

Thanksgiving

Month: Nov.

Week #: 13

Day: b. Tues. Time: 30 min.

The 1st Thanksgiving: Fact or Myth?

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Objectives/Aims

The students will: separate fact from myth, identify & analyze primary sources, make educated guesses using cultural clues, consider multiple points of view and appreciate different cultures.

Materials

computer and/or computer projector, web site: http://www.plimoth.org/OLC/index_js2.html#

Illustration

Suzy is trying to decide what is fact, or what really happened, at the first Thanksgiving and what is fiction. Did somebody just make up a neat story?

Background Information

Pilgrims

The Pilgrims set apart a day to celebrate at Plymouth immediately after their first harvest, in 1621. At the time, this was not regarded as a Thanksgiving observance; harvest festivals were existing parts of English and Wampanoag tradition alike.

Several American colonists have personal accounts of the 1621 feast in Massachusetts:



William Bradford, in *Of Plymouth Plantation*:

"They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their house and dwelling against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides, they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned by true reports."

Edward Winslow, in *Mourt's Relation*:

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruits of our labor. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which we brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us,

Background Information: (continued)

yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

The mention of ninety men in the Winslow account is of interest, as the Native People present would have outnumbered the 50 surviving English at that point. The two preceding passages are the only records of the event, but historians presume that both groups were exposed to unfamiliar forms of celebration. The Pilgrims did not hold a true Thanksgiving until 1623, when it followed a drought, prayers for rain, and a subsequent rain shower. Irregular Thanksgivings continued after favorable events and days of fasting after unfavorable ones. In the Plymouth tradition, a thanksgiving day was a church observance, rather than a feast day.

Gradually, an annual Thanksgiving after the harvest developed in the mid-17th century. This did not occur on any set day or necessarily on the same day in different colonies in America. The Massachusetts Bay Colony celebrated Thanksgiving for the first time in 1630, and frequently thereafter until about 1680, when it became an annual festival in that colony; and Connecticut as early as 1639 and annually after 1647, except in 1675. The Dutch in New Netherland appointed a day for giving thanks in 1644 and occasionally thereafter.

The source for the Background Information can be found at: Wikipedia, Thanksgiving. Accessed at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving#Pilgrims> (Last visited 6/17/08)

Group Activity

1. Say, "This week, our nation is celebrating Thanksgiving. Guess what? It never really happened! There are no such people as 'Pilgrims' and the 'Wampanoags.' To think they came together for one evening meal is crazy! They never even ate turkey, mashed potatoes or apple pie, either! By a show of hands, who thinks everything I just said is true? False? How many think some of the things are true and some of them are false? Yes, some of things I said are truths based on facts, and others are myths which have been made-up over time. How can I tell what is the truth and what is fiction? This is one of the jobs of historians, to discover the truth. We're going to an interactive web site that has been put together by historians to help uncover what really happened at the first Thanksgiving." Go to the web site, http://www.plimoth.org/OLC/index_js2.html#, read the directions, follow the prompts and answer the questions that are posed. If you don't have a computer projector, invite the students to access the site on a personal computer.

2. As a follow up activity, invite the students to do the 'Share what you've discovered' activity. The link for the activity is at the bottom of the home page.

Variations/Extensions

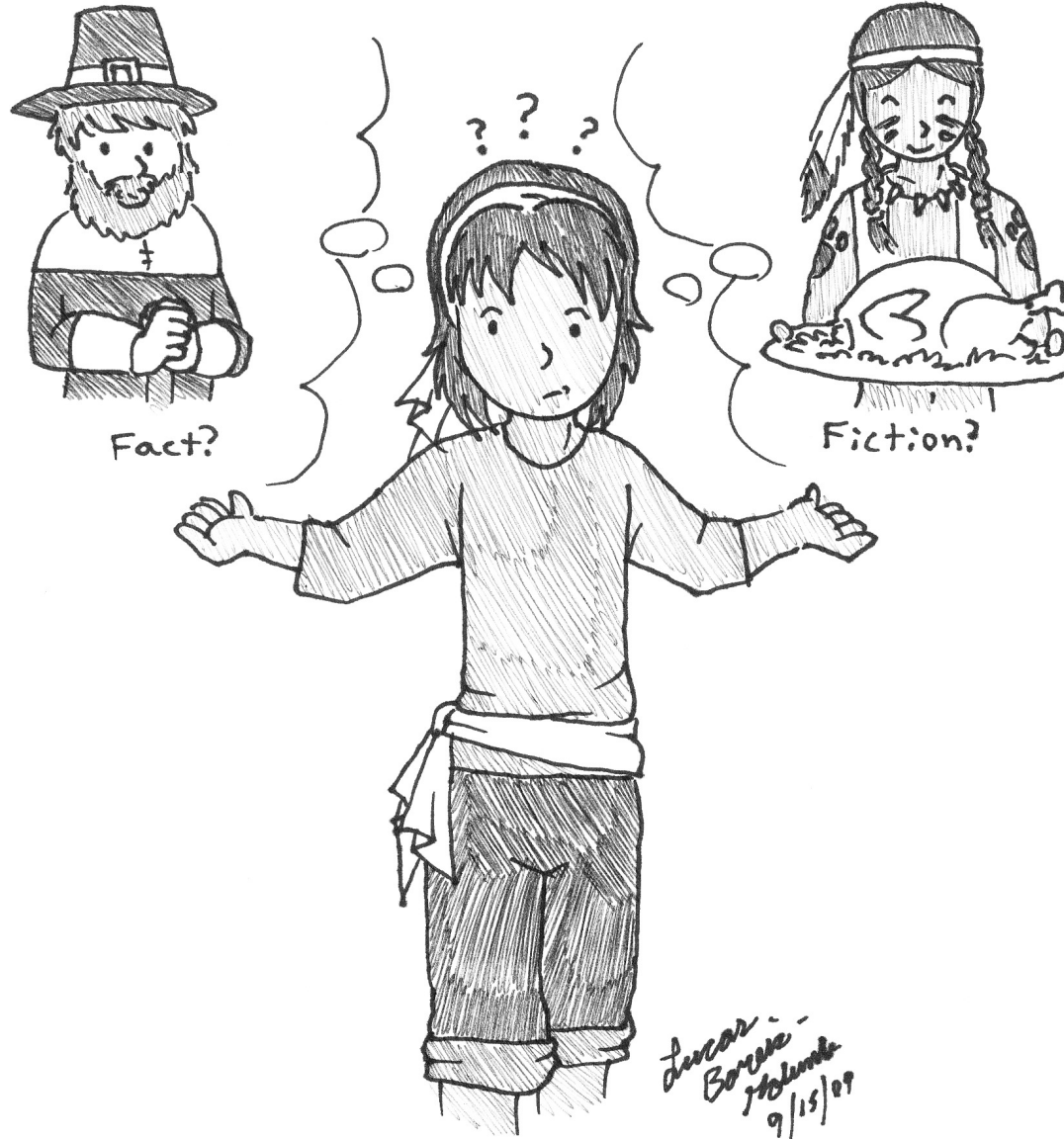
1. On the board, list everything that the students believe to be true about the first Thanksgiving. Then read excerpts of the 'Background Information' to challenge the ideas that are actually myths.

Conclusion

Say, "Sometimes what we believe to be true is not actually true, but a myth. One of the jobs of historians is to 'set the record straight' or to discover the real facts. Often times, these discovered truths and facts can be more interesting and informative than the fanciful story or myth."

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