

Folklife Today

November 2018: Festive Foods and Menus

George "Shortbuckle" Roarke [with banjo]:

Next will be "Groundhog"

Shoulder up my gun and whistle to my dog, groundhog

Shoulder up my gun and whistle to my dog

Go to the wild wood to catch a groundhog, groundhog

Two up a bush, one in a log, groundhog

Two up a bush, one in a log, two for me and one for my dog,

Come on, Sal with a ten-foot pole

Come on, Sal with a ten-foot pole

And twist them groundhogs out of their hole

She took that pole and twisted them out

She took that pole and she twisted them out

Good God almighty, ain't them groundhogs stout

She took him home and tanned his hide

She took him home, she tanned his hide

Made the best shoestrings ever I tied

She took him home and put him on the fire

She took him home, and she put him on the fire

I bet you a dollar you can smell him a mile, groundhog

Well up stepped Sal with a snicker and a grin, groundhog

Well up stepped Sal with a snicker and a grin

Groundhog grease dripping off her chin, groundhog

2:18

John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. And I'm here with Steve Winick, the Center's writer, editor, and creator of the blog *Folklife Today*.

Steve: Hi, John! With Thanksgiving coming up, today we thought we'd talk about festive foods. So what we just heard was one of my favorite Festive Foods songs, "Groundhog," played in Kentucky in 1937 by George "Shortbuckle" Roarke. We got groundhog grease running down our chins here in the studio. We're going to talk to Megan Harris from the Veterans History Project about holiday menus in the military, and Mackenzie Kwok about ramps.

John: But first, Steve, you wrote a blog at Thanksgiving last year having to do with the foods of Thanksgiving. Tell us a little about that.

3:00

Steve: Well, it was in response to a piece in the New York Times called "Most Everything You Learned About Thanksgiving Is Wrong." It kind of shows the bloggification of the news, with sensational claims in headlines that some people might call clickbait.

John: And what kinds of things did they say we've been getting wrong?

Steve: Well, a number of things, but in particular they made some weird claims about food. First I should clarify that by "Thanksgiving," they actually meant the event in the fall of 1621 that Americans call "The First Thanksgiving."

John: so you mean the event at which about 90 members of the Wampanoag tribe came and feasted with the English colonists we often call the "Pilgrims."

Steve: Right. And I think, for one thing, it's not really accurate to say that that event was either the "first thanksgiving celebrated by Europeans in the New World," nor did it really lead to our modern holiday of Thanksgiving. So that's something the Times should have challenged, but didn't.

John: so they just said our modern Thanksgiving was based on this event?

Steve: right.

John: And you don't think so?

Steve: well, the primary sources don't support it. Early presidential proclamations of Thanksgiving don't mention the 1621 event, and neither does Lincoln's 1863 proclamation, which most people agree is the basis of our

current holiday. So the holiday was established with no reference to 1621. It would be more truthful to say that we created this holiday of Thanksgiving and then looked to the past for a kind of origin myth and settled on the 1621 feast. So now it's part of the meaning of Thanksgiving, but not the historical origin of it.

John: Interesting. But, you also wrote about the food, right?

Steve: Yes. The sticking point for me was a repeated statement in the Times piece that there was no turkey at the feast. They even made a subheading "There was no turkey or pie."

John: So what struck you as off-base about that?

Steve: Well, the Times piece says:

There was no mention of turkey being at the 1621 bounty.... If fowl graced the table, it was probably duck or goose

Now, there are two primary sources for what the Pilgrims ate in the autumn of 1621. They're a paragraph each, so you can read them both in about 5 minutes. Everything we know about what they ate comes from these two paragraphs. They make it clear that fowl was on the table, yet this Times author acts as if that's an open question by saying "if fowl graced the table."

So that made it pretty clear the Times author hasn't read these primary sources at all. The sources aren't cited, and the authors aren't mentioned. Instead, the Times just interviewed various modern people, which takes a lot longer and in this case tells you less.

John: So you said the primary sources tell you that fowl was on the table at the 1621 feast?

Steve: Yes. The only primary source that mentions the food specifically eaten at this feast is the account called Mourt's Relation, written by Edward Winslow, who was at the feast. And he says that four men went fowling and came back with enough to feed the colony for a week. What Winslow doesn't tell you is what KIND of fowl they brought back. The Times for some reason says there MIGHT have been fowl, but if there was, it must have been duck or goose but probably not turkey.

John: OK. So there was definitely fowl, and the jury's out on turkey. And you said there was another primary source?

Steve: Yes, that's Of Plymouth Plantation by William Bradford, who also was there. He doesn't say what foods were served at this specific event, but he does say what foods the pilgrims ate in the autumn of 1621. And he does mention waterfowl, but then specifically says "There was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many."

John: so one document says they ate fowl at the feast. And another says that when they did eat fowl, that included both waterfowl and wild turkey, and that turkey was not a rare treat but a staple of the diet.

Steve: Exactly.

John: And yet the Times said that there was duck and goose at the feast but not turkey?

Steve: Right. One source doesn't say what kind of fowl at all, and the other mentions both waterfowl and turkey, but the Times somehow concluded that waterfowl was on the menu but turkey wasn't. They cited no source and gave no evidence. But they did make it clear that they hadn't read the primary sources by saying "If fowl graced the table."

John: so why did they make this claim?

Steve: It's not fully clear, but the claim was popularized in 2010 by an author named Andrew Behrs, and he wrote a piece in the Times before the one I was responding to...so it seems likely the author of this piece was taking his word for it. And he just argued that ducks and geese were easier to hunt than turkeys, so the word fowl must have referred to ducks and geese. But this is directly belied by Bradford's writing, which tells us they did indeed successfully hunt "great many" wild turkeys in the fall of 1621. So it's a very dubious claim.

John: So, do we have a better sense of what actually was eaten?

Steve: yes, a team from the Library of Congress's Teaching with Primary Sources program looked into this a few years ago, and they decided that they ate: wild turkeys, ducks, geese, venison, lobsters, clams, bass, corn, green

vegetables, and dried fruits. So I brought along a little tune for us to listen to, to celebrate this.

7:55

[Nancy Buckalew plays "Turkey in the Straw."]

Steve: To celebrate the fact that turkey on Thanksgiving is still historically accurate, that was Nancy Buckalew playing "Turkey in the Straw" in Chicago in 1977.

John: Sounds delicious...but what do you think this teaches us?

Steve: First of all, always check the primary sources. Second, be wary of claims that everything you know is wrong, especially about events about which we're not likely to learn anything really new. I mean, unless new evidence is discovered, you may be hearing someone who wants to claim that their new book or article is radically new, but it's really just their spin on the same sources. And then third of course...clams and venison!

John: Yeah, that sounds really good but also kind of random. And it makes you realize that like everyone else, the pilgrims had to celebrate using what was available. And we often forget in our modern world with all the modern conveniences, that in most times and places there have been severe limits on what people could eat. One place that still applies is among troops deployed around the world.

9:35

Steve: So our next guest is going to tell us a little about festive eating in the military. Please welcome Megan Harris, Reference Specialist at the Veterans History Project.

Megan: Hi!

John: So, Megan, tell us a little about the Veterans History Project and what you collect.

Megan: So the Veterans History Project is part of the American Folklife Center. It was established by congressional legislation in 2000, and our mission is to collect, preserve, and make accessible the stories of America's veterans. So our collections include materials relating to over 100,000 individual veterans,

and these materials in the form of oral history recordings, original manuscripts like letters and diaries and military papers, and original photographs.

Steve: I've listened to a good many VHP interviews over the years, and food does come up pretty often. Interviewers are interested, and veterans don't mind talking about it. One thing you learn is that in the military, food can be quite monotonous. So, Megan, how did people on duty celebrate food-centered holidays like Thanksgiving with limited resources?

Megan: So, holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas were times where servicemen and women particularly missed their families and home-cooked meals. So, when possible, they had more elaborate meals to mark these special occasions. And oftentimes they were given commemorative menus to tell them what was going to be served.

John: So we're talking about physical menus?

Megan: Yes, they're sometimes little booklets, oftentimes printed on special paper and decorated with illustrations. They sometimes included messages from the unit's commanding officer, or names of the officers and members of the units that were gathered at that holiday meal.

Steve: What kinds of foods were included?

Megan: Well, sometimes there were, um, unfamiliar foods, we'll say, like mayonnaise salad.

John: That's....not what immediately comes to mind when I think of holiday foods.

Megan: They also had what was called "fresh frozen" food. One Navy nurse named Charlotte Ione Bailey Temerario remembered having "fresh frozen asparagus" and "battered fresh frozen lima beans" in 1943. In this case, "fresh frozen" refers to flash-frozen vegetables, which was a new technology at the time and made for frozen vegetables that were less mushy and more like fresh than your typical slow-frozen or canned. And then, there were mostly traditional holiday staples, like turkey, cranberry sauce, potatoes, and pumpkin pie.

John: So your typical Thanksgiving or even Christmas dinner.

Megan: Exactly.

Steve: What about times when people either didn't have the resources or time for a commemorative meal? What did people eat then?

Megan: Great question. Of course, not all servicemen and women were able to enjoy commemorative meals during wartime. We have an interview with Albert L. Allen Jr., who landed in the Philippines on Thanksgiving Day in 1941.

John: Great, let's hear what Allen has to say about that:

12:25

Albert Allen: There were six of us from Mansfield [Ohio], we went over to the Philippines. We actually arrived November the 20th, which was Roosevelt's Thanksgiving Day. We called it that because it was moved back to the third Thursday instead of the fourth. And he...I don't know why he changed that date. And that's when we pulled into Manila, into the Army pier there, and unloaded our equipment and all, and got ready to go up to our base up at Ft. Stotsenburg or Clark Field. So, we'll never forget that, because unfortunately it moved so fast that the turkey meal that was going to be served on the ship...we had to leave it. We never got it. But then when we got up to Ft. Stotsenburg later in the afternoon, we were...the other tank battalion that was already up there...all they had left was beans. And that's what we had was beans instead of turkey, on Thanksgiving Day! So we remembered real well. And I only...as often with GIs will happen, I just read again in a book, someone else had the same experience!

Steve: People really seem to remember their holiday meals, whether they ate a turkey dinner or a can of beans. The turkey dinner stands out in your mind because the meal is exceptional for the military, and the can of beans stands out because eating so poorly on a holiday is memorable too.

Megan: Absolutely. That's partly why the Veterans History Project collections have so many of these commemorative menus.

John: Why do you think so many servicemen and women held onto them after they came home from war?

Megan: Well, I think that goes to show just how different and special these holidays were. They were a break from the monotonous and challenging

military life, and they gave the servicemen and women a taste, no pun intended, of traditional foods and home. Food brought a source of comfort amidst really harsh and uncomfortable conditions. And besides providing an escape from everyday hardships, food also shaped people's memories and experiences of military life.

14:30

Steve: You know, there's another Thanksgiving food tradition in the military our listeners might know about. This is when the highest-ranking officers, the generals and even the commander-in-chief, fly out to troops at home or abroad and work the mess hall serving food.

John: That's a really fascinating practice, because festivals have often been marked by the reversal of hierarchies, when the powerful have to serve the regular folks. This seems like a contemporary example of this very longstanding tradition. Do we have any interviews relating to that?

Megan: Yeah, we do. In 1990, a few months before the ground war started in Kuwait, President George H. W. Bush visited the troops in Saudi Arabia. One soldier who was photographed with the President was Anna M. Ruiz from Arizona. She spoke about it in her interview.

15:14

In November, I had the honor and privilege of meeting the President of the United States. I had my picture taken with him, and that picture came out in Time Magazine. That's right there. I met the First Lady. He came over to talk to the troops about going to war. That was Thanksgiving day. And of course that's another thing...it's something I'll never forget. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I've had my fifteen minutes of fame, just the way that it all happened. I got to meet General Colin Powell, who became Secretary of State. I met General Schwarzkopf."

Megan: on that visit, the president was also photographed eating a mess-hall Thanksgiving dinner with the troops, as a morale-booster and a reminder that our men and women in uniform are not just thinking of home during the Holidays, but also home is thinking of them too.

Steve: Those are just a couple of examples of foodways and other folklife in the VHP collection, and we hope to have Megan back with us for more in the future. Thank you so much for joining us today, Megan.

Megan: Thank you for having me!

16:25

John: As we know, festive foods are popular and meaningful in areas other than the military.

Steve: Absolutely. There are all sorts of foods that mark holidays, like ham for Christmas, latkes for Hanukah, noodles for the Lunar New Year—

John: But there are also festive foods that celebrate occasions that aren't holidays.

Steve: Like what?

John: Well, one of our Bartis interns from this past summer studies foodways. Why don't we have her explain?

Steve: Great idea! Here's Mackenzie Kwok. Like John said, she's one of our Bartis interns here at the AFC. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May with a major in folklore, and wrote her senior thesis on Asian American foodways in North Carolina. Hi, Mackenzie!

John: Hey!

Mackenzie: Hey! Thanks for having me.

Steve: So, Mackenzie, what kinds of festive foods have you come across in our archives?

Mackenzie: Great question. There are so many, but one that really sticks out to me is the annual Knob Creek ramp supper in southern West Virginia.

John: Ooh, great example. But what are ramps?

Mackenzie: Ramps are wild leeks that grow in the forests of West Virginia and some other parts of Appalachia. They grow in the spring, and they're known for their really...pungent smell.

Steve: So you're saying they're stinky?

Mackenzie: Yup. We have an interview with a woman named Crystal Meadows in our archive that is pretty telling.

17:35

Crystal Meadows: When I was a kid, if a kid came to school that had ate ramps, they set him out in the hall.

Mary Hufford: I love it.

Crystal Meadows: You love it? They made him sit out in the hall, when I was a kid!

Steve: Why do folks in Drews Creek have an annual supper based around these strong-smelling ramps?

Mackenzie: Well, the ramp supper started off as a sort of spring fundraiser, you know, people would come for a plate of ramps with potatoes and pinto beans, and the funds would go towards the community center, which called the Ramp House. But it's not *really* about the money. The first Knob Creek ramp supper really hardly made anything.

John: OK, can you tell us more about the origins of that ramp supper?

Mackenzie: We've actually got an interview with one of the founders of it in the archives! Why don't we hear what she has to say?

John: Great idea.

Mackenzie: This is Jenny Miller Bonds, a founder of the ramp supper, with folklorist Mary Hufford.

18:24

Mary Hufford: Someone told me the ramp dinner here is 36 years old? But were ramps popular before they started having the ramp dinner?

Jenny Miller Bonds: People didn't think too much of it. They stunk! Because of the smell, they didn't approve it. The schools didn't like children to come to school after they ate ramps. But one time, a teacher we had down here said "let's have a ramp supper," so we decided to do it. And she backed out, but there was about six of us. And we didn't have a plate, we didn't have a teacup,

we didn't have anything! So we got out, and we went house to house in Boone until we had enough to have a ramp supper, and we made 35 dollars.

Mary Hufford: 35 dollars?

Jenny Miller Bonds: Yes. And we did it in an old store building that she owned, or she had a little store in it. And after we had our first one they tore the building down and we built one out here that was originally a little hut. We tore it down and moved it. Then we built this one, and we've had it all along.

Mary Huffors: You've had it ever since. So it really started with that little 35 dollars.

Jenny Miller Bonds: But we don't do it for the money. If we did, we'd charge more than 4 dollars. We don't do it for the money.

Mackenzie: So you can see how, based on what Jenny said, that the ramp supper is really just a community effort of digging ramps to contribute to the supper, then cooking and cleaning the ramps together at the ramp house, and all eating together at the end.

Steve: So it's really not about the money.

Mackenzie: It's not, it's more about celebrating that everyone comes from this area. Since ramps are mainly dug—you *can* grow them and buy them, but many people prefer to find ramp patches in the wild—they represent the people's connection to the landscape.

John: But why ramps? Why not other foods that grow in the area?

Mackenzie: Well, a big part of eating ramps and the ramp supper as a whole is the process of going out into the woods and digging for them. So ramps really reflect people's connection to nature and the spring season, place and identity.

John: I imagine also a really strong sense of community.

Mackenzie: Absolutely. People come from all over for the ramp supper—maybe people who are from the area but moved away, people who have family from the area, or visitors from out of state.

Steve: Wow, these ramp suppers are festive on so many levels! One more question, where can listeners find out more about the ramp suppers?

Mackenzie: The Knob Creek Ramp Supper that I was talking about in particular is from the collection called *Tending the Commons: Folklife and Landscape in Southern West Virginia*. It's digitized, and available online, so anyone can go see it. It has some really nice photos and interview clips.

Steve: Awesome. You know, I have a weird fact about ramps.

Mackenzie: What would that be?

Steve: Did you guys know that Chicago is named after ramps?

John: Really?

Steve: Yes, there used to be a dense field of ramps in Illinois, and the local indigenous people referred to the Chicago River as the river that went through the ramps, so the word for ramps in the local language gives us the name "Chicago."

Mackenzie: That is another really great thing about ramps.

John: Thanks, Mackenzie. It's been a pleasure having you at the American Folklife center.

Steve: Thanks so much, Mackenzie. You've done a great job helping us develop this series, among other things.

Mackenzie: Thank *you!*

Steve: And thank you, John, for producing this podcast with me.

John: Thanks, Steve! Let's also give a shout out to Charlotte Temerario, Albert Allen Jr., Dean E. Galles, and Anna M. Ruiz, whose stories we heard today. And let's give a very special thanks to all of the active troops serving our country.

Steve: To our friends at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, especially Megan Harris and Mackenzie Kwok, and our engineer, Jon Gold, and to everyone listening right now, thank you and have a wonderful Thanksgiving season.

John: As always, you can find the blogposts we've discussed at blogs.loc.gov/folklife, which is the Folklife Today blog.

Steve: Let's end the show with a tune from Neal Morris, recorded in Timbo, Arkansas in 1959, about another regionally prominent leafy green, the great Ozark delicacy of "Turnip Greens."

Neal Morris (Sings with guitar):

Well, I had a dream the other night, I dreamed that I could fly
I flapped my wings like an eagle, and I flew up to the sky.

At the gate I met Master Gabriel and he looked at me so keen
He asked me what I'd have to eat, and I told him "turnip greens!"

Master Gabriel also asked me from what country did I fly
And I told him from the Ozarks that I flew up to the sky.

He wondered why the men down there were rough, and yet so clean
And I said, why, Mr. Gabriel, it's those good old turnip greens!

Turnip greens, turnip greens, good old turnip greens
Cornbread and buttermilk, and good old turnip greens

Master Gabriel brought some angel food on a great big silvery bowl
And he said "If you eat this it will rest your weary soul."

Well it didn't taste like taters, and it didn't taste like beans
And it didn't have the flavor of them good old turnip greens.

Master Gabriel said, "Youngman I see that you're not satisfied
You'd rather be down yonder on some Ozark mountainside."

"So I'll tell to you the story of the country of your birth
The lord's a getting ready for his kingdom on the earth!"

"Tomorrow we'll be moving to that great land of the free
That band you hear playing is the Ozark Jubilee!"