents.

She wrote not just about slavery, but also about two national holidays, Washington's Birthday and the 4th of July. They were insufficient. A religious people needed a national holiday, in the fall, to be thankful. This could decrease discontent and discord. *Northwood*, Sarah's novel, was a public version of all those letters and her deeply held beliefs. *Northwood* featured a family meal, complete with turkey and all the fixings:

"[It] is considered as an appropriate tribute of gratitude to God to set apart one day of Thanksgiving in each year; and autumn is the time when the overflowing garners of America call for this expression of joyful gratitude."

Even though politicians often ignore letters, Sarah kept writing, asking for a national holiday of thanksgiving. Sarah became an editor, of *Godey's Lady's Book*, and used her new pulpit, with a circulation of 150,000 copies, to push for her holiday of thanks.

In 1863, there was another very good reason for thanksgiving, at least for the Union. They had won at Gettysburg, at incomprehensible cost, and won again at Vicksburg. President Lincoln knew, in his political mind if not his religious heart, that it was time "to observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving." Sarah Josepha Hale had won her argument*.

JOHN C. BENNET was many things, a physician of sorts, having studied with his physician uncle for three years and attended a course or two at McGill University in Canada. He was a religious advisor to Joseph Smith of the Mormon faith, disgraced and expelled by what we call sexual harassment but that he called "spiritual wifery." But, in the end, John was an entrepreneur.

Disgraced in his adopted home of Indiana, he returned to his birth home of Plymouth, Massachusetts to lead the life of a farmer. John began breeding chickens and turkeys, writing *The Poultry Book*, a guide to breeding and raising birds. Ever the eager promoter, he created turkey shows and contests so his early adopters could show and share their work. These gatherings promoted sales of his book and his "branded" version of several turkey breeds.

Bennet made a fortune as "hen fever" went viral, creating a cottage industry in turkey breeding. His Plymouth Rock breed, a combination of a domestic and Asian turkey, gave way to Narragansetts, Bourbon Butternuts, and the Bronze. These were show turkeys prized for plumage, not meat. By 1920 there were two predominate breeds for food, the Bronze and the White Holland. With economies of scale, small family farms that produced turkeys were gradually replaced by larger farms.

American industry did what it does best and satisfied the customer, who evidently wanted inexpensive, high-quality food. The Bronze and the White Holland were bred for wide breasts; the Bronze begat the Bronze Mae West, which begat the Broad-breasted Bronze, which begat (with

the White Holland) today's commercial breed, the Broad-breasted White.

Along the way, the birds were bred for docility, early maturity, maximum growth, and color -- everything demanded by a public that wanted their protein cheap and plentiful. Flavor was not a priority.

CLARENCE, Carl's biggest buyer, couldn't get enough, at least at first. With a buyer, Carl offered farmers 18 cents a pound, advancing money in the spring, harvesting, and settling accounts in the fall. It was the depression, and when money flowed, everyone did well. However, it was no longer the Depression, but 1950, and Carl was in big trouble.

Carl had 20 railroad cars, expensive refrigerated cars, rolling around with no buyer for the cargo. One million frozen pounds of turkey. There would be time for recriminations, to ponder whether the greed in cornering the market was to be his downfall. He looked again at what had been offered as his salvation, a piece of tin, 12" x 8", stamped into compartments. Pan American, America's largest airline, was moving from cargo and mail to passengers. In order to maintain its edge, Pan American introduced hot meals for their passengers. Those stamped tins that Carl filled from his twenty railroad cars of turkey became some of America's first airline meals.

Carl and his sons were bailed out, their self-inflicted bad fortune reversed, but it got them thinking. With a little redesign, that stamped tin could hold two large slices of white breast turkey meat on a bed of stuffing covered in gravy. Mashed potatoes, carrots, and peas or maybe corn, too. Centered, like a crown on top, a dessert such as brown Betty or apple cranberry cobbler.

And that's how Carl Swanson's TV dinner was born. It rapidly grew in popularity, selling 14 million annually within a few years. Clarence did okay, too, even though he was no longer active or owned the company that bore his name; Birdseye had their version of the TV dinner in the markets shortly after that.

Let's talk turkey statistics.

- Turkeys breed in the spring, their twenty-eight-week growth cycle coinciding perfectly with Thanksgiving.
- Turkey consumption has grown from 6.4 pounds/person in 1960 to 16.8 pounds/person in 2017
- Pound for pound, turkey is the least expensive meat and is a low-fat meat alternative to beef and pork.
- We eat more than 46 million turkeys on Thanksgiving.
- The average weight of a turkey is now over 30 pounds; it was 15 pounds in 1930.
- Turkeys have been transformed by breeding into a fast-growing bird, efficiently converting feed to food.
- Turkeys are so large they require artificial insemination to reproduce.
- Industrial turkey production is year-round, producing turkey bacon, sausage, burgers and those large turkey legs found at Disney World.

- Industrialization has problems, such as stressing the animals, who no longer regulate their food intake and mimic us, overeating too often. Their deaths may be humane but remain disturbing to those (sub)urbanites who remain disconnected from their sources of food.

The rise of the industrial turkey is a story large enough to contain many narratives -- from the salvation of agriculture to the rise of TV dinners. Indeed, it is a tale of American exceptionalism.

Happy Thanksgiving!

**Note: In 1939, at the advice of executives of Macy's, President Roosevelt moved the holiday up a week, to extend Christmas sales. The uproar was more significant than that surrounding our "Black Friday." Republicans demanded a return to the traditional "last Thursday," while Democrats championed the more innovative, economically stimulating "fourth Thursday" position of Roosevelt. Congress split the difference in their 1941 law making Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday of the month some years and the fifth Thursday in other years, on a schedule done, believe it or not, without an algorithm or scoring by the Congressional Budget Office.*

Source material from The Turkey - An American Story by Andrew Smith

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manduca_sexta