



November 2, 2004

Holiday Traditions Bring Friends and Family Together

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompass

The first Thanksgiving might have taken place in Virginia if Pilgrims landed where they had been granted territory. Instead, Plymouth Harbor, on the western side of Massachusetts' Cape Cod Bay always gets the Thanksgiving's spotlight because that's where the Pilgrims went ashore in December 1620, after a voyage across the stormy Atlantic.

Eleven months later, in November 1621, the Pilgrims served what is believed to have been the first Thanksgiving dinner, a three-day feast joined by Native Americans in the area.

Nowadays, the third Thursday in November has become a time for food, family, friends, football – and thanks. Most Americans celebrate the holiday in a home setting. But, for more authenticity, consider parking your RV at the [Boston/Cape Cod KOA](#). The campground can serve as a base for exploring [Plimoth Plantation](#) (using the original spelling), 14 miles away, which recreates the era of Pilgrim settlement.

Besides admission to a museum that features a 1627 Pilgrim village and the Mayflower II, a 1957 replica of the legendary original ship, Plimoth Plantation offers visitors a Victorian, 19th century-style Thanksgiving dinner (sold out for 2004) and a Thanksgiving Day buffet. It's all part of a month long celebration, starting in mid-October, that includes actors dressed in period customs and speaking in Old English as well as Native Americans recounting 17th century history from their perspective.

Cape Cod KOA manager Ron Frederick said "a few hardy souls" occupy camp sites in November.

The campground stays open until December 1. Some RVers driving through New England to catch the final touch of fall color drop in. "They're surprised to find we're still open," Frederick said.

If the thought of Massachusetts in November chills your bones, consider heading to a major gathering spot for RV snowbirds: [Okeechobee KOA](#) in Florida (the largest in the system with 700 sites) where an annual Thanksgiving potluck brings a feeling of family to people far from their cold weather origins.

Although the setting may appear non-traditional, the Okeechobee retirement community evokes a warm Thanksgiving feeling, too, according to Wendy Woodman, general manager of the Okeechobee KOA.

For snowbirds, who start returning in October, "the tradition we have here is we do a Thanksgiving potluck (for) our residents – snowbirds as well as anyone in the campground who happens to be here for the weekend."

The campground provides turkeys and asks volunteers to provide other dinner items.

Several women donate the use of their ovens to cook the turkeys. Other groups decorate tables at a large convention center where the dinner is served.

"We have a wonderful volunteer support group here with residents who have been coming back year-after-year," Woodman said.

"Some have permanent homes here, some are seasonal 3-4 month campers, but they volunteer for many different activities in the campground."

Woodman said about 300 persons attended the 2003 Thanksgiving dinner.

"It's one of the first gatherings when these people come back. It's like family, and that's why we do it because they've been here for so many years. This is their second home," Woodman said.

Nan Gump, a nine-year resident of Okeechobee, agreed that sociability helps residents adapt.

"You have to like to be around people because we're like family," she said.

Gump and her late husband were Ohio residents. Fishing originally attracted him to Florida. The Gumps were snowbirds for two years before becoming permanent residents.

"This KOA is just a special place," Gump said.

"We all look after each other – and it's not just Thanksgiving. Christmas, New Year's Day, St. Patrick's: we always have something going on," she said.

Joe and Nancy Turner celebrate Thanksgiving at Okeechobee in a different way.

"I'm a retired chef, and that's one of my favorite dinners to cook," Joe Turner said. "We always have a group at our place."

When the Turners retired, they were living in northern Indiana but had temporarily made Michigan their retirement home.

They purchased a pickup truck and a trailer and heard about Okeechobee from people in Indiana.

"We said, 'where in the heck is Okeechobee, Florida?' We made reservations for January. We planned to travel about eight months throughout the U.S., but we're still here," he said.

"We've been here five years and really like it," Turner said.

The community camaraderie banishes holiday blues, he said.

"You always have someone to be with here -- maybe it's Christmas or Thanksgiving. You never feel alone; there's always someone to pick up the strays.

"It's just a very festive park," Turner said.

A few Thanksgiving food facts

- In 2003, about 274 million turkeys were raised. An estimated 46 million birds were eaten at Thanksgiving, according to the National Turkey Federation.
- 97 percent of Americans surveyed by NTF eat turkey at Thanksgiving
- More than 40 million green bean casseroles are served at Thanksgiving, according to Scripps Howard News Service.

[Newsletter Archives](#)

© 2004, Kampgrounds of America, Inc.