



## Are you teaching the real story of the "first Thanksgiving"?



**Are you teaching the true Thanksgiving story or is the version you're passing on to your students a blend of fact and myth? Ready to set the record straight?**

"I propose that there may be a good deal that many of us do not know about our Thanksgiving holiday and also about the 'First Thanksgiving' story," says Chuck Larsen in the introduction to [Teaching About Thanksgiving](#). "I also propose that what most of us have learned about the Pilgrims and the Indians who were at the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth Plantation is only part of the truth."

"When you build a lesson on only half of the information, then you are not teaching the whole truth," Larsen adds.

Larsen seems to know of what he speaks. As a public school teacher, a historian, *and* an American of Indian heritage, Larsen has always had a difficult time teaching about the Thanksgiving holiday.

"Every year I have been faced with the professional and moral dilemma of just how to be honest and informative with my children at Thanksgiving without passing on historical distortions, and racial and cultural stereotypes," Larsen says in his introduction.

"The problem is that part of what you and I learned in our childhood about the 'Pilgrims' and 'Squanto' and the 'First Thanksgiving' is a mixture of both history and myth," Larsen continues. "But the *theme* of Thanksgiving has truth and integrity far above and beyond what we and our fore bearers have made of it. Thanksgiving is a bigger concept than just the story of the founding of Plymouth Plantation."

Larsen goes on to try to sort out the myth from the true history in his introduction to "Teaching About Thanksgiving," a project of The Fourth World Documentation Project of The Center for World Indigenous Studies. The project includes an accurate telling of "The Plymouth Thanksgiving Story" along with study and discussion questions, ideas for enrichment, art projects, and authentic recipes -- all intended to enable teachers to accurately portray the events surrounding the first Thanksgiving.

In closing his introduction, Larsen provokes with a question: "What started as an inspirational bit of New England folklore soon grew into the full-fledged American Thanksgiving we now know... But was [that 'First Thanksgiving'] really our *first* Thanksgiving?"

"There really was a *true* Thanksgiving story of Plymouth Plantation," Larsen says. "But I strongly suggest that there has always been a Thanksgiving

story of some kind or other for as long as there have been human beings. There was also a 'First' Thanksgiving in America, but it was celebrated thirty thousand years ago. Every last Thursday in November we now partake in one of the *oldest* and most *universal* of human celebrations, and *there are many Thanksgiving stories to tell.*"

## Stereotypes, for example

"Teaching About Thanksgiving" offers a handful of the "old stereotypes" that are often reinforced in classrooms across the United States. According to the article, "If you enact the story of the first Thanksgiving as a pageant or drama in your classroom, here are some things to consider:

- "Indians should wear appropriate clothing. NO WARBONNETS! A blanket draped over one shoulder is accurate for a simple outfit."
- "Squanto and Samoset spoke excellent English. Other Indians would have said things in the Algonkian language."
- "These people were noted for their formal speaking style."
- "Indians in the Woodlands area did not have tipis or horses, so these should not be part of any scenery or backdrop."
- "Any food served should be authentic. The following would be appropriate: corn soup, succotash, white fish, red meat, various fowl (turkey, partridge, duck), berries (including whole cranberries), maple sugar candies, corn starch candy (believe it or not, candy corn is almost authentic except for the colored dyes), watercress, any kind of bean (red, black, green, pinto), squash."

Larsen has detractors...

Caleb Johnson, creator of the [MayflowerHistory.com](http://MayflowerHistory.com) Web pages, claims that Larsen's "Teaching About Thanksgiving" contains many factual errors. Among the facts above disputed by Johnson is the idea that "Squanto and Samoset spoke excellent English." They spoke broken English at best, Johnson writes.

## The Native American perspective

"Young children's conceptions of Native Americans often develop out of media portrayals and classroom role playing of the events of the First Thanksgiving. That conception of Native Americans gained from such early exposure is both inaccurate and potentially damaging to others," says Debbie Reese in "[Teaching Young Children About Native Americans](#)," an ERIC Digest (May 1996).

For example, a visitor to a child care center heard a four-year-old saying, "Indians aren't people. They're all dead." "This child," Reese says, "had already acquired an inaccurate view of Native Americans, even though her classmates were children of many cultures, including a Native American child."

"By failing to challenge existing biases we allow children to adopt attitudes based on inaccuracies," Reese continues.

"Most of the commercially prepared teaching materials available present a generalized image of Native American people with little or no regard for differences that exist from tribe to tribe," Reese adds. "Many popular children's authors unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes. Richard Scarry's books frequently contain illustrations of animals dressed in buckskin and feathers, while Mercer Mayer's alphabet book includes an alligator dressed as an Indian."