

# Tricks, Treats and Turkeys: Labor Day, Halloween & Thanksgiving

From grateful prayer  
to greedy profit-  
making — Robert Frye  
writes about the  
evolution of  
American holidays.



'Wampanoags' and 'English colonists' (aka 'Pilgrims') share a recreation of the 1621 harvest celebration now known as "The First Thanksgiving" at Plimoth Plantation (sic), Massachusetts.

In the rest of the Western world, if All Saints' Day is observed at all, it is as a religious holiday, often involving visiting relatives' graves. So how did Americans turn it into a children's carnival of costumes and candy, second only to Christmas in consumer spending? In *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*<sup>1</sup>, Leigh Eric Schmidt posits that the tension between sacred and secular celebrations has been a constant in American history, but that in the 1800s, merchants realized the profits to be made from commercializing the holidays.

The exploitation of Mother's Day by the floral industry; Valentine's Day cards, chocolates and flowers; chocolate eggs and Easter bonnets ("In your Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it, You'll be the grandest lady in the Easter parade"), and of course Christmas, the quintessential consumer event of the year, not only enriched shopkeepers but also "helped lift up and standardize a set of national holiday symbols out of a welter of local, regional, and ethnic traditions."

We look here at three American holidays, all firmly in the secular camp —

Labor Day (the least commercial of the three), Halloween (with caveats), and Thanksgiving — and we review their origins as well as contemporary manifestations surrounding them.

## Labor Day: the End of Summer

Autumn or fall in America doesn't really begin around September 20, as the calendar indicates. In the American mindset, Labor Day marks the end of summer and the beginning of the school year throughout the country. With the advent of fall comes football season, the sport that defines what contemporary Americans like to watch.

Labor Day, an homage to the working men and women of America, coincides with the harvest celebrations and activities such as country fairs and festivals. Congress formally adopted Labor Day as a national holiday in 1894 and declared the first Monday in September as the day to recognize the labor movement's achievements. Big Labor has been in decline since

the mid-20th century and is viewed today as something of the skunk at the party of free enterprise and entrepreneurial spirit. Decidedly contrary to the Ayn Rand (*Atlas Shrugged*) mold of the self-made man (the notion of the rugged individualist who achieves success based on individual merit) and the belief that government's role is the protection of individual rights; labor unions, in today's politically correct climate, are given short shrift and bad press.

Trade-union parades and end-of-summer family barbecues mark a typical Labor Day weekend in America. Our family attends the Lord's Acre Sweet Corn Festival in Bolton, Massachusetts, a rural town 30 miles west of Boston best known for its apple orchards. On Sunday, the day before Labor Day, Bolton's Catholic Church serves up barbecued chicken, roasted sweet corn, and games and raffles as a church benefit.<sup>2</sup>

Labor Day also marks the end of summer vacation for most Americans, or at least for those lucky enough to get time off from work. On the other hand, "25% of American workers got no paid vacation at

all [in 2006], while 43% didn't even take a solid week off. A third fewer American families take vacations together today than they did in 1970. American workers receive the least vacation time among wealthy industrialised nations".<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Labor Day coincides with the end of the summer vacation season, which nearly half of all Americans do not enjoy. Not so for the wealthy and the powerful, however, including President Bush, who retreats to his Texas ranch during the four to five weeks leading up to Labor Day. Unfortunately for Mr. Bush, his month-long vacation before Labor Day 2001 will be forever linked in the collective popular memory to the attack of 9/11 and an unheeded intelligence briefing: "Bin Laden determined to strike in the United States" (August 6, 2001).

### Halloween: from Sacred to Secular

Undoubtedly pagan in origin, Halloween, (from *All Hallows Eve* or *All Hallow E'en*), occurs on October 31, the evening before All Hallows Day, the religious feast that celebrates all martyrs and saints, known also as All Saints' Day. This latter feast day was officially established by Pope Gregory IV in 837. Modern Halloween customs date back to the 19th and early 20th centuries, and were likely brought to the U.S. by Irish and Scottish immigrants, combining traits of both Celtic and Christian traditions. Today's Halloween has evolved into a solidly secular American event.

Americans carve and display jack o'lanterns, pumpkins with a candle inside.<sup>4</sup> The practice is thought to date back to the 1800s, but the origin can't be confirmed.

Beginning around the time of American independence, Halloween was a time for mischief and relatively innocent pranks. As the nation became more urban in the 19th century, many of the pranks assumed a more nefarious quality.

As a youngster growing up in rural Illinois, I remember hearing stories of the older boys toppling outdoor toilets. Teens my age would engage in taking bars of soap and soaping windows, and tossing rotten vegetables (or worse) on the steps of a home, especially if those in the offending

residence failed to offer treats to children wearing Halloween costumes and shouting, "Trick or treat!"

Perhaps as a more acceptable alternative, trick-or-treating on Halloween night appears to have emerged after World War I. Today, children dress up as witches, ghosts, skeletons, monsters, or their favorite cartoon characters. Accompanied by a parent, they visit neighboring homes. Residents indicate their openness by leaving the outdoor lights on, decorating front yards and stoops with jack-'o-lanterns and more (cotton wool spider webs, plastic ghosts, etc.), or playing eerie music from speakers placed outdoors.

### All-American Thanksgiving

Harvest feasts date back to ancient times, a custom that came over with the earliest European settlers in the New World. In 1621 in Plymouth Colony (Massachusetts), Governor William Bradford ordered a day of thanksgiving and prayer to mark the Pilgrims' first harvest in America. Grateful for their help during that difficult first year, the colonists invited Chief Massasoit and members of his Wampanoag tribe to join them for three days of giving thanks and sharing in the settlers' meager bounty. Were proof needed that America eventually integrates everyone into its melting pot, the descendants of those Wampanoags are today lobbying to build a gambling casino near Cape Cod.

The late *Washington Post* columnist Art Buchwald observed that Thanksgiving is the one day of the year when Americans eat better than the French. A typical Thanksgiving Day at our household in Sudbury, Massachusetts, is shared with 12 to 20 family and friends and includes a turkey dinner with all the trimmings<sup>5</sup>: bread and sausage stuffing, gravy, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, mashed turnip, sweet potatoes, green beans or spinach, corn pudding, tossed salad; and for dessert, apple and pumpkin pies.

Stuffed Yankees retire from the Thanksgiving dinner table to watch football games, whether televised college and professional games or local high-school ones,

George Washington proclaimed the first national Day of Thanksgiving in honor of the new constitution, in 1789. In 1863, in the midst of Civil War, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday of November as Thanksgiving Day, a time for reconciliation and restoring national unity.

As a perfect illustration of the influence of commercialism in American holidays, in 1939, Franklin Roosevelt gave in to U.S. retailers' request to move Thanksgiving up to the next to last Thursday in November. (Americans traditionally start their Christmas shopping after Thanksgiving, and retailers wanted to extend the Christmas-shopping season). Roosevelt's decision caused an uproar. States split evenly between honoring the new date and the old one, and two states (Colorado and Texas) decided to honor both!

In 1941, Congress settled the matter with an elegant compromise: they declared that Thanksgiving would henceforth be celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November. Concretely, this is usually the last Thursday, but on years like this one, when there are five Thursdays, it is the next to last.

throughout the long holiday weekend. Thanksgiving has long marked the opening of the consumer event of the year: Christmas. Since 1924, Macy's department store in New York City has hosted an annual Thanksgiving Day parade which is broadcast nationally and features enormous balloons and floats (Santa's presence on the latter is not coincidental).

Many shopping malls open Thanksgiving night at midnight, or the next morning, Black Friday, at 5 a.m., luring Christmas shoppers with bargains known as *loss leaders*. The limited supply of "doorbuster discounts" has caused violence among shoppers: "Shortly after midnight yesterday, an estimated 15,000 shoppers pushed and shoved their way into the Fashion Place Mall in Murray, Utah. Police soon joined them, responding to reports of nine skirmishes"<sup>6</sup>. As shopping becomes a contact sport, some have suggested that perhaps *Black and Blue Friday* might be a more appropriate moniker for the day. So much for Christmas spirit. ■

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### Footnotes

1. *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*, Leigh Eric Schmidt, Princeton University Press, 1995
2. See <http://stfrancisbolton.org/>; scroll to the bottom and click on the Festival images.
3. American Prospect, May 21, 2007
4. For a feast of pumpkin photos: <http://flickr.com/photos/capturedcreativity/286005091/in/set-72157594365205236/>.
5. Although the turkey is inevitable, the trimmings may vary. According to Esaul Sanchez, in *The Compass*: “Even as the turkey is ‘All-American,’ other dishes can be as diverse as the population itself: from pasta to sweet-potato latkes to collard, mustard and turnip greens.” “You can have a Hispanic version of Thanksgiving together with many different black versions,” Dr. Abrahams pointed out. “So it can be both all-American and ethnic. In the last 25 years, the number of popular ways to stuff the bird is fascinating. Now there is this wonderful argument that goes on: Should it be the traditional stuffing with the old bread and the herbs, or should it be Southern style with oysters? A lot of people say, ‘Well the old-fashioned stuff is great; I wouldn’t like to have a Thanksgiving without it. But that oyster stuffing, now, that is really good.’”
6. “Attention, Holiday Shoppers: We Have Fisticuffs in Aisle 2,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2006