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The University of Dayton

AMERICAN INDIANS FEASTED TO GIVE THANKS LONG BEFORE PILGRIMS SET THE TABLE

DAYTON, Ohio -- The Pilgrims' Thanksgiving of 1621 may have established the American tradition we celebrate today, but it wasn't terribly original. American Indians had been putting on a spread in thanks for a good harvest long before the Mayflower.

"Perhaps all of the many tribes in North America had some sort of thanksgiving ceremony or ritual long before the white people landed here," said Leroy V. Eid, a professor of history at the University of Dayton. Eid, a cultural-sociological historian, teaches a class that looks at various Indian ceremonials.

The Narragansett tribe in New England had a thanksgiving feast to their god of bounty, Cowtantowit, that included dancing, games and contests. The Green Corn Ceremony was a common form of thanksgiving wherever corn was grown. The Five Nation Iroquois, who lived primarily in New York but also had villages around Lake Erie, were among several tribes to celebrate the gift of corn.

"The ceremony lasted for several days and included dances of a spiritual nature," Eid said. After the Iroquois feast of late summer, what followed is strikingly similar to our contemporary Thanksgiving ritual. "They played a 'Sacred Bowl' game," -- not football, but probably something similar to lacrosse, Eid said.

The Algonquians, in Virginia, held an annual ritual dance celebrating the harvest.

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Sixteenth-century paintings by Englishman John White show rituals in the town of Secontan, next to Roanoke, where tribes danced around posts set in a circle.

"It's probably safe to say that some form of thanksgiving ceremonial has long and deep-seated roots in almost all cultures," Eid said.

The first white man's Thanksgiving was held in the Plymouth Colony of Massachusetts. After a bitter first year, the Pilgrims had a successful second summer harvest, thanks in part to some sound agricultural advice from an Indian named Squanto.

The Pilgrims invited Chief Massasoit and his Wampanoag tribesmen to their celebration feast. The Indians brought with them some deer meat and the first Thanksgiving holiday resulted.

"The important fact of that Thanksgiving is that two different cultures were able to get together and say 'thanks' in peace," Eid said.

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