

## New Mexico Quarterly

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Volume 1 | Issue 3

Article 15

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1931

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### Recommended Citation

Van Arsdale, Elizabeth. "The Origin of Our Thanksgiving Turkey and Its Use by the American Indians Before the Coming of the White Man." *New Mexico Quarterly* 1, 3 (1931). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol1/iss3/15>

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# The Origin of Our Thanksgiving Turkey and Its Use by the American Indians Before the Coming of the White Man

By ELIZABETH VAN ARSDALE

THERE is a great deal of misconception current with regard to the turkey. Where did it come from? Who were the first to use and domesticate it? It is certainly a truly American product, because archaeology has shown that there are instances of its use in America in prehistoric times, and it was used in some way by almost all of the Indians on this continent long before Columbus ventured to sail westward.

The turkey family is a native to this continent only, and is here confined to North America and to Central America. The turkey formerly occurred wild from southern Mexico to New England and Canada, and from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic seaboard, but now is rarely found north of Virginia in the eastern region of this country because it has been so persistently hunted as to be almost exterminated in that area.

The turkey used to be ranked as a separate family, but is now regarded by some authorities as the only natural American representative of the pheasant family. There are two main species of the turkey, of which the *Mealeagris gallopavo* has the widest range in North America. There are five main varieties now recognized: The Florida turkey, Merriam's turkey, the Rio Grande turkey, the American wild turkey, and the type not found within the United States, the Yucatan Ocellated turkey. The turkey has a handsome plumage with a bronze luster, a naked carunculated head, and whitish tips to the upper tail coverts and tail feathers in the typical variety (that of Mexico) from which our domesticated bird is derived. The northern va-

rieties are to be distinguished by the chestnut tips to the tail coverts and tail feathers. The Yucatan bird is considerably smaller and has a very brilliant plumage. The domesticated varieties display a greater range of color such as buff, slate, or pure white.

The origin of our common "Thanksgiving Turkey" is very interesting and quite surprising; tracing its lineage back to the court of Montezuma. It seems to be a common concept that the bird was first obtained by the settlers from the Indians of the Atlantic coastal region, but this is not the case, as it has already been domesticated in Europe for almost a century previous to the establishment of the New England settlements. The turkey had come into Europe as early as the sixteenth century. When the Spanish conquerors invaded Mexico, they found the turkey already domesticated by the Aztecs. It is somewhat doubtful to what extent the turkeys were used as an article of food by the Indians, but there is record of a flock of tame turkeys which were used to supply the larger birds of prey in the aviary of Montezuma with food. But at any rate the turkey found favor with the appetites of the Spaniards and specimens were immediately sent home to the court of Spain. It is said that Fra Agapida, Cortez' own confessor, propagated it while still in Mexico, and that the great conqueror was exceedingly proud of the flock he carried back to Castile and Aragon. These birds were at first a great rarity and were very valuable, even taking their place as an important item in the dowry of a princess. Everyone liked the turkey so much that it soon became very plentiful and even spread as far as China. By 1530, turkeys were known and enjoyed even in England, and by 1541, it was decreed that an ecclesiastic could have "only one to a dish"—an interesting comment on the eating capacities of the clergy. It is recorded that by 1555 the birds were cheap enough for the common people to afford them.

## OUR THANKSGIVING TURKEY [ 277 ]

The name "turkey" has no relation to the land that also bears it. It was mistakenly supposed when first introduced into Europe that the turkey was a species of guinea fowl, then a Portuguese importation from Africa, called the "Turky" from a rude imitation of its raucous cry. Another theory as to the origin of the name is that the bird was erroneously supposed to have been brought from the land of Turkey.

In the interval between its introduction into Europe and its re-introduction into the New World, the turkey passed through several changes and was improved in various ways—made larger and the like. And it was this improved form of the turkey that the early settlers brought over here soon after their arrival here. Of course, there is no doubt that they also hunted the wild turkey to a great degree as it is still hunted to this day in the regions where it abounds. But it is generally conceded that within a short time after the settlement of the eastern coast those people were in possession of flocks of domesticated European turkeys.

As has been indicated before, nearly all regions of this continent, with the exception of the Pacific coast had the wild turkey, and almost without exception the Indians of this continent made some use of that fowl. It supplied a great many needs: It was an article of food, its feathers were used to make feather mantles and robes, as well as in the decoration of garments, its bones were also used for whistles or sometimes for needles. It served as a model for various art forms, as well as playing an appreciable part in the religion and the ritual of the Indians.

Each tribe had its own name for the bird. The Creeks called it *Sulagi*; the Yuchi, *Ya ti*; and the Timcuus, *Apokola hasome*. It was also intimately connected with the Cheyennes. The Cheyenne tribal sign was made by drawing the right index finger several times across the left forefinger, which perhaps arose from the practice of severing the fin-

gers of the prisoners of war, but some authorities say that the sign is intended to indicate "stripe people" or "striped arrow people," referring to the fact that the Cheyenne usually feathered their arrows with the striped feathers of the wild turkey. This agrees with the interpretation of the name for Cheyenne in several different Indian languages.

The *Jesuit Relations* are full of mention of the wild turkey and give testimony to its plentifulness, for example these quotations. Binneteau, writing from the Illinois country in 1699, "Game is plentiful, such as ducks, geese, bustards, swans, cranes, and turkeys." Marquette wrote in his journal in the years 1673-77, "We were delayed for three days, during which Pierre killed a deer, three bustards, and three turkeys, which were very good." "We started with a favoring wind and reached the river of the portage, which was frozen to a depth of six inches, there was more snow there than elsewhere, as well as more tracks of animals and turkeys." . . . "When we reached the parallel of 41-28' following the same direction we found that the turkeys had taken the place of game." Claude Dablon wrote (1672-74) "and turkeys are found there (along the St. Louis river) in greater numbers than elsewhere. For a distance of eighty leagues, I did not pass a quarter of an hour without seeing one." . . . "The turkeys strut about on all sides." . . . "We entered this first stream, which flows from a lake, there we saw two turkeys perched on a tree, male and female, resembling perfectly those of France—the same size, the same color, and the same cry." . . . "The lake where Allouez saw the wild turkeys is Lake Poygan, the eastern arm of which is called Lake Winneconne."

In the anonymous *Relation* of 1661, there is this mention of the turkey, "Bears, wild boars, leopards, and lions, inhabit those wildernesses much more than man; while the turkeys and fowls fly in flocks as starlings do in France, and the cock's crow is heard in the woods just as in our villages." In Bonnecamp's *Relation* of 1710, "We always kept close to

## OUR THANKSGIVING TURKEY [ 279

the shore. It is quite regular, straight, but moderately high, and furnishes little shelter; in many places it is mere rock, covered with a few inches of soil. Lake Erie is not deep. Its waters have neither the transparency nor the coolness of those of Lake Ontario. It is at this lake that I saw for the first time the wild turkeys; they differ in no way from our domestic turkeys." These accounts show the prevalence of the wild turkey among the lands inhabited by the Indians before they were filled by the white settlers. It is therefore, a natural thing that the Indians should have made such extensive use of the bird in the many ways in which they did.

Among many tribes the turkey held a prominent place as an article of food. Allouez wrote from Illinois of the Indians of that region, "They live on Indian corn and other fruits of the earth, which they cultivate, like the other savages on the prairies. They eat fourteen kinds of roots, which they find in the prairies, they made me eat some and I found them good and very sweet. They gather from trees and plants forty-two different kinds of fruits, all of which are excellent, and catch twenty-five sorts of fish—among them the eel. They hunt the roebuck, the bison, the turkey, and the wildcat." In another *Relation* entitled "Of the Mission of the Angels to the Attiwandarons or the peoples of the Neutral Nation" in the neighborhood of Lake Erie, "The food and clothing of this nation do not greatly differ from those of our Hurons: They have Indian corn, beans, and squashes in equal plenty; the fishing likewise seems equal, as regards the abundance of fish, of which some species are found in one region that are not in another, the people of the Neutral Nation greatly excel in hunting stags, cows, wild cats, wolves, black beasts, beaver, and other animals of which the skin and the flesh are valuable. The supply of meat has been great there this year on account of the heavy snow and they have had this year more than three

feet. They have also multitudes of wild turkeys, which go in flocks through the fields and woods."

A later traveler, in the first half of the nineteenth century, also mentions some instances in which the turkey was used as food by the Indians, especially the Wallapais.

Some of the Indians had domesticated the turkey. Stevenson, in a paper on the "Ethnobotany of the Zuñi Indians," says: "The blossoms of this plant are fed to the newly hatched turkeys, the *a wan sa pipi a wa i tonakia* or great young fowls all eating food." In this case, however, the turkeys are raised less as an article of food as for their feathers, which rank in equal importance with eagle feathers in ceremonial importance." Another implied instance of domestication is recorded by Du Pratz in *Histoire de la Louisiane*, "My slave told me that in her nation and in her native village they have them (turkeys) and have raised them without more care than is required for young chickens." This refers to the Natchez Indians.

Fewkes, on this question of the domestication of the turkey, says in "Two Summers' Work in Pueblo Ruins," "The numerous turkey bones which were found do not necessarily mean that this bird was used as food by the ancient sedentary peoples of Arizona. We are told by the historian of Coronado's expedition that the Pueblos had domesticated fowls, but they were probably from which as at present were obtained the feathers used in ceremonials. It would hardly seem possible that birds whose feathers were thus used would be eaten, although parallels to such a usage occur in the religious rites of many peoples. And there is every probability that the wild turkey's flesh was eaten."

It is certain that the turkey played an important part in the diet of nearly all of the Indians on this continent—with, of course, minor variations and exceptions. In addition to this, the turkey was also used in the making of articles of clothing. To quote from Kreiger's article on

## OUR THANKSGIVING TURKEY [ 281

"American Indian Costumes," "Owing to the perishable nature of the material, most of the evidences of artwork in feathers have disappeared from the northern continent; but, on the authority of the old historians and the testimony of a few precious examples still remaining it is certain that these were used from one extremity of the continent to the other. The Virginian Indians made robes of turkey feathers." . . . "In Mexico and in South America ornamental fabrics were obtained by overlaying cloth with feathers. Throughout native America, featherwork constituted one of the most characteristic developments of Indian dress, extending, as it does, from the Arctic Eskimoan tribes to the scantily clothed tribes of South America. Head dresses, skirts, cloaks, and mantles predominate, while feathers in mosaics were badges of distinction. Mantles of turkey feathers were plaited in the Pueblo area in the southeastern states, along the Gulf of Mexico and eastward to the territory of the Iroquois."

A priest who accompanied the Iberville expedition, in 1700, mentions that the Indians about Natches wore a robe of muskrat skins or turkey feathers. From these and other recorded instances it would seem justifiable to conclude that feathers were an integral part of the wearing apparel of the Indians and it is certain that the feathers of the turkey and the eagle were those most commonly used.

Many stories and myths of the Indians deal with the turkey. These stories fall in the usual categories, such as tales in which the animals are personalized, regarded as a divinity or ruling spirit or the like. Other stories account for special physical peculiarities. The Seminoles have a story of the turkey who was once king of the birds and who could fly like the eagle. There is also a Hitchiti story about a "Strange Turkey who catches People and Carries Them up to the Sky." The turkey as a figure in myth and story is not confined to any one group of Indians, but enters into



almost all of the mythology of whatever peoples that came into contact with the bird.

The turkey is not always separated from the turkey buzzard and the buzzard in the customs and usages of these tribes. This seems to be more especially the case when the turkey is not used for food. The mortuary customs of some Indians along the lower Mississippi valley pertain more to the buzzard than to the turkey, but are nevertheless of interest. Every village of any size had a "bone house" or *ha na katci*, which was occupied by an official known as the "buzzard picker" or *oc hatcna*, whose duty it was to tend a fire which was kept burning continually within the house. About a year after the death of a head chief or any of the village war chiefs, of whom there were five, the buzzard man was required to dig their bones up and these bones were then wrapped in a new and checkered mat and burnt in the lodge.

We may, perhaps, infer from another legend, that of the Seneca Indians, that the turkey was in some way used as a healing medicine. In the story, "The Seven Sisters who Produced Wampum," one of the characters is commanded by his mother to get some turkey oil from a newly killed gobbler in order to rub it upon the raw flesh of a wound as an aid in healing. This is perhaps an indication that such oil was used in the medicinal practices of these Indians.

The turkey is sometimes the subject of taboos and prohibitions. For example, fish, pork, chicken, and all kinds of birds and eggs were tabooed as food by the Havasupai Indians. This would imply the placing of the turkey on the forbidden list.

James Mooney, in "Myths of the Cherokee" gives another instance of the turkey figuring in taboo. "On account of the red throat appendage of the turkey, somewhat resembling the goitrous growth known in the South as "kernels" or *dule tsi* in the Cherokee language, the feathers of this bird are not worn by ball players; neither is the neck allowed to

## OUR THANKSGIVING TURKEY [ 283

be eaten by children of sick persons, under fear that the growth of kernels will be the result." (Page 285). This is, of course, an example from modern times after the Indian has been subjected to the influence of the white man for several centuries, but such a practice might well have had a counterpart in earlier times.

A nineteenth century traveler in the Plains records that the Indians of the place where he happened to make his camp refused to eat turkey, holding the belief that if they did eat it they would become cowardly. Thus there are examples of what might be called the negative use of the turkey by the Indians.

Another interesting phase of the use of the turkey by the American Indians is the place it occupies in their religion and in their customs. In the *Relation of Le Jeune*, written in 1637, from Huronia there is recounted an interesting instance of this. A contagious epidemic of some kind of fever had broken out and the Jesuit fathers worked very hard to save the lives and souls of the Indians, but they were unable to check the sickness and the converts increasingly turned away from the Christian religion. The Indians resumed again their old rites; the sorcerers were active and parties went about singing. One of the singers sang a song beginning with these words: "Come great Arendiouave, come, behold the day beginning to dawn." After this song had been sung several times there began an inspection and tour of the cabins by this medicine man. At his arrival a profound silence prevailed; a captain marched before him holding in one hand the bow of Tehorenhaegnon (a medicine man from another village, who had sent on his emblem of authority as a sign of the power possessed by his substitute) and holding in the other hand a kettle filled with mysterious water which he sprinkled over the sick. He also carried a turkey's wing with which he gravely fanned the sick at a distance, after giving them something to drink. He performed the same ceremony at every cabin and after

having inspired all the Indians with hope he withdrew. "On the 21st, Saissarion returned to the Andiatæ. At his departure taking into partnership with himself and Tehorentaegnon one Khioytenstia and one Iandatassa, to whom he taught the secrets of his art, and to them communicated his power—as a token of which he left them each a turkey's wing, adding that henceforth their dreams would prove true." But in spite of all this ceremony the deaths continued and the priests were so zealous that finally they were able to successfully resume their work of conversion and the medicine men were forced to give up their positions. "Moreover, he did so well that those gentlemen, the substitutes of Tehorenaegnon, were obliged to throw aside their turkey wings and renounce their office."

In the *Relation of Bonneteau*, dated 1696-1702, he writes that: "In public they perform a hundred mummeries full of impiety; and talk to the skins of animals and of dead birds as divinities. Every day they sing songs in honor of their little manitous, as they call them (a kind of private fetish made from feathers and the like)."

*Le Jeune's Relation of 1836* contains a further account of such practices. "*Whether there are Sorcerers among the Hurons?* There is therefore, some foundation for the belief that the devil occasionally gives them assistance and reveals himself to them for some temporary profit for their eternal damnation: Let us see some examples of it. Onditachia is renowned among the Tobacco Nation, like Jupiter among the heathens of former times, from having the rains, the winds, and the thunder in his hands. This thunder is by his account, a man like the turkey cock; the sky is his palace, and he retires there when it is serene; he comes to earth to get his supply of adders and serpents, and of all they call Oke, when the clouds are rumbling; the lightnings occur in proportion as he extends or folds his wings. If the uproar is a little louder, it is his little ones who accompany him, and help him to make a noise as best they can. Raising the ob-

## OUR THANKSGIVING TURKEY [ 285

jection to him who told me the tale, 'whence, then, comes dryness?' he replied that it came from the caterpillars, over whom Ondiachiae had no power. And asking him 'Why the lightning struck trees?' 'It is there,' said he, 'that it lays in its supply.' 'Why does it burn cabins, why does it kill men?' 'Chieske?'—'How do I know?'

The Hopi, those descendants of the Arizona cliff dwellers, who have to this day preserved many survivals of their ancient worship, make a very extensive use of the feathers of the turkeys in all of their ceremonies. There is a very complex calendar embracing originally over sixty ceremonies. All these rites are, in general, directed toward the end of placating and propitiating their gods in order to gain their desires. There are several different types of worship: The katchinas or the personation of the clans that people the underworld; the elder brothers, who are personated by deputies, or descendants of the first offspring of the cultus hero and the maid, and finally the worship connected with the cultus maid of the women's societies, who dance with baskets.

There is a wide variety of sacred paraphernalia—costumes for the dancers, prayerstick offerings, and the several sacred altars. In all these feathers are used and the feather of the turkey is the one most plentifully used.

The Hopi believe that the life after death is similar to the life on earth and the spirits of the dead return to earth either to bless or vex mankind, they are called Katchinas and a large part of their ritual is devoted to the representation of these beings. One of these Katchinas represents Koyona, or the turkey. The costume is a green colored helmet, with long, extended beak and red wattles, which are made in modern times of red flannel cloth. The tails and wings are made of feathers attached to the body with gum. The man who puts on this costume performs a dance in imitation of the gait of the turkey. It is interesting to note as a com-

parison that the Creek Indians also had a turkey dance called *pin-e-bun-gan*.

Turning from religion to art, we find that the turkey has been represented in many ways in many mediums ever since prehistoric times. For example, there has been found a prehistoric plate from the Mimbres valley showing a very clever drawing of a strutting turkey. There also have been found cave drawings of the turkey dating back to that far.

In more recent remains found in Florida, there have been discovered small models of this bird. This mortuary pottery, as it is called, is rather new looking, uncovered near the surface, crude and rough in form, construction, and finish. They are mostly figurines modeled with the unaided fingers.

All this Indian lore and its use dating back to prehistoric times is the heritage of our common Thanksgiving turkey. It is usually regarded as a purely colonial contribution to the table, but we have seen that it originally came from Mexico, after it had been used for perhaps several thousand years already by the Indians of this continent. Thus, when we eat our feast at Thanksgiving time, we are celebrating a truly American feast with a purely American bird as the chief dish.