IN August of 1621, the Pilgrims commemorated their first harvest festival in the New World. Since arriving in December of 1620, 46 of the 102 who had arrived in the Mayflower had died. 1621 had been a year of difficult beginnings; however, they had had a bountiful fall. Governor Bradford declared a day of thanksgiving. They invited scores of the Wampanoag Indians who had helped them so much to dine with them. From that moment of humble gratitude came the national holiday of “Thanksgiving”.

When America sits down this year at 117 million family tables for Thanksgiving Dinner on November 25th, they participate in a feast that most likely includes food from a US agricultural co-op. Every Thanksgiving table in America features the uniquely American cranberry. Legend has it the Indians brought cranberries to the very first Thanksgiving with the Pilgrims. Since then, cranberries, whether they are fresh, frozen, sauce or jelly or as a juice are the one constant in a Thanksgiving Dinner. Americans ate 709 million pounds of cranberries in 2009.

The largest cranberry producer in the US is Ocean Spray, a co-operative of cranberry growers headquartered in Lakeville-Middleboro, Massachusetts. Founded by three growers in Massachusetts and one in New Jersey in 1930, Ocean Spray has grown to 600 cranberry growers with farms in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and other parts of Canada. Ocean Spray’s sales in 2009 amounted to $1.9 million.

**Potatoes**

Another American favorite that makes a special appearance for Thanksgiving are sweet potatoes. In 2009, Americans ate 1.8 billion pounds of sweet potatoes.

The centre of production for sweet potatoes in California is the town of Livingston in the abundant Central Valley. Production of sweet potatoes began there through the efforts of Japanese immigrant farmers at the turn of the century. Near Livingston those immigrant farmers established a 3,000 acre co-operative colony where they farmed sweet potatoes and other crops and raised orchards of many of the same products they had grown in Japan.

In 1910, farmers at the Yamato Colony created the first of a number of co-operatives. By 1957, they merged the two remaining co-ops to form the Livingston Farmers Association (LFA). Today, the LFA operates a major marketing co-op in Livingston, and ships hundreds of thousands of boxes of sweet potatoes around Thanksgiving. Though LFA was the first co-op to distribute sweet potatoes in the US, there are now grower co-ops in all the main states in the USA where sweet potatoes are produced.

But now let’s get to the main event on Thanksgiving — the ubiquitous turkey, with 45 million eaten on that one day. Turkeys are truly the American bird and they are the only breed of poultry native to the Western Hemisphere.

In almost every turkey-producing state there are co-ops of turkey growers determined to help their family farmers compete with the multi-national packing companies.

The most famous of these turkey co-operatives is Norbest, based in Utah. Founded in 1930 it is the oldest co-operative of its kind in the world and one of the top turkey marketing enterprises in the US. There are five million turkeys reared in Utah every year. Every Turkey in Utah comes from one of 55 different turkey grower co-ops. During the 2002 Winter Olympic Games held in Salt Lake City, Norbest donated cash and more than 50,000 pounds of turkey products.

Norbest made its national mark in 1936 when it presented a large turkey to President Franklin D. Roosevelt just before Thanksgiving. From that first presentation during the Depression the event has become a holiday tradition celebrated with every President.

Nowadays, the Thanksgiving turkey presented to the President in a White House ceremony is given a Presidential pardon. The turkey and its stand-in are then flown to Disneyland where they are the Grand Marshals of the Thanksgiving Parade. You will be proud to know that the first turkeys to gain a Presidential pardon were both from a co-operative. There are lots of other foods featured on the Thanksgiving table and many of them too would come from farmer co-operatives.

For the early Pilgrims that first year was replete with deaths and dismay. Yet, they huddled together in one building through a harsh winter. They planted the land together and farmed the land as one.

Everything they gained they shared. Without living co-operatively they would not have survived that first winter. And of course, as many of them were from rural England they remembered the harvest festival celebrated in the village church. It meant more to them in 1621 than any other year in their lives. That year “Thanksgiving” was born.