

# **muse**

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## **What's Wrong With This Picture?**

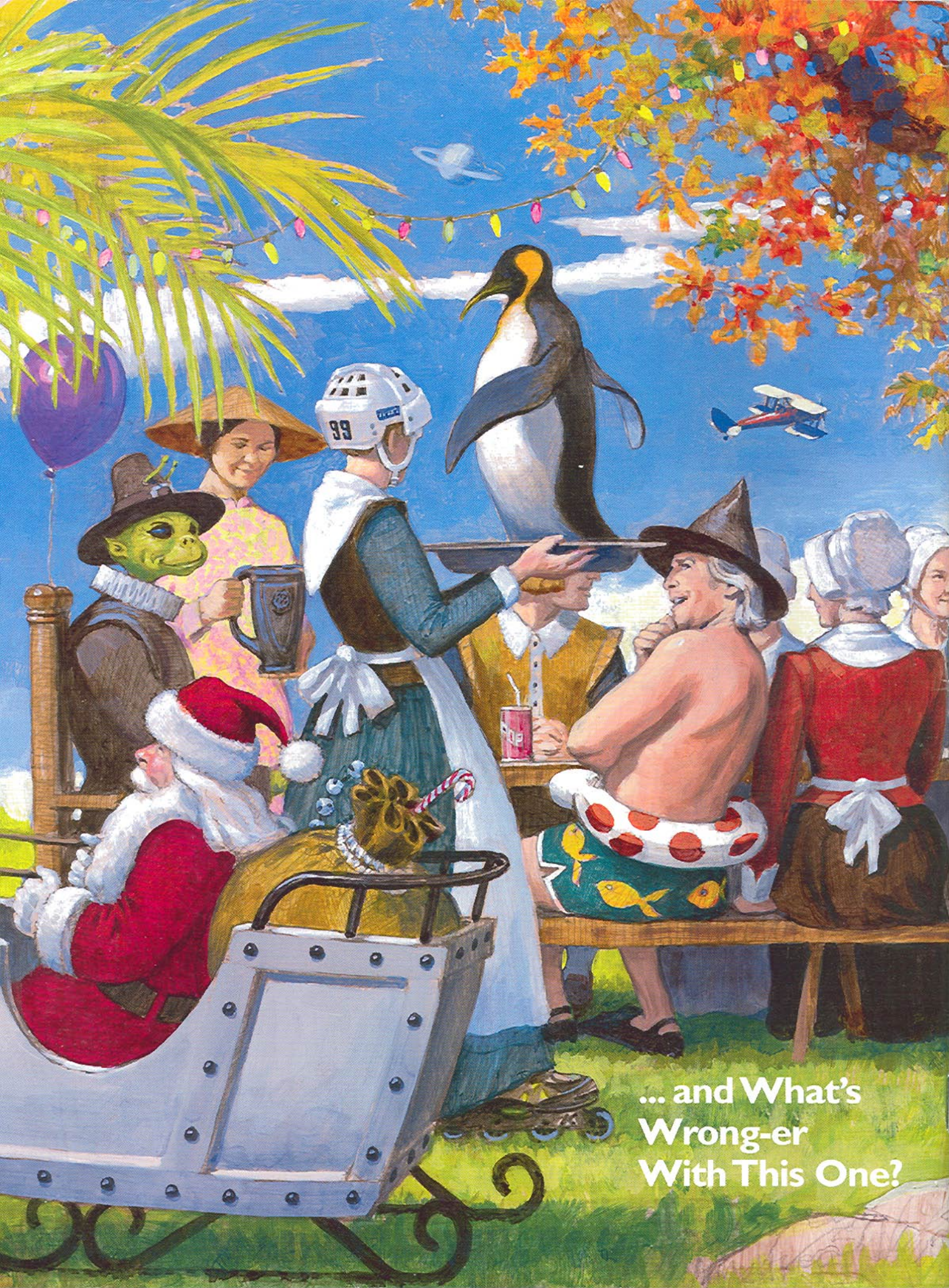
**The True Story of the  
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... and What's  
Wrong-er  
With This One?





N.C. Wyeth, Mural from  
Plymouth Colony series, 1940.

# *The True Story of the*

by Patricia Scott Deetz

*Patricia Scott Deetz*

**W**hat comes to mind when you think of the first Thanksgiving? Something like this painting by N.C. Wyeth? Men wearing tall black hats, women in white caps, and an Indian in a blanket keeping an eye on the turkey while they listen to the Thanksgiving prayer? The painting looks more or less right, doesn't it?

Well, it's not. Wyeth, who designed this mural in 1940, was painting our idea of Thanksgiving rather than what actually happened. We don't know much about life in Plymouth colony in the fall of 1621, less than a year





"Okay folks ... this turkey is all we have—everybody gets one bite."

# *First Thanksgiving*

after the settlers arrived on the *Mayflower*. But what we do know suggests that the feast held that fall didn't look much like Wyeth's picture.

We have only one eyewitness account of the first Thanksgiving. It is a letter a settler named Edward Winslow wrote on 11 December 1621 to a friend in England. Like many pioneers, Winslow talked about how plentiful food and game were in America, probably because he hoped to encourage other people to make the risky ocean crossing and join the settlers.

See how the settlers lived at the Plimoth Plantation's web site:  
<http://www.plimoth.org>  
(Yes, that's how the Pilgrims spelled it.)



Edward Winslow Writing to a Loving Friend,  
11 December 1621

Winslow's letter isn't very long. However, it gives us several clues to what really took place that fall.



A  
LETTER SENT FROM  
New-England to a friend in these parts,  
setting forth a brieft and true Declaration  
of the worth of that Plantation;  
As also certayne full Directions  
for such as intend a VOYAGE  
into these Parts.



Quing, and old Friend, although  
I receiued no Letter from you  
by this Ship, yet forasmuch as I  
know you expect the perfor-  
mance of my promise, which  
was, to write vnto you truly  
and faithfully of all things. I  
haue therefore at this time sent  
vnto you accordingly. Refer-  
ring you for further satisfaction

to our more large Relations. You shall vnderstand, that in  
this little time, that a few of vs haue bene here, we haue built  
seauen dwelling houses, and foure for the vse of the Plantati-  
on, and haue made preparation for diuers others. We set the  
last Spring some twentie Acres of Indian Corne, and sowed  
some six Acres of Barly & Pease, and according to the man-  
ner of the Indians, we manured our ground with Herings or  
rather Shadds, which we haue in great abundance, and take  
with great ease at our doores. Our Corne did proue well, &  
God be prayfed, we had a good increase of Indian Corne,  
and our Barly indifferent good, but our Pease not worth the  
gathering, for we feared they were too late sowne, they  
came vp very well, and blossomed, but the Sunne parched  
them

NEW-ENGLAND, &c.

them in the blossome; our harvest being gotten in, our Go-  
vernour sent foure men on fowling, that so we might after  
a more speciall manner reioyce together, after we had ga-  
thered the fruit of our labours; they foure in one day killed  
as much fowle, as with a little helpe beside, served the Com-  
pany almost a weeke, at which time amongst other Recre-  
tions, we exercised our Armes, many of the Indians coming  
amongst vs, and amongst therest their greatest King *Massa-  
soyt*, with some nintie men, whom for three dayes we enter-  
tained and feasted. and they went out and killed five Deere,  
which they brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our  
Governour, and vpon the Captaine, and others. And al-  
though it be not alwayes so plentifull, as it was at this time  
with vs, yet by the goodnesse of God, we are so farre from  
want, that we often with you partakers of our plentie. We  
haue found the Indians very faithfull in their Covenant of  
Peace with vs; very louing and readie to pleasure vs: we of-  
ten goe to them, and they come to vs; some of vs haue bin  
fiftie myles by Land in the Country with them; the occasions  
and Relations whereof you shall vnderstand by our generall  
and morefull Declaration of such things as are worth the  
noting, yea, it hath pleased God so to possesse the Indians  
with a feare of vs, and loue vnto vs, that not onely the grea-  
test King amongst them called *Massasoit*, but also all the  
Princes and peoples round about vs, haue either made sute  
vnto vs, or bene glad of any occasion to make peace with  
vs, so that seauen of them at once haue sent their messengers  
to vs to that end, yea, an Fle at sea, which we neuer saw hath  
also together with the former yeelded willingly to be vnder  
the protection, and subiects to our soueraigne Lord King  
JAMES, so that there is now great peace amongst the Indians  
themselues, which was not formerly, neither would haue bin  
but for vs; and we for our parts walke as peaceably and  
safely in the wood, as in the hie-ways in England, we enter-  
taine them familiarly in our houses, and they as friendly be-  
stowing their Venison on vs. They are a people without  
any Religion, or knowledge of any God, yet very trustie,  
K 3 quicke

Winslow's letter as it appeared in the book History of Plymouth  
Plantation 1620-1647.

"... many of the Indians coming amongst us, and  
among the rest their greatest King Massasoit, with  
some nintie men ..."

One of the odder things about Wyeth's painting is the solitary Indian.  
In fact, there were more Indians than settlers at the feast. One  
hundred and two people had sailed on the *Mayflower* for America.  
On the way, one died and one was born. But only 50 survived the  
first winter in Plymouth. Of these, 13 were children under 12, and  
13 were teenagers. That leaves 24 adults. Massasoit, Winslow says,  
brought 90 men to the feast, and some Indians were already visiting  
the colony.



“... our harvest being gotten in ...”

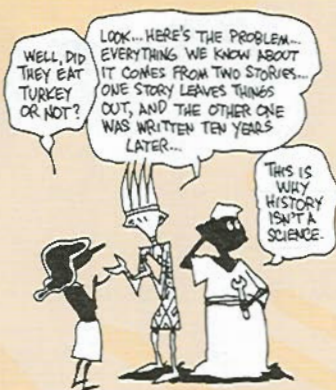
We traditionally celebrate Thanksgiving in November. However, the celebration in 1621 happened earlier, at harvest time. In New England, depending on when the crops were planted and how fast they ripened, that would have been in the early fall, certainly not later than early October.

It wasn't until the Civil War that President Lincoln made the fourth Thursday in November Thanksgiving Day.

“... our governour sent foure men on fowling ...”

“Fowling” meant hunting birds (fowl). The birds were probably ducks and geese because the harvest would have been at the same time as their fall migration. During the migration, it would have been easy for four men to shoot enough birds to provide the settlers with food for a week.

Winslow does NOT mention turkeys.



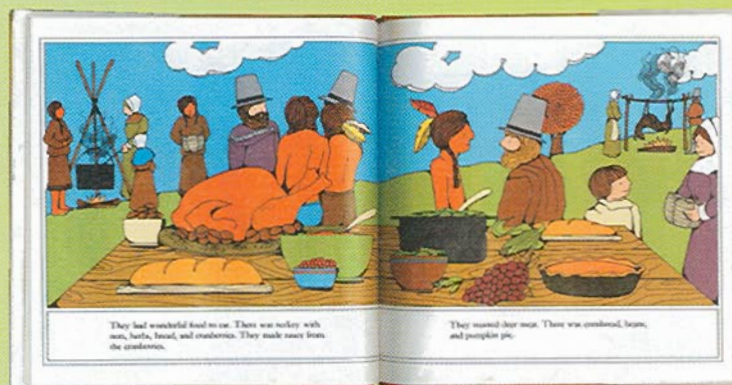
“... amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Armes ...”

Exercised our arms means the settlers fired guns, probably in some kind of drill, or shot at targets. It is also possible they had archery contests with the Indians. What could some of the “other recreations” have been? We know that some of the settlers played stool ball, an early form of cricket, and that the English enjoyed throwing weights. There might also have been dancing and tumbling.

In any case, the celebration is likely to have been rowdy and noisy, not subdued and solemn. There would have been gunfire, running and jumping, laughter and shouting—in two languages.



## Spot the Turkey



The settlers and Indians are often shown feasting on turkey, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie.

But there is no evidence that the settlers ate turkey at the first Thanksgiving. Although cranberries grew in Plymouth, the settlers made no use of them. And pumpkin pie did not come along until much later.

So what did the settlers and their Indian guests eat? Probably ducks, geese and venison (deer) roasted on spits. Pottages (stews) made by cooking corn—and possibly wheat—in a broth made from stewed meat. Fish, eels and shellfish, including lobster. And plenty of beer! In 1621 everyone drank beer, even the children!

For utensils, they would have had spoons, sharp, pointed knives, and their fingers, but no forks. While the English nobility of the time might have used forks, most people regarded them as unnecessary luxuries. The earliest fork found at Plymouth dates from the end of the 17th century.

ANYONE HERE KNOW HOW TO CARVE AN EEL?





**Forget what you learned** in first grade: here's what the Pilgrims and their native guests looked like. Note complete absence of stupid buckles on hats, shoes, belts, anywhere. Let this be a lesson to you: never trust a first-grade teacher. Oh, sure, they seem nice . . . but they lie.

WHAT'S THAT?  
A ROCK  
CONCERT?

IT'S THE FIRST  
THANKSGIVING! IF  
WYETH CAN PUT BIG  
BUCKLES ON THEIR HATS,  
I CAN GIVE 'EM NOSE  
RINGS AND COMBAT  
BOOTS!

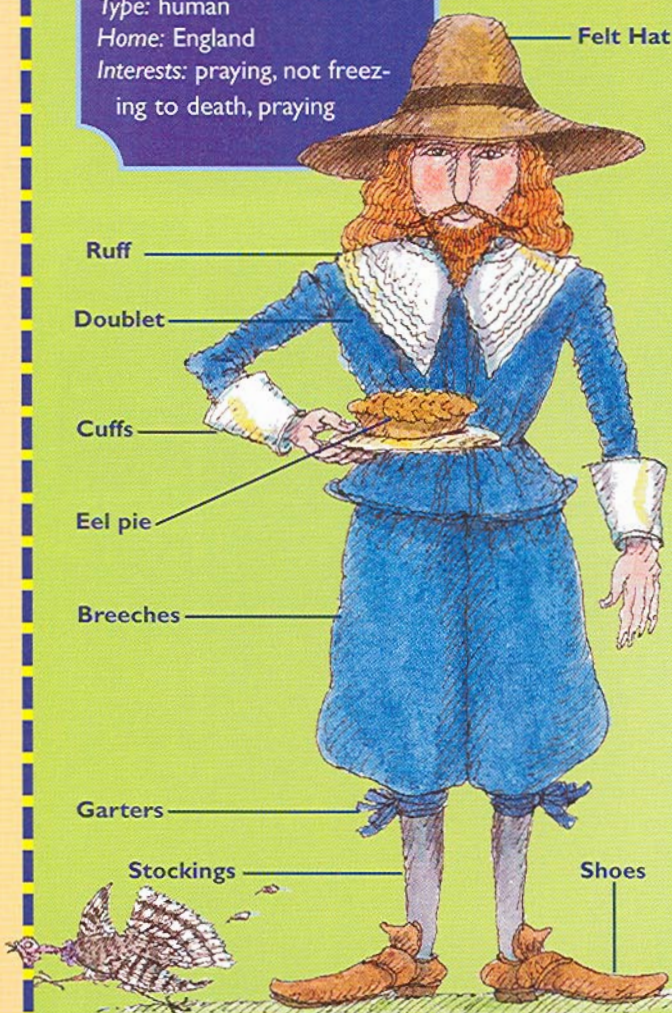


### Pilgrim (Male)

Type: human

Home: England

Interests: praying, not freezing to death, praying

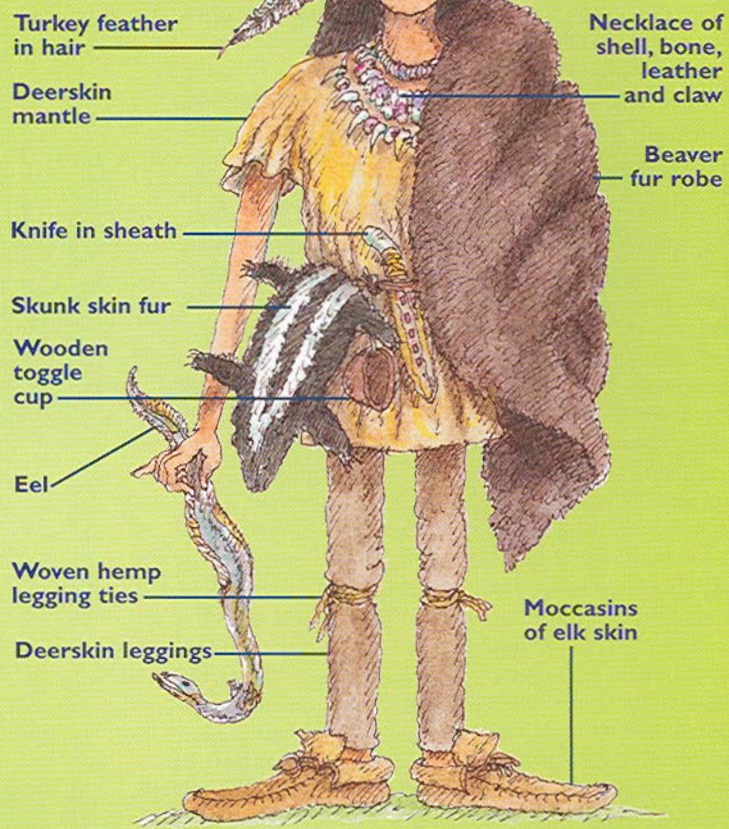


### Native American (Male)

Type: human

Home: North America

Interests: hunting, fishing, hanging out with the tribe



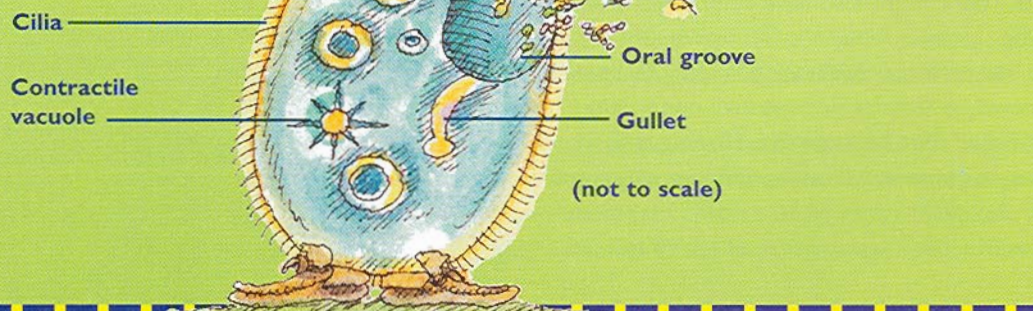
**Were there any *paramecia* at the first Thanksgiving?** Since none were mentioned in the Winslow letter, we can't be sure. Just to be on the safe side, we've included them on this handy chart. It will save you time and embarrassment the next time a Pilgrim, native American, or *paramecium* comes tromping through your backyard.

### Paramecium (?)

Type: single-celled organism

Home: fresh water, mostly

Interests: eating, swimming in a spiral motion, N Sync







Folks getting down at a Harvest Home autumn feast, the likely model for the first Thanksgiving. Somehow, the carousing and carrying-on of this ...



Browncombe, The First Thanksgiving.

... turned into the solemn piety of this. We know which party we'd rather go to!

Did you notice that Winslow makes no mention of giving thanks? He acknowledges the goodness of God, but that is as close as he gets. What was really taking place was not a form of worship, but rather the old English custom of celebrating the harvest of the year's crop with revelry and feasting. With the passing of time, memories of this celebration were blended with celebrations people invented to honor the Pilgrims, and the original harvest feast gradually became the Thanksgiving we know today.

Thanksgiving became a national holiday in 1863 by proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln. Why then and not earlier? The country was being torn apart by the Civil War, a war in which brother fought against brother. How could Lincoln ask all Americans to give thanks to God for his goodness at such a terrible time? Lincoln wanted to unify people in the midst of turmoil. Great statesman that he was, he could see that despite the agony of civil war, the U.S. was still at peace with other nations,



Read biographies of the Pilgrims at:  
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/deetz/>





## Spot the Mistakes

How much do you think you know about the first Thanksgiving? After reading this article, you should be able to spot at least a few errors in the illustration at right. Check page 47 for a more complete listing.



Henry Botkin, *The First Thanksgiving*, 1920.

With her husband, the author of this article wrote *The Times of their Lives*, a book for adults that describes life, love, and death at Plymouth Colony.

it was still ruled by law and prosperous. There was much to be thankful for.

So Thanksgiving as we think of it today is largely a myth. But this isn't necessarily bad. Stories like the one about Thanksgiving are usually called origin myths, and people the world over have them. Origin myths give us a shared sense of what it means to be an American and, especially in a country as diverse as ours, this is a good thing.

But not everyone feels included by our Thanksgiving myth. In 1970, Native Americans declared Thanksgiving a National Day of Mourning and chose Plymouth as the place where it would be observed. To them, Thanksgiving has come to symbolize not a beginning but an end: the tragic destruction of their culture.



Patricia Deetz is a cultural historian with an M.A. in history from Rhodes University, South Africa. Her husband, James Deetz, who is well known for bringing the Plymouth story to life at Plimoth Plantation, was often interviewed at Thanksgiving time. The next day a story with a headline like "Meals of Eels and Lots of Booze" would appear in the paper.



Answers from page 33.



Answers from page 14.

1) The settlers are wearing hats with big silver buckles. 2) They are feasting on roast turkey. 3) The pilgrims outnumber the Indians, instead of the other way around. Historians would also point out the following mistakes: A) Log cabins were never built at Plymouth. Instead the settlers built houses whose walls were made of flexible branches woven between upright posts and plastered with clay. B) Because the settlers had few tables or chairs, most of the diners would have sat on the ground, and the table would not have had a table cloth. C) The standing indian holds a peace pipe, or calumet; this was used by native peoples to the west but was unknown in New England.