UD History Professor Discusses Differences, Myths Between Thanksgiving Today and at Plymouth
UD HISTORY PROFESSOR DISCUSSES DIFFERENCES, MYTHS BETWEEN THANKSGIVING TODAY AND AT PLYMOUTH

DAYTON, Ohio — Expecting discriminating company for Thanksgiving? Look on the bright side — they’re not Puritans.

Those who founded Plymouth, Mass., in 1620 and held the first American Thanksgiving the following year would be dismayed at the way in which the holiday is celebrated today, says Ann Little, assistant professor of history at the University of Dayton.

For openers, they would chastise us for the number of hours we spend in front of the TV, time these New England Puritans used for spiritual humility and gratitude.

“That we are worshiping at the shrine of the television and not praying all day for thanks would appall them,” says Little, an expert on colonial-American history. “It was much more self-consciously a religious holiday and meant to celebrate God, his abundance and God’s care for them.”

So much for catching the Cowboys-Lions game.

Puritans would find other surprises as well, especially when called to repast, Little says. Though we serve some of the same dishes as the colonists — cranberry sauce, pumpkin, squash and corn dishes — a colonialist would look aghast at the bloated Butterball gracing the spread.

“Of course, turkey was served at the first Thanksgiving, just as it is today,” Little says. “But it was a much smaller wild turkey. Early Puritans wouldn’t recognize our unnaturally fattened domestic turkeys.”

Aside from the differences in the way it is celebrated today, myths still abound about colonial Thanksgiving, Little says. One of the most deeply held myths is that of early colonists and local Indians sharing a table at the harvest holiday each year.

“Americans look to the first Thanksgiving in the Plymouth Colony as a kind of intercultural celebration between the Wampanoag Indians and the first English settlers,” Little explains. “That’s true of the first Thanksgiving but beyond that, Indians were not included in this celebration.”

Little qualifies, adding that in subsequent feasts some Indian elders were invited to “break bread” with the settlers not as an intercultural celebration but for diplomatic or political motives.

“I think it’s important to remember that this moment of caring and sharing was very – over –
short, especially when we’re talking about New England Puritans who had very little interest in mixing with many English people, let alone Indians.”

Even though, Little says she appreciates the essence behind the traditional myth of the first Thanksgiving. “I think it shows how the near eradication of Native-American culture didn’t have to happen. There was a moment on the Anglo-Indian frontier where people could and did get along.”

Another myth is that Thanksgiving has been a national tradition since that fall in 1621. “It wasn’t until President Abraham Lincoln made it a national holiday (in 1863) that it was no longer a regional celebration,” Little explains. Lincoln, historians say, created the national holiday — given its romantic legend of inter-cultural togetherness — as a way to encourage solidarity and counter sectionalism after the Civil War.

Despite the differences and myths separating Plymouth in the 1600s and the U.S. in 1998, Little finds Thanksgiving the most endearing of holidays, in part for its low-level commercialism. And, she adds, there is another quality — benevolence — that has become an attribute of modern Thanksgiving.

“Many Americans today spend their Thanksgiving helping those in need,” Little explains, from volunteering at food drives to planning community or family dinners for the poor. “We trash the modern Thanksgiving celebrations for not being authentically Puritan, but then they didn’t have the tradition of helping the needy on Thanksgiving.

“They took care of their own, and believed that everybody else was responsible for their own families. They didn’t have any kind of sense public welfare. They actually thought it was sinful to help out the poor.”

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