

## Rethinking Thanksgiving

Autumn 2009



Illustration: Eric Hanson

### *Myths and misgivings*

**By Vera L. Stenhouse**

In 2006, an Atlanta newspaper ran several photos with captions describing the celebration of the Thanksgiving holiday. The first picture featured a 5-year-old girl wearing a precision-cut fringe vest made out of a brown paper bag from a local grocery store (as identified by the store name and tagline detailed prominently in big blue letters on the vest). On top of her head sat a multicolored feather headdress made of construction paper. The caption under the picture read: "Feathers in her cap. Ava adjusts the headdress of her American Indian costume for a Clairemont Elementary School Thanksgiving feast. More photos from the feast are on page J9."

Page J9 includes three additional pictures—one showing a group of Pilgrims (with white paper collars and hats) and Indians (as identified by their feather headdresses, of course). A second picture shows students in "costume" working on a coloring project and a third captures a student showing off his "homemade American Indian costume." Between the pictures it reads: "Clairemont Elementary School studied American Indians and Pilgrims in preparation for today's big holiday. Last week, they re enacted the first Thanksgiving and dressed in costumes for a feast with family members." In the center is the phrase "Thanks for the lessons."

What lessons *did* they learn? Between Columbus Day in October and Thanksgiving in November, Native Americans [the "official" curricular name in Georgia] play a key role in the mythology of U.S. history as taught in schools. As someone who works with pre- and inservice elementary teachers, I see firsthand how these happy stories maintain children's ignorance and reinforce stereotypes.

The traditional first Thanksgiving story recounts Pilgrims from Europe settling in the wilds of the New World and celebrating their survival by sharing their bountiful feast with the Indians. As my students learn, this version of Thanksgiving is inaccurate. The Pilgrims did leave Europe and comprised 35 out of 102 colonists traveling on the *Mayflower*, eventually settling in 1621 at Patuxet—aka Plimoth. The "new" and "wild" world to which they arrived was neither new, wild, or unnamed, thanks to the Wampanoag, the indigenous people who lived there. Given the Pilgrims' ignorance of the "new" land, their survival was made possible through indigenous knowledge, labor, harvest traditions, and trade. Most significant to the first Thanksgiving story: According to the Wampanoag and the ancestors of the Plimoth settlers, no oral or written account confirms that the first Thanksgiving actually occurred between them in 1621. The Wampanoag, however, did participate in daily and seasonal thanksgivings for thousands of years prior to the Pilgrims' arrival.

Beyond the inaccuracy of the first Thanksgiving story itself are its omissions: Colonists initially stole bushels of corn buried and stored by Wampanoag families for their own use, robbed graves and homes, and left diseases that devastated (albeit unintentionally) Native American communities, subsequently enabling European settlers to overtake Indian land.

The traditional Thanksgiving story is continuously retold through plays, activities, worksheets, and children's books, perpetuating misinformation and stereotypes that maintain a deep misunderstanding of American Indian history and current issues. Thanksgiving Day, for example, is considered a Day of Mourning by many American Indians—a time to acknowledge the ongoing painful legacy of removal from their homelands, enslavement, and deaths from diseases. Thanksgiving images further negate significant cultural and sacred distinctions among indigenous peoples. Long feather headdresses and tipis are not part of an accurate portrayal of Northeast Coast Native Americans. Thanksgiving pictures tend to depict garments and housing of Plains Indians, whom the Pilgrims would have not met.

As a teacher of teachers, I attempt to engage students in a more accurate, inclusive, and culturally respectful approach to a time in history that began to set the pattern for U.S. race relations. I choose to critique the first Thanksgiving story because of its familiarity, inclusion in so many schools' curricula, and persistent misrepresentation of Indians and Pilgrims.

### **Flipping the Script on the First Thanksgiving**

Before launching into the myths and omissions surrounding the "first Thanksgiving," I ask my teacher education students what they already know about the event: Who celebrated the original Thanksgiving and when? What was celebrated and for how long? Who initiated the celebration? Why? Where did the event take place?

My students find the details difficult to recall. Generally, their contributions reflect a disjointed recollection: Pilgrims and Indians; something about religious persecution; the *Mayflower*; Jamestown, Va.; an abundant harvest after tough times; the Pilgrims' generosity toward the Indians; and three days of fun, games, and eating popcorn, turkey, and pie. Sometimes students suggest names of actual "Indians" like the Sioux or Cherokee nations or people such as Sacagawea, Squanto, or Pocahontas.

I challenge my students' knowledge about Pilgrims, Indians, and Thanksgiving through a series of exploratory

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Got an idea? For

activities using elementary-appropriate materials. I designed activities meant to model how they might introduce a critique of Thanksgiving to their own elementary students that also identifies stereotypes about Native Americans and explores the events surrounding 1621. The activities require my students to work first within and then across small groups to compare and contrast the histories of the “Indians” and “Pilgrims,” separate fact from fiction about the Thanksgiving story, and uncover new information concerning Native Americans past and present.

For one activity, I divide a set of students into “Indians” and “Pilgrims.” Both groups visit [www.plimoth.org/education/olc/index.js2.html#](http://www.plimoth.org/education/olc/index.js2.html#), a website elementary teachers and students could use that offers an interactive timeline with key dates in the history of the Wampanoag and the Pilgrims. I send the students to the “path to 1621” for their respective group’s story. The “Indians” follow the Wampanoag ancestor Ahsaupwis’ story and the “Pilgrims” follow English ancestor Remember Allerton. In the penultimate phase of the activity, I combine the “Indians” and “Pilgrims” and tell them to create a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting what they learned.

Other student groups work to determine the facts, fictions, and omissions of the first Thanksgiving story using a selection of traditional first Thanksgiving picture books. To add to their critique, students receive additional texts that provide perspectives and information often distorted or omitted in traditional texts. I send the students to partner-read their selected books with questions: From whose perspective is the story told? Whose voices are active and passive? What words are used to describe the groups? Whose story has the most detail? What details were offered or implied in the text or illustrations about Thanksgiving and each group’s lifestyle (e.g., food, clothing, beliefs, and traditions)? Are the illustrations accurate? How do you know?

After partner-reading, students read the short version of Judy Dow and Beverly Slapin’s article “*Deconstructing the Myths of The First Thanksgiving*.” I tell them to mark new and surprising information. Typically during this activity, as students read and discuss, I’ll overhear one say, “So there was no Thanksgiving at all? I’m confused.” I clarify that although the Thanksgiving story as told is not historically accurate, Native Americans and Pilgrims had thanksgiving traditions exclusive of each other.

When the groups reconvene as a whole class, I ask each to report what they learned and to share what they believe to be the main points of their activities. It is clear from their reactions that in most instances, the activities presented different depictions from what they had previously believed or known. As Lorrie said, “I remember learning about a huge friendly feast between ‘Pilgrims’ and ‘Indians.’ It was taught almost as though it was a culmination of a friendship that had been building from day one.”

Charlie commented, “I remember making the feather headdress for Thanksgiving. I had no idea it could be inaccurate, let alone inappropriate.” Students often remark on the cultural disrespect implicit in illustrating Thanksgiving stories with clothing that the Wampanoag didn’t wear.

By the end of our re-examination of Thanksgiving, students grow anxious and begin to consider if and how they might integrate a more critical perspective of Thanksgiving with their own students. As Iris later wrote:

So, how do we go about talking about Thanksgiving now that we have all of this new information? How should we treat it with our students? Truly, it is not a day of Thanksgiving for all people in this country. I am at a loss now. I think that we could approach it with the new information that Ms. Stenhouse gave us and debunk some of these myths for our students, but I’m beginning to question what the bigger message should be. Is the holiday real? Is there really something to celebrate? I mean, sure, I’m glad to be here, and I’m thankful for the blessings in my life, but am I celebrating at the expense of others? If I do teach my children that the coming of the settlers was at the indigenous people’s expense, will they want to continue celebrating this day? Will their parents thank me if I do? I am not sure how to proceed.

My response to Iris’ conundrum and to students who ask “now what?” starts with prompting my students to generate alternative ideas for teaching Thanksgiving. I want them to start thinking about how they might use or adapt our activities or their underlying concepts with their students. I notice that, as they share their ideas with each other, they introduce a variety of ways to reframe Thanksgiving based on what they experienced in class (for example, book critiques or use of the two-voice poem, as described in *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1*) and begin to consider tactical approaches to parents’ and administrators’ potential concerns. Given my students’ focus on the repercussions from school authorities, I also ask them to imagine for a moment what the first Thanksgiving story means for Native American children in their classes. And based on their own experiences, I ask them to keep in mind the lasting impressions about Indians and Pilgrims from their own schooling. I further encourage them to first find out what their students already know, which is how I started with them.

More recently, I have also begun showing a video clip of Monty, a former student of mine, who discusses how he addressed Thanksgiving with his 1st graders. After witnessing parents, students, and teachers delight in a Thanksgiving re-enactment held at his school, he determined he needed to provide his students with a more complex perspective of Native American-Pilgrim relations. Monty shares candidly the steps he took (including a trip to his principal’s office) and the process he went through to teach his students about fairness through a lesson on the consequences of colonial encroachment on indigenous lands. Watching Monty adds a perspective to our discussion other than my own about the possibilities, relevance, and power of teaching critically at any grade level.

I know that what I am asking my students to consider is unsettling to many of them; however, I’m convinced that it is necessary in order for them to be the teachers they wish to be. In addition to our in-class discussion, I ask my students to continue thinking, problem-posing, and talking with me and each other through the class blogs and journals.

### **Waiting for Later to Disrupt the Status Quo**

As preservice teachers, my students are overwhelmed by learning to teach the prescribed curriculum and consumed by their university schoolwork. They work in schools they assume are not populated by indigenous students or other students for whom it is relevant to know the unpleasant details of historical events. Why trouble a good story?

Silent in most discussions about indigenous peoples are the current realities of Native American life, including widespread poverty; relegation to reservations; the persistent political, social, and economic disregard for things cultural or sacred by the dominant U.S. society; and the advocacy necessary for linguistic, cultural, economic, and territorial sovereignty. I use the Thanksgiving story to provide an opportunity for my students to ask themselves, “If not me, who?” and “If not now, when?” as it relates to challenging the

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status quo.

In terms of measuring progress, we have come a long way from learning how to count to 10, one "Indian" at a time. Yet national multimillion-dollar franchise sports teams retain derogatory "Indian" names, logos, and chants; commercial products still utilize "Native" names and imagery as brands; and we still have the enduring uncritical portrayal of the first Thanksgiving. I believe a connection exists between the unwillingness to "give up" the beneficent 1621 Thanksgiving story and the ongoing appropriation of the imagery, spirituality, ceremonies, sovereign rights, and identity of this country's indigenous peoples. Students from all racial and cultural backgrounds learn early that it is OK to play Indian. They learn that Indians wear "costumes," feathers define cultural features for all Indians, and sacred cultural artifacts are crafts to be made from brown paper bags, paper towel rolls, paper plates, and construction paper. And after Thanksgiving, crafts and all, the "Natives" disappear back onto the shelf.

Confronting racism, injustice, prejudice, and stereotypes through a consciousness-raising education is a far cry from the fun-filled, feel-good activities characteristic of how schools approach holidays. With respect to indigenous peoples, I want my students to acknowledge the diverse and unique traditions among Native American cultures and to explore the historic and contemporary legacy of colonial intrusion, brutality, and cultural ignorance. As a teacher educator, I seek to invite my students on a journey of interrogating the fallacy of the "standard" curriculum as neutral and push them to develop an understanding of official knowledge as politically constructed and contestable. Critiquing received fact, such as the first Thanksgiving, is an integral piece of an overall critical approach to teaching and learning. I want my students to recognize that the histories of indigenous peoples have been subverted, silenced, and misrepresented in the curriculum. Equally important: I want my students to recognize that we can do something about it.

**Vera L. Stenhouse** has taught culturally responsive pedagogy at Georgia State University with aspiring elementary teachers in an urban-school-focused accelerated teacher preparation program.

## RESOURCES

### Evaluating resources about Native Americans:

Boston Children's Museum. Evaluating Resources: The Wampanoag in Teacher Resources on Native American History and Culture. ([www.bostonkids.org/educators/wampanoag/html/evaluate.htm](http://www.bostonkids.org/educators/wampanoag/html/evaluate.htm))

Seale, D., and Slapin, B., eds. (2005) *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children*. Lanham, Md.: Altamira Press.  
Cultural appropriation in books for children. Evaluates hundreds of books for children and teenagers published from the early 1900s through 2004.  
"Evaluating Children's Books for Bias." Integrating New Technologies into the Methods of Education. ([www.intime.uni.edu/multiculture/curriculum/children.htm](http://www.intime.uni.edu/multiculture/curriculum/children.htm))

### Wampanoag information past and present:

"Mashpee Wampanoag Timeline." Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Website. ([mashpeewampanoagtribe.com/timeline.html](http://mashpeewampanoagtribe.com/timeline.html))  
Timeline of events from precolonial times to current federal recognition.

Boston Children's Museum. "People of the First Light." Teacher Resources on Native American History and Culture. ([www.bostonkids.org/educators/wampanoag](http://www.bostonkids.org/educators/wampanoag))  
Information and suggested activities about Wampanoag origins and life before, during, and after 1620; survival; and current day.

### Teacher and student resources on Thanksgiving, Native Americans, and colonists:

Dow (Abenaki), J., and Slapin, B. "Deconstructing the Myths of The First Thanksgiving." Oyate. ([www.oyate.org/resources/longthanks.html](http://www.oyate.org/resources/longthanks.html))

Facts and fiction about the first Thanksgiving story, including critiqued excerpts from popular books.

Oyate. Primary Sources from a Colonialist Perspective. ([www.oyate.org/resources/booklistcolonialist.html](http://www.oyate.org/resources/booklistcolonialist.html))

Oyate. Recommended Books About Thanksgiving. ([www.oyate.org/resources/booklistrecommended.html](http://www.oyate.org/resources/booklistrecommended.html))

### Recommended books, links, and videos:

Goldstein, K. "As American as Pumpkin Pie." Plimoth Plantation. ([www.plimoth.org/discover/thanksgiving/pumkin-pie.php](http://www.plimoth.org/discover/thanksgiving/pumkin-pie.php))  
How, when, and why the "first Thanksgiving" came to be known as such.

Boston Children's Museum. Teacher Resources on Native American History and Culture. ([www.bostonkids.org/educators/wampanoag](http://www.bostonkids.org/educators/wampanoag))  
Wampanoag voices, information, and suggested activities.

Seale, D., Slapin, B., and Silverman, C., eds. (2001) *Thanksgiving: A Native Perspective*. Berkeley, Calif.: Oyate (available at [www.oyate.org](http://www.oyate.org)). Historical and contemporary information about Thanksgiving. Context and counterstories for a critical cultural approach to Thanksgiving.

Jones, G., and Moomaw, S. (2002) *Lessons from Turtle Island: Native Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms*. St. Paul, Minn.: Red Leaf Press.  
Problems and appropriate alternatives to addressing Native peoples' experiences.

Loewen, J. (2007) *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York City: Touchstone

Press.

Detailed information on the first Thanks-giving based on primary resources.

Bigelow, B., and Peterson, R., eds. (1998) *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*. Milwaukee: *Rethinking Schools* Essays, poems, historical vignettes, and lesson plans.

Slapin, B., and Seale, S., eds. (2006) *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children*. University of California Press (available at [www.oyate.org](http://www.oyate.org)). Stereotypes and myths in children's literature.

*Rethinking Schools*. (2008) *Unlearning "Indian" Stereotypes* (DVD). Milwaukee: *Rethinking Schools* (available at [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)). Introduction to Native American history through the eyes of children. Includes teaching ideas and resources.

Rosenstein, J. (1997) *In Whose Honor? American Indian Mascots in Sports*. New Day Films (available at [www.oyate.org](http://www.oyate.org)). Examination of the use of racist logos, nicknames, and caricatures as "mascots" in college and professional sports—and the impact of this practice on Indian families and communities.

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Teacher educator Vera Stenhouse wrote "Rethinking Thanksgiving: Myths and Misgivings" for us for our Fall 2009 issue of the magazine. It's reprinted below with a new introduction from Vera.Â Select Category #blacklivesmatter (4) Archives (25) Call for magazine submissions (2) Childrenâ€™s Books (1) Climate Justice (2) Common Core (2) Current events (162)