

Thanksgiving in Genesee County – A Day of Gratitude, Rest, Play, and Community
by

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President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that there would be an official holiday of Thanksgiving to be observed on November 26th of 1863. The proclamation was actually issued in the previous month, on October 3rd. The rationale was gratefulness for the victory of the Union Army at Gettysburg. In Lincoln's words – words that resonate in our day – the last Thursday of November “is one of Thanksgiving and Prayer” designed to “implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it . . .” Nonetheless, this proclamation of a national holiday remained a workday for many Americans until the 1930s. From that point on, a shift in the view of the holiday is discernible. Gratitude remained a theme, but the ideas of rest, play, and community gathering were all added. The birth of the modern Thanksgiving holiday therefore became recognizable in the United States during the 1930s. That turn to what we now understand to be Thanksgiving could also be perceived in Genesee County as well.

The shift away from Thanksgiving as a day of gratitude – while still remaining a workday – meant the obvious. It was also now a time of rest for growing numbers of Americans, including the residents of Genesee County. Like the Labor Day that had become a national holiday in 1894 under President Grover Cleveland, this day away from the workplace featured family gatherings and a play that took the form of competitive athletics. The bounty of the fall harvest was equated with the ability to stop working momentarily and indulge in a restful period featuring a combination of both repose and amusement. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the place of football on Thanksgiving.

Long before the spectacle of televised National Football League games on this day there was Thanksgiving football in Genesee County. The town of LeRoy is an example of the place that competitive athletics occupied on this holiday. In 1938 two semi-professional teams played – one from Albion and the other from LeRoy.

But by 1938 not only was there interest in local football teams but, in addition, college football on Thanksgiving was also attracting attention in Genesee County – as it was in the nation at large. Cornell is an example of how colleges worked to

build regional followings – an effort which peaked with annual Thanksgiving Day football contests.

Play on Thanksgiving Day also began to assume other expressions – such as parades. Over time, parades merged with yet other athletic endeavors, such as “turkey trots.” The featuring of turkeys was of course a clear portrayal of how central the turkey dinner, indeed, how central food, had become on Thanksgiving. Food and what can be called a ceremonial meal became an integral part of Thanksgiving celebrations in the county and in the nation at large. Cooking and a family gathering that included friends became the ideal. So too did an even wider community activity – volunteering. As we move closer to our own day, a variety of Genesee County groups used the food tradition in order to express concern with those in the county who were less fortunate. Churches, Masonic Halls, and Veterans Posts all joined in the effort to promote gratitude for their own well-being through a promotion of the well-being of others. What began with President Lincoln’s call in 1863 to “heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it” came full-circle in such volunteer efforts. The holiday synthesized all that was special in American life, and that synthesis was quite visible in Genesee County from the 1930s on.