

WOBURN'S THANKSGIVING TRADITION

by Marie Coady

When Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863, the United States was in the midst its most devastating war. More Americans were killed in the Civil War than in World War I, II, Korea and Vietnam combined. Yet somehow, in the midst of all that carnage, Lincoln believed setting aside a day for Americans to give "thanksgiving and praise" together, would impress upon his fractured nation the necessity for America to be one nation under God.

Although 1863 marked Thanksgiving as a national holiday and all that it implies, celebrating Thanksgiving was not a new idea, especially in Woburn. But the compassionate folks of Woburn were well aware that not all its citizens could sit at table with loved ones and enjoy all the fixings of a Thanksgiving feast. For example, here is a statement that appeared in the Woburn Weekly Budget newspaper on November 20, 1857. "Next Thursday is the day appointed by the governor as a day of public thanksgiving and praise in this Commonwealth. Whether it will be so observed by a majority of its citizens, is a matter of some doubt." The writer clarifies his position by adding: "What will be said of the poor, who have not even the comforts of life, much less the luxuries of life?" This seems to be an overriding theme that has weaved itself through every Thanksgiving here in Woburn. Thanksgiving appears designed to bring out the best in us, and it was no different in the Woburn of 1857.

For example, Thanksgiving turkeys were presented to each married employee at Alley, Choate and Cummings Tannery. "Some sixty turkeys were thus distributed, causing many a man to trudge homeward with a heavy hand, but with a light heart. It gives us pleasure to record such acts of benevolence, in these times, especially." His reference, "in these times, especially", was to the beginning of the labor movement in Woburn and the tannery workers battle to secure better wages and a shorter work week.

But some enterprising thieves found a more efficient way of securing a bird for Thanksgiving dinner. The Weekly Budget of November 23, 1860, reported that Mr. A. Jaquith's special Thanksgiving turkey which he was "treasuring up for that eventful day and would have weighed sixteen pounds" was turkey-napped along with most of the turkeys in his roost. The thieves then moved down the road to Mr. Avery's roost and took five turkeys. Not stopping to give thanks, the thieves hurried onto the Boston Road and carried their bounty off into the night. One likes to think they stole those turkeys in the best Robin Hood tradition - to give to the poor.

In that same edition there was reference to another thanksgiving tradition of the day, the Turkey Shoot. "Some 'sharp-shooting' was had during Thanksgiving day. Out of ninety-odd shots with rifles and shot-guns, only

eight turkeys were killed. Some of the last gun-shots were at but six rods distance, and even then they did not kill." A later edition of the Weekly Budget reported a turkey shoot in Winchester which fared no better according to this tongue-in-cheek report of the day's activities. "Thanksgiving Day passed off nearly as usual. The festival was inaugurated with a series of bold charges, by members of the Home Guard, upon a regiment of antiquated hens. This was a brilliant and well executed movement. The enemy were engaged upon the front and upon each flank, and although they made a considerable show of resistance the gallant Home Guard were not afraid, but stood nobly by their guns and pocket pistols. Honorable mentions of their bravery will undoubtedly be forwarded to headquarters, and some of our intrepid Home Guard may yet be raised even to the distinguished post of Corporal's Clerk in the regular army."

By Thanksgiving of 1861, the Civil War had changed the public's appraisal of the Home Guard. The Civil War was in full bloom, and the Friends of the Woburn Union Guard were following through on a promise. They had just sent off two crates full of "warm clothing, magazines and papers". But the most important packages contained turkeys, chickens, pies, cakes, preserves, pickles and whatever else would make up a good Thanksgiving dinner. Their hope was that the boxes would not be delayed and would arrive in the hands of Captain Thompson just in time to celebrate the holiday.

A letter from John Plummer of Woburn, serving aboard the steamer Atlantic along the coast of South Carolina with the 3rd N. H. Regiment, arrived on November 22, 1861 and stiffened the resolve of Woburnites to remember the men serving on the front lines of that bitter Civil War. Plummer's letter kept the home folks abreast of the war news. He told of gunboat forays against hapless Rebels camped near the entrance to Port Royal who fled when the steamer Atlantic made its appearance on the horizon. He also told of the sinking of the steamer Governor in the ensuing battle of Port Royal. "The steamer Governor which formerly ran between Boston and Portland, was with us, a lot of cattle and over a hundred marines on board. She went down at 2 o'clock Saturday morning. All but twenty-three were saved...Our Captain is a brother of Capt. Eldridge who owned the silk farm in East Woburn. He is one of the best men I have ever met with. He says the ship has been under water but her masts for three minutes came out bright."

Letters came also from S. Watson Drew, a Surgeon with the 9th Regiment Volunteers. He wrote that although it had been some two months since he left Woburn, "thirteen have been shot while on picket duty" but are recovering nicely. "The nights are rather cool here. Ice has formed in our buckets. We are about a mile from Falls Church (Virginia). Please accept the thanks of friend Wyman and myself for the papers, songs, books, etc. received from you."

On Thanksgiving 1863, the Woburn Budget reported that not only was the

promise to take care of our men in blue being honored, but that Woburn's citizens had also kept their promise to minister and comfort the families they left behind. "Our soldiers in the field will be gratified to learn that in their absence...Last Tuesday and Wednesday the committee who have in charge a fund devoted to this purpose were busy sending to the different families in town turkeys provided, and yesterday the recipients partook of a dinner which consisted of the customary New England roast turkey."

Giving is a Woburn tradition that extends back to the days of its first settlers. Let's keep the tradition alive by not forgetting to include those who may be forgotten on this day of "thanksgiving and praise"

Happy Thanksgiving!

Copyright © Marie Coady, 1999