

## Two national Thanksgivings

Providence Journal November 21, 2012

By **TIM LEHNERT**

Every year we ease into Thanksgiving by doing a run-through six weeks in advance -- Canadian Thanksgiving at my parents' house in Montreal. The holiday in Canada is on the second Monday in October (Columbus Day in the U.S.). Just like the Canadian Football League, Thanksgiving in Canada starts earlier than its U.S. counterpart, the players are smaller, and there is less hype.

Canadians don't do Thanksgiving in late November, and for good reason. By the time that the Macy's Day Parade comes around in Manhattan, the ground is frozen solid north of the border, and possibly covered in snow; the time for a harvest feast is well past.

The basics of the Thanksgiving meal are the same in Canada as in the U.S. -- turkey dinner and all the fixings. The Canadian holiday, however, lacks the lore of the U.S. version: no Pilgrims, Plymouth Rock or friendly natives in Canada. The holiday didn't really arrive there until the 1750s, well after the 1621 kick-off in these parts (though it wasn't until Abraham Lincoln that it really became official).

Moreover, unlike in the U.S., Thanksgiving is not a huge deal in Canada. It is even permissible to opt out of the festivities. If the mood strikes you, on Thanksgiving Day you can go see a movie, paint the kitchen or catch up on your e-mail. Not so in what Canadians call "the States." Here, it is mandatory for many to repair to somebody's dwelling, typically that of a relative, to eat and drink too much. (If not, questions will be raised: "What's wrong? Sick? Depressed? Hater?")

It's entirely acceptable to skip Christmas on religious grounds, and many pooh-pooh it for environmental reasons, but not celebrate Thanksgiving? No way, everybody's in, no excuses.

There is even macho cred to be gained from exhibiting extreme devotion to the holiday. Some Thanksgiving hosts start cooking on Labor Day, or if they are really "way behind," Halloween. Others jet in from afar and boast, "Spent three hours on the ground in Atlanta and four hours in the terminal at O'Hare, but I made it!" With a build-up like that, there's no way that the event can match its billing, and Thanksgiving's dark underbelly has become something of a pop-culture cliché: the family fight backdropped by the blare of televised football, the massacred turkey (raw on the inside, charred on its exterior), the glassy eyes and slurred speech, the tearful ride to the airport.

Canadians, on the other hand, take the holiday in stride. They will drop by Mom's for turkey, but aren't pinballing from Vancouver to Winnipeg to Halifax so as to tuck in for the meal. The stores are open on Thanksgiving Day, and last time that we were there, people were all over Sainte-Catherine Street, Montreal's downtown main drag, buying shoes, eating noodles, sipping lattés.

The day after Thanksgiving in Canada is a Tuesday just like any other.

People go to work and school, and the stores open at their usual times. People do not riot outside big-box retailers in the 4 a.m. darkness so that they can get their mitts on a discounted big-screen TV. The Canadian Thanksgiving does not kick-off "the holiday season," Christmas music is not heard, and pundits do not take to the airwaves to evaluate the performance of the nation's consumers on that holiest of days, "Black Friday." (Canadians save that nonsense for Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, when Sainte-Catherine Street and other major shopping areas are grotesque mob scenes).

There are many differences, but this year, like every one, I was doubly thankful. Our family got to celebrate the Canadian Thanksgiving with my parents in October, and the American one with my wife's family last Thursday. And on the Sunday of the U.S. Thanksgiving weekend, the Canadian Football League will hold its 100th Grey Cup game. I know, a football league holding its championship match before the new year has been rung in is plain weird, but, once again, that's how they roll north of the 49th.

*Tim Lehnert is a Rhode Island-based writer*