Thanksgiving today is a very important holiday in the United States. Families get together and eat a special Thanksgiving meal, usually with turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn, cranberry sauce, squash, and pumpkin pie. Many families share what they are thankful for in their lives.

The traditional story of Thanksgiving is about the Pilgrims who came from Europe to settle in the “New Land” in 1620, in a place which is now Plymouth, Massachusetts. Their first winter was very difficult and many Pilgrims died. The Native American tribe that already lived in that area, called the Wampanoag, became friends with the Pilgrims, taught them about growing corn and about surviving off the land. The Pilgrims and Wampanoag had a big feast together to celebrate the harvest and their friendship. That was the first Thanksgiving dinner.

But this traditional story is not very accurate. The group of Puritans (the real name for Pilgrims) **did** come from England on the ship called the Mayflower in 1620. They were a group breaking away from the Church of England, and wanted to settle in a new land to practice their religion and also to make money. However, the Puritans were not always kind and respectful of the Native Americans who lived there. They viewed them as lesser people. The Puritans **did** have a very difficult time during the first year, and many died. At one point some Wampanoag **did** visit the Puritans, and **did** show them how to use fish to grow corn. In November of 1621, the Puritans were happy with their big harvest, and they celebrated by shooting guns. The Wampanoag leader heard this and was worried they were starting a war. He went with 90 of his men to investigate. When they saw it was a celebration, they joined the Puritans at a feast, and even went hunting to provide meat for the feast. This feast actually happened, and that is what Americans know as the First Thanksgiving dinner.

However, the bigger picture of the history between European settlers and Native Americans is not included in this positive story of friendship and a meal. In general, the arrival of the European settlers brought disease and decimation to Native Americans. In fact, the Puritans were at war with the Wampanoag 30 years after that one feast. The one shared meal in 1621 does not at all represent the true relationship between Native Americans and European settlers. The European settlers took their land, killed them with war and disease, forced them onto reservations, forced their children to go to European schools to forget their culture, did not treat them with basic human rights, and tried to destroy their culture and traditions. For most Native Americans today, Thanksgiving is a reminder about the hundreds of years of discrimination and repression that started when the European settlers arrived, not a nice story of friendship.

Abraham Lincoln officially started a national holiday called Thanksgiving in 1863 during the Civil War when the country was very divided. He wanted to focus on positive things and how to be grateful. The 1621 story was brought back to show a peaceful gathering between two groups. For more than 150 years, school children in the USA have learned about the friendly dinner with the “Pilgrims” and the “Indians” without knowing the true history. Recently, more people are aware of the real history about Thanksgiving, and many teachers try to explain this to children.

**Vocabulary:**

harvest: gathering crops at the end of the growing season

accurate: correct

settle: to move to a place and make it your home

lesser: lower than

decimation: when almost everyone in a group is destroyed

repression: using force and laws to control a group of people

feast: a BIG meal

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Why did the Puritans settle in America?

2. Who was already living in America in 1620?

3. What is the “traditional story” of Thanksgiving?

4. What things are actually TRUE about the traditional story?

5. What is **not** included in the traditional story of Thanksgiving?

6. How is the traditional story of Thanksgiving NOT accurate?

7. How do many Native Americans feel about Thanksgiving?

8. Why have children learned the traditional story of Thanksgiving for so many years?

9. What do you think?