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THE PLYMOUTH “Thanksgiving” STORY

By Chuck Larsen

When the Pilgrims crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1620, they landed on the rocky shores of a territory that was inhabited by the Wampanoag (Wam pa NO ag) Indians. The Wampanoags were part of the Algonkian-speaking peoples, a large group that was part of the Woodland Culture area. These Indians lived in villages along the coast of what is now Massachusetts and Rhode Island. They lived in round-roofed houses called wigwams. These were made of poles covered with flat sheets of elm or birch bark. Wigwams differ in construction from tipis that were used by Indians of the Great Plains.

The Wampanoags moved several times during each year in order to get food. In the spring they would fish in the rivers for salmon and herring. In the planting season they moved to the forest to hunt deer and other animals. After the end of the hunting season people moved inland where there was greater protection from the weather. From December to April they lived on food that they stored during the earlier months.

The basic dress for men was the breech clout, a length of deerskin looped over a belt in back and in front. Women wore deerskin wrap-around skirts. Deerskin leggings and fur capes made from deer, beaver, otter, and bear skins gave protection during the colder seasons, and deerskin moccasins were worn on the feet. Both men and women usually braided their hair and a single feather was often worn in the back of the hair by men. They did not have the large feathered headdresses worn by people in the Plains Culture area.

There were two language groups of Indians in New England at this time. The Iroquois were neighbors to the Algonkian-speaking people. Leaders of the Algonquin and Iroquois people were called "sachems" (SAY chems). Each village had its own sachem and tribal council. Political power flowed upward from the people. Any individual, man or woman, could participate, but among the Algonquins more political power was held by men. Among the Iroquois, however, women held the deciding vote in the final selection of who would represent the group. Both men and women enforced the laws of the village and helped solve problems. The details of their democratic system were so impressive that about 150 years later Benjamin Franklin invited the Iroquois to Albany, New York, to explain their system to a delegation who then developed the "Albany Plan of Union." This document later served as a model for the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution of the United States.

These Indians of the Eastern Woodlands called the turtle, the deer and the fish their brothers. They respected the forest and everything in it as equals. Whenever a hunter made a kill, he was careful to leave behind some bones or meat as a spiritual offering, to help other animals survive. Not to do so would be considered greedy. The Wampanoags also treated each other with respect. Any visitor to a Wampanoag home was provided with a share of whatever food the family had, even if the supply was low. This same courtesy was extended to the Pilgrims when they met.

We can only guess what the Wampanoags must have thought when they first saw the strange ships of the Pilgrims arriving on their shores. But their custom was to help visitors, and they treated the newcomers with courtesy. It was mainly because of their kindness that the Pilgrims survived at all. The wheat the Pilgrims had brought with them to plant would not grow in the rocky soil. They needed to learn new ways for a new world, and the man who came to help them was called "Tisquantum" (Tis SKWAN tum) or "Squanto" (SKWAN toe).

Squanto was originally from the village of Patuxet (Pa TUK et) and a member of the Pokanokit Wampanoag nation. Patuxet once stood on the exact site where the Pilgrims built Plymouth. In 1605, fifteen years before the Pilgrims came, Squanto went to England with a friendly English explorer named John Weymouth. He had many adventures and learned to speak English. Squanto came back to New England with Captain Weymouth. Later Squanto was captured by a British slaver who raided the village and sold Squanto to the Spanish in the Caribbean Islands. A Spanish Franciscan priest befriended Squanto and helped him to get to Spain and later on a ship to England. Squanto then found Captain Weymouth, who paid his way back to his homeland. In England Squanto met Samoset of the Wabanake (Wab NAH key) Tribe, who had also left his native home with an English explorer. They both returned together to Patuxet in 1620. When they arrived, the village was deserted and there were skeletons everywhere. Everyone in the village had died from an illness the English slavers had left behind. Squanto and Samoset went to stay with a neighboring village of Wampanoags.

One year later, in the spring, Squanto and Samoset were hunting along the beach near Patuxet. They were startled to see people from England in their deserted village. For several days, they stayed nearby observing the newcomers. Finally they decided to approach them. Samoset walked into the village and said "welcome," Squanto soon joined him. The Pilgrims were very surprised to meet two Indians who spoke English.

The Pilgrims were not in good condition. They were living in dirt-covered shelters, there was a shortage of food, and nearly half of them had died during the winter. They obviously needed help and the two men were a welcome sight. Squanto, who probably knew more English than any other Indian in North America at that time, decided to stay with the Pilgrims for the next few months and teach them how to survive in this new place. He brought them deer meat and beaver skins. He taught them how to cultivate corn and other new vegetables and how to build Indian-style houses. He pointed out poisonous plants and showed how other plants could be used as medicine. He explained how to dig and cook clams, how to get sap from the maple trees, use fish for fertilizer, and dozens of other skills needed for their survival.

By the time fall arrived things were going much better for the Pilgrims, thanks to the help they had received. The corn they planted had grown well. There was enough food to last the winter. They were living comfortably in their Indian-style wigwams and had also managed to build one European-style building out of squared logs. This was their church. They were now in better health, and they knew more about surviving in this new land. The Pilgrims decided to have a thanksgiving feast to celebrate their good fortune. They had observed thanksgiving feasts in November as religious obligations in England for many years before coming to the New World.

The Algonkian tribes held six thanksgiving festivals during the year. The beginning of the Algonkian year was marked by the Maple Dance which gave thanks to the Creator for the maple tree and its syrup. This ceremony occurred when the weather was warm enough for the sap to run in the maple trees, sometimes as early as February. Second was the planting feast, where the seeds were blessed. The strawberry festival was next, celebrating the first fruits of the season. Summer brought the green corn festival to give thanks for the ripening corn. In late fall, the harvest festival gave thanks for the food they had grown. Mid-winter was the last ceremony

of the old year. When the Indians sat down to the "first Thanksgiving" with the Pilgrims, it was really the fifth thanksgiving of the year for them!

Captain Miles Standish, the leader of the Pilgrims, invited Squanto, Samoset, Massasoit (the leader of the Wampanoags), and their immediate families to join them for a celebration, but they had no idea how big Indian families could be. As the Thanksgiving feast began, the Pilgrims were overwhelmed at the large turnout of ninety relatives that Squanto and Samoset brought with them. The Pilgrims were not prepared to feed a gathering of people that large for three days. Seeing this, Massasoit gave orders to his men within the first hour of his arrival to go home and get more food. Thus it happened that the Indians supplied the majority of the food: Five deer, many wild turkeys, fish, beans, squash, corn soup, corn bread, and berries. Captain Standish sat at one end of a long table and the Clan Chief Massasoit sat at the other end. For the first time the Wampanoag people were sitting at a table to eat instead of on mats or furs spread on the ground. The Indian women sat together with the Indian men to eat. The Pilgrim women, however, stood quietly behind the table and waited until after their men had eaten, since that was their custom.

For three days the Wampanoags feasted with the Pilgrims. It was a special time of friendship between two very different groups of people. A peace and friendship agreement was made between Massasoit and Miles Standish giving the Pilgrims the clearing in the forest where the old Patuxet village once stood to build their new town of Plymouth.

It would be very good to say that this friendship lasted a long time; but, unfortunately, that was not to be. More English people came to America, and they were not in need of help from the Indians as were the original Pilgrims. Many of the newcomers forgot the help the Indians had given them. Mistrust started to grow and the friendship weakened. The Pilgrims started telling their Indian neighbors that their Indian religion and Indian customs were wrong. The Pilgrims displayed an intolerance toward the Indian religion similar to the intolerance displayed toward the less popular religions in Europe. The relationship deteriorated and within a few years the children of the people who ate together at the first Thanksgiving were killing one another in what came to be called King Phillip's War.

It is sad to think that this happened, but it is important to understand all of the story and not just the happy part. Today the town of Plymouth Rock has a Thanksgiving ceremony each year in remembrance of the first Thanksgiving. There are still Wampanoag people living in Massachusetts. In 1970, they asked one of them to speak at the ceremony to mark the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrim's arrival. Here is part of what was said:

"Today is a time of celebrating for you -- a time of looking back to the first days of white people in America. But it is not a time of celebrating for me. It is with a heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my People. When the Pilgrims arrived, we, the Wampanoags, welcomed them with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end. That before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a tribe. That we and other Indians living near the settlers would be killed by their guns or dead from diseases that we caught from them. Let us always remember, the Indian is and was just as human as the white people.

Although our way of life is almost gone, we, the Wampanoags, still walk the lands of Massachusetts. What has happened cannot be changed. But today we work toward a better America, a more Indian America where people and nature once again are important."