



Thanksgiving: The Expression of Gratitude and Generosity

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

For generations, in late November Texans have joined in acknowledging the blessings granted to those fortunate enough to live in our great country, and in helping those in need.

Texas always makes unique contributions to the American experience. Recollections of the earliest Thanksgiving days in Texas contain slightly different thoughts about origins of this harvest holiday. And it's also not surprising that some versions have Texas leading the way.

A marker outside Canyon, Texas once memorialized celebration of Thanksgiving there during an expedition of explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in May of 1541. That's more than 80 years before Pilgrims sat down with the Wampanoag in Plymouth, Mass.

A celebration in El Paso recognizes the "First Thanksgiving" in April, commemorating the day when Spanish explorer Juan de Oñate and his expedition stopped near San Elizario for an observance of Thanksgiving in 1598. Historians study and discuss these and other accounts at great length.

The Texas Almanac quotes a San Elizario expedition member: "We built a great bonfire and roasted the meat and fish, and then all sat down to a repast the likes of which we had never enjoyed before ... We were happy that our trials were over; as happy as were the passengers in the Ark when they saw the dove returning with the olive branch in his beak, bringing tidings that the deluge had subsided."

Texans have paused to extend thanks at different times, and only recently in November. In 1841, in one of his first acts as President of Texas, Sam Houston recommended that Texans set aside March 2, the anniversary of independence, as a day of thanksgiving.

Eight years later, after Texas had joined the union, Gov. George Wood proclaimed that Thanksgiving should be celebrated on the first Thursday of December.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln declared an annual day of thanksgiving. It wasn't until 1941 that President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a law establishing November's fourth Thursday as our official Thanksgiving Day.

But there is a greater purpose to the holiday. It is an opportunity to elevate ourselves by caring for others.

President Ronald Reagan eloquently described the meaning of Thanksgiving in a 1986 radio address from Camp David: "... just as Thanksgiving Day has always been an occasion for counting our blessings, so, too, it's always been a time for making life better among our fellow Americans.

"The spirit of voluntarism is deeply ingrained in us as a nation. Maybe it has something to do with our history as a frontier land. Those early Americans who gave us Thanksgiving Day itself had to help each other in order to survive—joining together to plant crops, built houses, and raise barns. And perhaps they discovered that in helping others their own lives were enriched."

Helping those less fortunate and those in need is an important parallel to the tradition of giving thanks for Texans across the state. The benevolence of Texans extends throughout the year, but Thanksgiving marks the beginning of an especially abundant period of helping others.

Many Texans will be directly involved: joining food and clothing drives, serving holiday meals to the less fortunate at food banks, visiting senior citizens' homes, bringing cheer to those in hospitals, or brightening the day of our military men and women by remembering our veterans and those serving in the armed services.

Expressions of thanksgiving can occur without limits—at home with family and friends, in our houses of worship, through our support of philanthropic initiatives, or one-on-one with those in our communities. For some, words of thanksgiving and acts of kindness are conveyed every day.

Thanksgiving can find expression in many ways. It all begins with caring hearts and helping hands. Texans are generous, welcoming and optimistic, making this holiday of gratitude and service particularly important in our state.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/ column: <http://www.cornyn.senate.gov/column>.