North York Community House

History of the Canadian Thanksgiving



Question: What is the story behind the Canadian Thanksgiving?

Believe it or not, Thanksgiving in Canada, or at least the land that would become Canada, has its own history, separate from our U.S. counterparts.

First Nations across Turtle Island have traditions of thanksgiving for surviving winter and for receiving crops and games as a reward for their hard work. These traditions may include feasting, prayer, dance, **potlatch**, and other ceremonies, depending on the people giving thanks.

When it comes to European thanksgivings in Canada, we have a few tales to tell.

In 1578, English explorer Martin Frobisher hosted the first Thanksgiving celebration in North America. Martin Frobisher and his crew had many reasons to be thankful: making it alive! The explorers would eat salt beef, biscuits, and mushy peas and give thanks through Communion for their safe arrival in then Newfoundland. This is now accepted as the first “Canadian” Thanksgiving, forty-three years before the first “American” Thanksgiving.

Forty-eight years later on November 14, 1606, inhabitants of New France under Samuel de Champlain held huge feasts of thanksgiving between local Mi’kmaq and the French. Even though the settlers did not know, cranberries, rich in vitamin C, are credited with helping avoid scurvy. The neighbouring Mi’kmaq likely introduced the French to cranberries, or as they called them, Petites Pommes rouges (little red apples).

To prevent the scurvy epidemic that had decimated the settlement at Île Sainte-Croix in past winters, the Ordre de Bon Temps (Order of Good Cheer) was founded, offering festive meals every few weeks. Medical treatises recommended better nutrition (more food) and entertainment to combat scurvy.

However, despite this history of uniquely Canadian thanksgiving, our modern concepts of Thanksgiving were influenced by our U.S. neighbours. Foods that are associated with a “traditional” Thanksgiving, such as North American turkey, squash, and pumpkin, were introduced to citizens of Halifax in the 1750s by the United Empire Loyalists, who continued to spread these traditions to other parts of the country.

You would think that Thanksgiving was celebrated all over Canada, right? Thanksgiving wasn't celebrated nationally in Canada until 1879. For a while, Canada attempted a two-for-one approach to the festivities, combining it with **Armistice Day**. It wasn't until 1957 that the Governor-General of Canada issued a proclamation declaring a "Day of General Thanksgiving" to **be observed** on the second Monday in October.

What's on the Canadian Thanksgiving menu?

Usually, people eat turkey. In some homes, it is replaced by ham. Turkey is accompanied by gravy, stuffing, and vegetables. Pumpkin pie is something that cannot be missed on the table!

Source:

- "https://food52.com/blog/24609-canadian-thanksgiving-history
- https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/arts-culture-society/the-history-of-thanksgiving-in-canada"

Let's take a look at the vocabulary!

Word	Definition	Example
potlatch **noun** **/ˈpɑːtˈlætʃ/**	Historically: a gift-giving ceremony. During the ceremony the host gave gifts to the invited guests or even destroyed with great ceremony as a show of superior generosity, status and prestige over enemy	
Armistice Day noun /ˈɑːrmɪstɪs/	a formal agreement during a war to stop fighting and discuss making peace SYNONYM ceasefire	The First World War ended with an armistice on November 11, 1918.
be observed **verb** **/əbˈzɜːrvd/**	to be seen or noticed	Actors are observed by cameras.

Potlatch and Pow-Wow

They're entirely different events.

A pow-wow is a gathering for fun. People go to them to meet other people and for entertainment. They typically focus on dancing. There will also be people selling crafts and food stalls. Most people camp at the pow-wow site for socializing, which can go on day and night.

A potlatch on the other hand is serious business. Food is served, sometimes fairly modest, sometimes a real feast, and people may enjoy seeing their friends, but the purpose is not merely (= not just) socializing and entertainment.

The purpose of a potlatch is for business to be conducted in the presence of witnesses so that everyone can see what has been done and that it has been done properly. For prestige, respect and value.