

## **Americans Celebrate Thanksgiving by Eating, Serving ... and Shopping?**

Welcome to This Is America from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Imagine the smell of sliced apples and spices like cinnamon and ginger all mixed together and baked. Then let everything cool down and add a little sugar on top. For many Americans, that smell — the smell of apple pie — is a favorite part of Thanksgiving Day. Today we report on the history of the holiday and how Americans are celebrating this year.

The writer O. Henry called Thanksgiving the one day that is purely American. Thanksgiving is not a religious holiday. But it has spiritual meaning. Some Americans attend religious services on the day before Thanksgiving, or on Thanksgiving morning.

Others travel great distances to be with their families. They have a large dinner, which is the main part of the celebration.

For many Americans, Thanksgiving is the only time when all members of a family gather together. The holiday is a time of family reunion.

Thanksgiving is celebrated every year on the fourth Thursday of November. The month of November is autumn in the United States. Autumn is the season when crops are gathered. When the first European settlers in America gathered their crops, they celebrated and gave thanks for the food. They thanked God for the success of the harvest. Many people continue to give thanks on the holiday, but it may not be for a good harvest.

Sasha Bischoff is from Washington. This year, she says, she is thankful for her son Sebastian.

“So Thanksgiving for me is about giving thanks, and really embracing loved ones and things. And this year, I am most thankful for my beloved son Sebastian, who just turned one.”

Tradition says Pilgrim settlers from England celebrated the first Thanksgiving in 1621. There is evidence that settlers in other parts of America held earlier Thanksgiving celebrations. But the Pilgrims’ Thanksgiving story is the most popular.

The Pilgrims were religious dissidents who fled oppression in England. They went first to the Netherlands. Then they left that country to establish a colony in North America. The Pilgrims landed in 1620 in what later became known as Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Their trip across the Atlantic Ocean was difficult. Their first months in America were difficult, too. About 100 Pilgrims landed just as autumn was turning to winter. During the cold months that followed, about half of them died.

When spring came, the Pilgrims began to plant crops. A Native American Indian named Squanto helped them. When summer ended, the Pilgrims had a good harvest of corn and barley. There was enough food to last through the winter.

The Pilgrims decided to hold a celebration to give thanks for their harvest. Writings from that time say Pilgrim leader William Bradford set a date late in the year. He invited members of a nearby Indian tribe to attend.

That Thanksgiving celebration lasted three days. There were many kinds of food. The meal included wild birds such as ducks, geese and turkeys.

As the American colonies grew, many towns and settlements held Thanksgiving – or harvest – celebrations. Yet it was not until about 240 years later that a national day for Thanksgiving was declared.

The creation of a national Thanksgiving holiday resulted from the efforts of one woman, Sarah Josepha Hale. In the early 1800s, she began a campaign to officially establish the holiday. Ms. Hale was a writer. She wrote stories about a national day of Thanksgiving in a publication for women. As part of her campaign, she wrote many letters to public officials, including American presidents. She urged them to support her idea for a national Thanksgiving holiday.

Support for her idea grew slowly. Finally, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared the last Thursday in November a national holiday of Thanksgiving. At that time, the United States was fighting a civil war. President Lincoln liked the idea of a holiday that would also celebrate national unity.

Later, Congress declared that the holiday would be celebrated every year on the fourth Thursday in November.

More than any other American holiday, Thanksgiving celebrates family and home. On Thanksgiving, many people enjoy a long day of cooking, talking and eating. The traditional meal often includes a turkey with a bread mixture cooked inside.

“Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is one of the most beautiful and joyous times of the year. You get to smell all those beautiful fragrances of people cooking the different turkeys and the dressing and the potato salad and the chicken. Plus you get to meet all the new people that come by to visit for dinner!”

Like other Americans, W.L. Stokes is excited about the holiday. Mr. Stokes is looking forward to a big meal of turkey and some of his favorite foods. They include country ham, collard greens, and corn bread. Other foods commonly served on Thanksgiving are sweet potatoes, cranberries and pumpkin pie.

American supermarkets are reported to sell more food at Thanksgiving than at any other time of the year. And many people eat more food at Thanksgiving than at any other time of the year.

Thanksgiving is also a time when Americans share what they have with people who do not have as much. All across the country, thousands of groups provide Thanksgiving meals for older adults, poor people and the homeless. Many Americans give turkeys or other food to these organizations; schools organize food collection drives for Thanksgiving. Some people spend part of the holiday helping to prepare and serve meals.

Since becoming president, Barack Obama and his family have volunteered one day before each Thanksgiving at an organization that helps the needy.

Because so many people visit their families over the holiday, Thanksgiving week is one of the busiest travel times of the year. And that travel can be pricey. The website Travelocity says the average price for a flight in the United States over Thanksgiving is around \$400 this year.

Gasoline prices can also increase around Thanksgiving. Last year, gas prices were especially high after Superstorm Sandy hit the eastern United States.

But the American Automobile Association says trips by car were still responsible for nearly 90 percent of all Thanksgiving travel in 2012.

Over the years, Americans have added traditions to their Thanksgiving celebration. The *Wall Street Journal* newspaper says some people make the holiday into a vacation. It says New York City remains a popular place to visit over the holiday. Many people are traveling to Florida or an island in the Caribbean Sea in search of warmer weather.

Other Americans enjoy watching football games on Thanksgiving Day. Some of the games are broadcast on national television.

Many people also like to watch Thanksgiving Day parades on television. Big stores in several cities organize these events.

For example, Macy's department store will present its 87th Annual Thanksgiving Parade in New York City. Huge balloons shaped like cartoon characters will float high above the street.

Macy's officials are expecting 3.5 million people to attend the parade. An estimated 50 million others across the nation will watch the event on television.

Macy's is part of another Thanksgiving trend. For the first time, Macy's stores will be open Thanksgiving night so people can shop.

Historically, stores have been closed on the holiday. Most people spent the day with their families or friends. Then, many went to stores and shopping malls the following day.

In fact, the day after Thanksgiving is one of the biggest shopping days of the year. The Friday after Thanksgiving is often called Black Friday. The word "black" is used to describe the profit many stores make on that day. In comparison, a business loss is often written in red.

Many stores reduce prices on Black Friday in an effort to increase business. Macy's will open at eight o'clock Thanksgiving night, after most people have finished eating. Some stores known for their low prices will open even earlier. K-mart will open at seven o'clock in the morning, and Wal-mart plans to be open for all 24 hours of Thanksgiving.

The stores say many Americans want to go shopping on Thanksgiving. But those stores also want to be the first to win a large part of shoppers' holiday spending. Some businesses make 20 to 40 percent of their yearly earnings between Thanksgiving and December 25, Christmas Day.

One Thanksgiving tradition still remains for many families. People join in prayers and songs of Thanksgiving. One famous song tells of the traditional meaning of Thanksgiving: We gather with our family. We share what we have. And we give thanks for the good things of the past year.

We leave you with the Boston Pops Orchestra and chorus performing "Prayer of Thanksgiving."

This program was written by Jerilyn Watson and Kim Varzi. I'm Steve Ember.

And I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. You can read, download and comment on our programs at [learningenglish.voanews.com](http://learningenglish.voanews.com). Join us next week for another This Is America from VOA Learning English.