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"The Old Stone Bank"

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

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**The
Rhode Island
Turkey**



Presented by
"The Old Stone Bank"
Providence, R. I.

November 23, 1931



The Rhode Island Turkey

FOR ALL its long establishment as a national holiday, solemnly proclaimed and officially blessed in every state of the country, Thanksgiving Day remains primarily a New England institution. Here, in the land of gnarled apple trees, rough weather, "rock-bound coast," and incredible loveliness, the custom had its American origin. It is not to be called indigenous to America, however, though its age goes back to those bleak, forbidding days when the transplanted pilgrim flowers of England were trying and slowly succeeding, to send fragile roots into stern New England soil. Thanksgiving days have been celebrated in practically every age and every nation throughout the history of man. Fundamentally such a day is not an institution to be called synonymous with any place or time; it has its roots in the very heart of the human race . . . going back to the time, and before, when a joyful father ordered a great feast to be spread in honor of his prodigal son, come home at last. But we, who know Thanksgiving Day as a time for turkey and pumpkin pie, as a day when children's eyes are larger than their stomachs (to their later humiliation), when families gather together again around the festive board, and cider is drunk by the barreland, are more interested in it as a New England custom belonging to

our great-ancestors who celebrated it in their quaint homesteads, coming by coach in jolly family parties, cooking turkeys and pies in huge fireplaces or brick ovens.

The Mayflower Pilgrims have the honor of being the founders of the custom in New England, and subsequently the rest of the country. After a bitter year of struggle and despair, when many of their small number had been unable to survive the rigors of hardship or homesickness, when they had barely secured a foothold in this forbidding land, they still had the high courage to celebrate in a feast of thanksgiving the kindness and mercy of the Lord who allowed them to survive at all and in whom they founded their faith. This was the year 1621, the famous year when peace was first made between the Pilgrims and their Indian neighbors and they sat down together to share the thanksgiving feast. Turkeys, then as now, made the chief delicacy of the day, wild turkeys shot in the forests, not as large as many of those fattened for market today but of plump, tender flesh and exquisite flavor. After more and more settlers arrived, the wild turkey became almost as scarce as the ill-fated wood pigeon, but in the day of the Pilgrims it was yet abundant. As a delicacy it was not unknown to them before their coming to New England, for Old England and France had been breeding the bird for many years along with other domestic fowls.

To bring our story down to Rhode Island, out of the general and into the particular,

we must concentrate not on Thanksgiving Day but on its mainstay—the turkey. In respect to the former, suffice it to say that the custom initiated by the Pilgrims spread rapidly throughout the New England Colonies and was as highly celebrated in Rhode Island as anywhere else. In this colony it was probably in that same Narragansett farming country which bred the jonny-cake and the once-famous "Narragansett pacers" that Thanksgiving was made the greatest feast. At least, it was there that celebrations of all kinds were entered into with the most zest.

In 1781, we find a French officer, stationed at Newport, writing home to his friends and speaking of the "turkeys of the same kind as our own" and of what he called "Turkey grain," probably maize or corn. These turkeys which he mentioned were not native, trapped in the forests and then domesticized; but, on the contrary, were a particular kind of bronzed variety which had been introduced from England. Once imported, they had been highly prized and raised every year in increasing numbers by colonial Rhode Islanders who valued them for their sweet and firm flesh and subtle flavor.

Just why it happened that the turkey raising gradually centered in the Old Narragansett section, South County, we do not know except that it must have been for the age-old reason of the greatest abundance of natural facilities for turkey raising. The turkey, above all his fellow fowls, is a diffi-

cult individual to rear from egg to maturity, and environment plays a tremendous part in his successful rise to the age of ripeness for the table. Thus, turkeys were raised in South County in increasing numbers every year until Rhode Island began to get a reputation.

To retrace our steps a bit, we should remark on how the institution of Thanksgiving was progressing in its conquest of the country at large. New England was its staunch, dyed-in-the-wool adherent but the new generations that were growing up in the west and south during the late 18th and early 19th centuries had traditions of their own to support. Perhaps without the long and strenuous efforts of Sarah J. Hale, editor of *Godey's Ladies' Book* for many years, Thanksgiving might not have become a national holiday. She canvassed states from east to west and north to south throughout the country, working them up into enthusiasm over the issue, and succeeded in driving home her point in 1863, the year Thanksgiving became a national event. Of course the south, as a rule, still makes little of the day and does not celebrate it according to the time-honored dictates of New England, if at all.

With the establishment of Thanksgiving in the national consciousness, Rhode Island turkeys acquired a greater premium value; but it was not until ten years later that Rhode Island once more stepped into national prominence, becoming a leader in

this field as in many others. In 1873, Senator Henry B. Anthony of Rhode Island, knowing the fine points of South County turkeys and willing to be their champion, came to Westerly to confer with Horace Vose about a turkey to be sent with compliments to President Grant for the White House Thanksgiving dinner. Vose was an expert as far as turkeys were concerned, a distinction which he enjoyed all his life.

While not specifically a raiser of turkeys himself he dealt extensively in them, particularly around Thanksgiving time when he would scout about for the best birds that neighboring farms and towns could offer, buy them up, and put them into the pink of condition for the season's customers. The turkey he selected as suitable for the presidential dinner came from the farm of one Horace Brightman and weighed 36 pounds when dressed. The bird was accepted and eaten with relish, as might have been expected, and thereafter a new custom was in order. Senator Anthony continued it with the aid of Mr. Vose until his death, then Senator Nathan F. Dixon, a near neighbor of Vose's carried it on. Every president, as he came into office, had no fears about his Thanksgiving turkey. Year after year these Rhode Island-raised birds found their way to the White House, and won a sound reputation not only for themselves but for Horace Vose who soon acquired the title of the "Turkey King."

The specimens he selected as suitable for

a president never weighed less than 25 pounds, dressed, and most of them weighed a good bit more. The one sent to President Harrison weighed 31 pounds, while those that graced the tables of Presidents Roosevelt and Taft were within a pound of the same weight. All came from Brightman's farm in South County or its near vicinity and all had been fed on plenty of coarse meal, cracked corn, good spring water, and cracked shells and gravel, with a good range to run on where the ground was clean and there were plenty of grasshoppers. Chestnuts were also considered a necessary part of a Rhode Island turkey's diet. When killed and dressed for shipment to the White House, the turkeys were left with head, wings, tail-feathers, and feet all on for this was the method of preparing the very finest birds for market.

After Senator Dixon, Horace Vose himself continued the practice of supplying the White House annually. So famous did he become that he was besieged with photographers and writers who wanted to get from him the whole story of the custom. But they were so persistent and objectionable Mr. Vose became very wary of strangers, seldom allowing any about his grounds, while the photographic rights he sold completely to a New York agency.

However, nothing, not even a custom, can always sail serenely on and this one of sending a Rhode Island turkey each year to the White House was destined for disappoint-

ment. The trouble and interruption came in the form of a disease, called blackhead, which began to take heavy toll of Rhode Island flocks, wiping out hundreds in a brief time. Agricultural authorities worked on the case for months and years without great success. It finally came to the sorry pass where Ohio turkeys were being shipped into this state to acquire a Rhode Island flavor and then re-shipped to market from here. More than that, Vermont and even Tennessee turkeys began to have their hour in the limelight. Worst of all, the birds raised in Rhode Island fell below the presidential standard and the honor of supplying the White House fell elsewhere.

But that is not the end of the story. Only a little more than a week ago, in *The Evening Bulletin* for November 14th and right on the front page, we find that the old-time custom, established by Senator Anthony and Horace Vose is to be revived, although the honor within the state has passed from South County to Chepachet. Robert E. Steere, of this town, decided to regain for Rhode Island the honor that faded after Mr. Vose's death and offered the best of his large flock to President Hoover. The offer was accepted, and when the blue labelled turkey from the Steere farm arrives at the White House, Rhode Island will have regained, not only for herself but for New England another rightful crown.