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Thanksgiving

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As with all American traditions, if it happened once or twice it is one. Therefore I present my traditional Thanksgiving piece.

The History of Thanksgiving and of Football both go back into the Middle Ages, and so it may not be so strange that the two would become intertwined in modern America.

The first American Thanksgiving is generally believed to have been in Plymouth Colony in mid-October of 1621, when William Bradford and the Pilgrims gathered with local Indians to give thanks for survival and the first harvest. The first Thanksgiving proclaimed by a President was November 26, 1789 when the first president called for a national day of Thanksgiving for the new form of government.

By the end of that century the practice had faded into disuse, but through the first half of the nineteenth century Sara Hale, editor of Godey's Lady's Book kept the idea alive by writing editorials and letters to presidents and governors urging their adoption of such a day. Finally during the Civil War Abraham Lincoln took her advice and proclaimed the last Thursday of November, 1863, as Thanksgiving Day. The practice stuck, almost. (During the Great Depression FDR was beseeched by the retail community to move Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday of November, when the shopping/selling season was cut short as Thanksgiving fell on the fifth Thursday of November.)

Eleven years later in 1874 the first intercollegiate football game was played. Two years later the Intercollegiate Football Association was formed and they instituted a championship game for Thanksgiving Day. Within a decade it was the premier athletic event in the nation.

All but twice in the first two decades of the league Princeton and Yale were the participants, and by the 1890s when the game was played at the Polo Grounds it was drawing 40,000 fans. Players, students, and fans wore their school colors while banners flew from carriages, hotels, and the business establishments of the city. It was by then one of the most important social events of the season for New York's social elite.

In 1893 the *New York Herald* noted the significance of the event, declaring: "Thanksgiving Day is no longer a solemn festival to God for mercies given...It is a holiday granted by the State and the Nation to see a game of football."

Indeed it was, and would remain so.

By the mid-1890's it was estimated that some 120,000 athletes from colleges, clubs, and high schools took part in 5,000 Thanksgiving Day football games across the nation. The Thanksgiving Day game was established as both a tradition and a moneymaker.

The National Football League followed the example of the colleges. In 1934 George Richards bought the Portsmouth, Ohio, Spartans, moved them to Detroit, and renamed them the Lions. Richards decided to play the Lions game against the Bears on Thanksgiving Day at the University of Detroit Stadium. With no other professional competition and owning a radio station in Detroit, Richards was able to put together a 94-station coast-to-coast radio network. This allowed a national radio audience, and 25,000 fans, to witness the 19-16 Bear victory. The Detroit Lions traditional Thanksgiving Day game was born.

When professional football began to attract a national following in the 1950s as the television sport, it was the Lion's Thanksgiving Day game that became a mid-20th century tradition, and until 1963 the Lions always played the Green Bay Packers on Thanksgiving.

I can remember watching terrible Packer teams chasing the legendary Lion quarterback Bobby Layne around Briggs Stadium. I was in awe of Layne, the tough hard-drinking Texan, who was out of shape, aging, and never wore a facemask. But I loved the Packers and longed for an upset of the Lions.

After Vince Lombardi transformed the Packers into champions, with Starr, Taylor, and Hornung, it was the Lions who pulled the big upsets on Turkey Day in front of growing television audiences. The turkey could not be served until the game was over, as the smell of turkey, gravy, dressing, pumpkin pie and football filled the air. Some games were played in rain, others in snow, and almost always it was cold outside our Minnesota home.

Much has changed since then. The Lions are playing in a dome.

They play a variety of teams on Thanksgiving. This year it will be Houston. After the merger of the AFL and NFL in 1966 and with a different TV network covering each league, it became necessary to have two Thanksgiving Day games, the second one in Dallas with the Redskins providing the opposition this year. At our house the Turkey is still served at the end of the Lions game, and after the meal we watch the fourth quarter of the game from Dallas over pie and coffee, hoping for a Cowboy loss. And almost always now it is warm outside our Florida home.

The National Football League, in the spirit of excess consumption, introduced a third Thanksgiving Game to accommodate the programming needs of the NFL Network. That broadcast slot has now passed to NBC leaving the NFL Network on the sidelines for the Turkey Day festivities. The NBC game follows the Dallas game and this year features the Patriots and Jets in New Jersey. Each team will seek to avoid being the last thing stuffed on Thanksgiving.

So a tradition is expanding but this third game has not yet established itself fully as part of the tradition. Before it does there could yet be a fourth game now to accommodate the NFL Network. The problem will be finding a time slot. A morning game would have to compete with the Macy's Parade. A late night game seems unlikely but some solution will be found, because it is the greed and avarice of the NFL that truly is a tradition, one that has been part of American sport for over a century. And on a day when Americans stuff themselves with food, it seems appropriate to stuff one more football game into them as well.

As it was in the 1890s, so it is in the 21st century, The NFL Century, that Thanksgiving remains "a holiday granted by the State and the Nation to see a game of football."

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a Happy Thanksgiving and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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