



# THANKFUL ANYWAY

There were empty seats at the table, and there was plenty to worry about. But that didn't stop WWII Americans from observing Thanksgiving Day.

#### by Patrice Crowley

T WAS THANKSGIVING DAY AND THE WORLD WAS AT WAR. Boys were away overseas, some never to return. At home, rationing kept people from getting enough gasoline to drive to their relatives' homes for the big family dinner, and from getting the ingredients necessary to prepare the traditional meal. But there was still reason to be grateful. "Let us stop and think of the people in this war-torn world...who haven't food of any kind," wrote an Arkansas teenager in 1943.

Whether trying to cook without key ingredients, searching stores for scarce household essentials, or riding to grandma's in a GI-jammed train, everyone experienced Thanksgiving in new ways throughout World War II. What used to be a holiday of comforting predictability became a day full of obstacles.

Even the date of Thanksgiving was problematic. In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln had decided it should fall on the last Thursday of November. In 1939, as the country was rising from the Depression, November had five Thursdays, and Thanksgiving would have fallen on the very last day of the month. President Franklin Roosevelt decided the economy would benefit from a longer Christmas shopping season and moved Thanksgiving up to the fourth Thursday. The move worked, so the following year,

Roosevelt pushed the date even earlier, to the third Thursday. Finally, in 1944, Congress decreed that Thanksgiving would be the fourth Thursday of November.

So what was Thanksgiving like for the typical US family during the war? Imagine a fictitious but typical American family of the early 1940s. Miles and Mary Standish, with children Mike and Millie, usually had Aunt Anne, Uncle James, and Granddad over for dinner. But Miles was now off with the army, so the day was different from the start. The war placed an astounding number of obstacles in Mary's way as she tried to keep her house in order, her car running,



her children clothed, and the pantry stocked. Working at her job at least 48 hours a week, Mary had much less time and energy for household tasks. Shortages meant long lines for limited supplies, and gas rationing meant taking packed public transportation to grocery stores. Restrictions on meat, butter, and sugar rendered traditional recipes useless. Less fuel for cooking meant figuring out what dishes could share oven space.

Good cuts of meat had begun to disappear from butcher shops in 1942. In the East, even hamburger was soon absent. Meat rationing began in March 1943 as military needs grew. When meat was available, shoppers flooded stores, and shops ran out of supply before they ran out of customers.

Other foods and ingredients were rationed, too: cooking oil and fats, cheese, dried beans, ketchup, cof-

fee, and canned fruits and vegetables. Even heavy cream went missing, meaning there was no whipped cream for pumpkin pie. But as ingredients disappeared, helpful books and newspaper and magazine articles appeared. "The present day may bend [us], but it cannot break us," asserted a writer in the November 1942 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. "It is possible to make cranberry sauce without sugar."

Authors urged cooks to try corn syrup, molasses, or honey in a lieu of sugar. Extra noodles, rice, or cream sauce could supplement a meat-free casserole. The *Fannie Farmer Baking Book* 

A mirror (opposite) in the Crouch family's home in Ledyard, Connecticut, reflects Thanksgiving in 1940—family around a loaded table. Pies stand at the ready. During the war, families still gathered for Thanksgiving, though many loved ones were overseas. The food was different, thanks to wartime shortages. Families had to use ration stamps (above, a stamp for meat items, good July-October 1945) and hard paper tokens (top, given as change when a purchase didn't exhaust a stamp's value) to gain access to rationed items, if the items were available.

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offered a recipe for "war cake," an almost unbelievable "eggless, butterless, milkless cake" of brown sugar, raisins, vegetable shortening, flour, spices, salt, and walnuts. The savior of the shortage-strained house-

wife was Betty Crocker. In 1945 Fortune magazine named her the country's second most popular woman (First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was first). As the editors of Fortune knew, Betty wasn't real. She was a character born of General Mills' marketing department. Betty had a huge following as she helped women uphold the government's Consumer Pledge for Total

Defense: "I will buy carefully. I will take good care of the things I have. I will waste nothing."

In booklets, newspaper columns and magazine articles, and on a radio show, Betty presented menus and recipes that enabled women to serve good-tasting, budget-conscious, nutritious meals. "At the end of the day," she said, "let us be sure we can say 'I worked for freedom today. I served at least one food from each of the basic seven food groups. I prepared the food I served with care. I wasted no food this day."

Mary Standish heeded Betty's hints when preparing her holiday dinner. Though chicken may have replaced turkey, the basic meat and vegetables were there. Of course, Mary's menu wasn't as extravagant as the ones featured in the Ladies' Home Journal. In 1942 the magazine suggested serving oyster cocktails, turkey with cornbread stuffing, giblet gravy, three vegetables, cranberry sauce, mince pie, rolls, butter, and coffee. The menu shrank in succeeding years. In 1943 tomato juice supplanted the oyster cocktail, Indian pudding took the place of pie, and coleslaw was one of the vegetables. The 1944 lineup was clam and tomato bouillon, turkey, creamed onions, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie.

If Mary was fortunate enough to buy the big items for her holiday meal, she probably lacked the little ones. Spices from foreign lands-cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, allspice, ginger, paprika, and others-had practically vanished. "If your turkey isn't spicy, blame it on Hitler," quipped an article in Indiana's Hammond Times.

While the bird roasted, young Mike Standish watched for arriving relatives' cars. He most likely didn't see many models made in 1942, the last year before auto plants switched over to military manufacturing. Most people had older cars-cars that often needed repairs for which parts and a fully staffed repair shop were hard to come by.

Keeping tires on a car was a challenge of its own. Rubber had been in short supply ever since Japan captured the source islands



E SPIRIT OF THANKSGIVING FILLS THE AIR ... It's Maxwell House Coffee Time!

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in Southeast Asia. It was vital in manufacturing planes and ships, however. "A Flying Fortress required half a ton of rubber," according to Ronald H. Bailey's *The Home Front: U.S.A.* To stretch limited rubber supplies, car owners were allowed to buy only five new tires per vehicle until the war ended. In June 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt asked the public to turn in all rubber items for recycling. The annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade was cancelled and its giant rubber balloons were shredded.

IKE STANDISH UNDERSTOOD the rubber shortage, but he may have wondered why all the fuss about tires. With gasoline rationing and a nationwide 35 mph Victory speed limit, driving was practically pointless anyway. No pleasure cruising was allowed, and drivers were limited to buying set amounts of gas per week based on their job or business needs. Some people simply stored their cars for the war's duration.

Watching for arrivals wasn't Mike's sole Thanksgiving duty. He was also in charge of keeping the furnace stoked to keep the guests warm. But even warmth was regulated. Fuel rationing forced most





homeowners to set their thermostats no higher than 65 degrees. To make matters worse, coal miners went on strike in 1943. The East suffered coal shortages until the government threatened to man the mines with soldiers and the strikers returned to work.

When Aunt Anne, Uncle James, and Granddad arrived, Anne hurried to help Mary and Millie in the kitchen. Anne brought lots of news to share. In the newspaper that morning she had found stories of homecomings, departures, and deaths. There were articles like this one published in Iowa shortly before Thanksgiving Day 1942: "Private Clarion Christensen has been killed in action at Guadalcanal, according to word received by the family.... Private Clarion was 20 years old."

Uncle James held forth on news from the front. Sitting at the table in 1942, he spoke of the Allied invasion of Africa. A year later he reviewed the Japanese naval defeat in Leyte Gulf. In 1944 he beamed about the liberation of Paris.

Granddad always mentioned FDR's commemoration of the day. Through the years Roosevelt's proclamations asked citizens to "solemnly express our dependence upon almighty God" and pray

At the Crouch house, a youngster checks on the cooking (opposite, top). The 1940 feast at his house was the kind wartime Americans would pine for, with a turkey at the center. Turkeys fattened on farms like this one in Iowa (top left). They ended up in groceries and butcher shops. At this shop (top right) in Norwich, Connecticut, they fetched 18 cents a pound in 1940. Mrs. Crouch (above, left, basting) paid about \$3.60 for her 20-pound bird. Roasting a turkey was the same as it is today. So was the eating! At the Finch home in Silver Spring, Maryland (above,

right), four coastguardsman sons did the heavy eating in 1942. Another son was overseas; a sixth, not visible, was a coast guard trainee. Americans yearned for a day when family members in uniform would be home to stay, as in this 1945 Maxwell House ad (opposite, center).

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that he "keep the United States" in his "holy protection." In many towns, several church congregations joined together for a sermon and hymns.

After dinner, the guests discussed lighter topics. The men sipped rationed whiskey and talked football. Pro football sorely missed the Detroit Lions and Cleveland Rams, which lost so many players to the war effort that they couldn't field teams. The Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Steelers were

decimated, too. But rather than cancel their seasons, they merged into one team—the Steagles—and kept playing.

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OLLEGE FOOTBALL WAS HURTING, TOO. On Thanksgiving Day 1944 the Miami Daily News-Record reported that "shorn of nearly all of its pre-war traditional glamour games, today's third Thanksgiving since Pearl Harbor presents a slim card of games for college football fans." These games included Utah State versus Utah, Missouri versus Kansas, and Wake Forest versus South Carolina—not exactly nationally known rivalries. Noticeable among wartime matchups were college units playing against teams of servicemen from US bases and training schools. In 1944 the Wisconsin State Journal ranked the top teams as Army, Ohio State, Randolph Field, Michigan, Iowa Pre-

The abundance at the Crouch's table—and at the kids' table, too (top)—would be just a memory once the war began. Soon, ration stamps like this 5-point meat coupon (above) would control access to whatever was left after America had fed its servicemen and helped feed those of other Allied nations.

MEAT, FATS, FISH, and CHEESES

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night. Servicemen attended as special guests. Mary decided to see *Road to Morocco*, the second Bing Crosby and Bob Hope road movie of many to follow.

saved the game.

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clash was about to be cancelled in

1943 but navy officials' objections

Football was just one of the diver-

sions available to the Standishes that

evening. There were radio broadcasts

to enjoy, including the adventure series

Jack Armstrong and the musical galas

Stage Door Canteen and The Fred War-

ing Show. Millie was one of thousands

nationwide who went to a dance that

By day's end the Standishes had overcome wartime obstacles to be together and eat a good meal. They knew their sacrifices were helping end the war more quickly. As Elsie Robinson expressed it in her *Tucson Daily Citizen* column on Thanksgiving Day 1942, "I'm going to be glad on this day. It won't be easy. I'll not do it well. And yet in spite of all the hell and strife, the dislocation of our normal life, I'm going to be glad...that I'm an American and...our spirit did not die!" \*

PATRICE CROWLEY's article on Victory Gardens appeared in our April 2009 issue. She writes from Camp Hill, Pennsylvania.

🛠 AMERICA IN WWII FLASHBACK 😽

## YOURS ... FOR A "HAPPY BLENDING"!

#### 1.

Gus Gobbler sat brooding And spoke of his plight, "I wouldn't mind roasting If they'd stuff me just right."

#### 2.

"Cheer up!" cried Friend Thelma "Take the frown off your face, Ma Johnson has bought you; As a cook ... she's an ace!"

#### 3.

With rare skill and "fixin's", With no fuss or muss, Ma blended a dressing Quite worthy of Gus.

Happy Blending's the secret Of great whiskey, too-And that is why CALVERT Will captivate you.

### Like turkey and trimmings, mince pie and ice cream,

Happy Blending makes CALVERT the whiskey supreme. So on Thanksgiving Day, serve this finest of blends-Your palate will thank you, and so will your friends.

## Clear Heads Calvert

### THE WHISKEY WITH THE "HAPPY BLENDING"

BLENDED WHISKEY Calvert "Reserve": 86.8 Proof-65% Grain Neutral Spirits...Calvert "Special": 86.8 Proof-721/2% Grain Neutral Spirits. Copr. 1941, Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City

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RESERVE

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CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP. 1941 AMERICA IN WWII COLLECTION