

**Many blessings ago-1621**

By Rebecca Brite

Though the meanings of many holidays celebrated in this country have been lost in the mazes of commercial America, the heritage surrounding Thanksgiving still rings through the din of cash registers and sales pitches.

Every school child learns the story of the first Thanksgiving: the Pilgrims' near-failure in the winter of 1620-21, ... the spring planting made successful through the aid of the Pemaquid Indian, Samoset... the three-day harvest festival with the Indians and the survival of the Plymouth, Mass., colony.

But as America sits down to still-bountiful tables on Thanksgiving, 1974, while world leaders gather to discuss their starving millions and famine creeps inexorably over Africa, perhaps a brief refresher course in American history is in order.

The bleakness of that first winter in Plymouth has been so romanticized as to sound more like a fairy tale than the agonizing fight for survival it surely must have been.

The school child learns that the Pilgrims lost half their number that winter, but how many adults remember there were only 102 colonists to begin with?

Disease caused the loss, the child is told, but writings from that time show that more than a few of the 47 who died took their own lives.

Women, dismayed at the prospect they faced, threw themselves from the Mayflower before the tiny ship had even

landed; their surviving sisters formed "suicide anonymous" groups to discourage others from following.

And that legendary landing at Plymouth Rock four days before Christmas, 1620; is the child told, does the parent remember, that the Mayflower floated in the Cape Cod waters for more than a month before the landing, while the Pilgrims and their companions decided if they really wanted to disembark on that god-foresaken piece of rock? Or that, after the landing, the ship stayed offshore all winter as the settlers vacillated between faith and despair, before finally deciding to stay?

The Mayflower sailed in the spring, leaving the Pilgrims to bury their dead and plant seeds above the graves, to conceal from neighboring Indians the decimation of the new colony.

Is it any wonder, after such a winter, that the bounty from that tragic planting should have occasioned a celebration so meaningful to Americans that it endures, nearly intact, after more than three and a half centuries?

One would hope the parallel is clear for America today. Few families may sacrifice their Thanksgiving dinners for world hunger this year and most will certainly complain about rising food costs.

But maybe some will perceive the poignancy of the contrast between plenty and deprivation, and realize that this year, perhaps as never before since that first year, there is reason to give thanks.

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