



NOV 29

A British take on an American holiday

Alexandra Goodwin

Back in August, I started my junior year at UMD, only to be asked a week later by numerous classmates what I was planning on doing for Thanksgiving.

In England, we don't celebrate the holiday, but the mass media, television and Hollywood means the holiday is well known to us. And with my first extended period of living in America came the excitement of experiencing my first Thanksgiving.

Friends were initially very keen to host myself and the other exchange students at their houses, what could be more within the thanksgiving spirit than bringing back a British student with no family or thanksgiving plans? However, as November approached, the novelty had worn off and all the invites were suddenly not mentioned again. Instead, classmates started asking "What are you doing for thanksgiving?" and when they were met with "oh, nothing yet," they responded with an awkward "oh, that's a shame..."

And so it became a joke within the group of exchange students for who did, or did not have, Thanksgiving plans. It was a race to the finish to find someone to host all of us. Eventually, whether it be a week before thanksgiving or two days before, we all had plans orientating around the Duluth area. Myself and another British student were off to a Med-Chem professor's house with other Indian and Chinese students.

We awoke on Thursday morning, not wholly understanding the origins of the holiday, nor why it was so popular. In fact, as skeptical Brits we are quite convinced it is a holiday built around celebrating the oppressive actions of the British immigrants that arrived in the 1700s towards the Native Americans. The notion of thanks and friendship between these two groups is certainly not as the holiday necessarily portrays.

Despite this, we whole-heartedly bought into the idea of a Christmas dinner a month early, especially as snow lay on the ground. We were determined to buy into the American ideal, and watched the Minnesota Vikings lose to the Detroit Lions as our first pumpkin pie cooked in the oven. Once it was ready, we hopped in the car and drove to our host's house.

The dinner was by no means traditional. There was no large table set up, or family members circulating around the array of wine and beer. Instead, it was a mash up of American, Chinese and Indian cuisines as a buffet, with 20 individuals who did not previously know one another. Awkward chitchat slowly flowed more easily as the first alcoholic beverages were consumed. Of course, the under-21s did not drink, which was an odd concept. In the UK the legal drinking age is 18, but a glass of wine at Christmas or for a holiday toast was more than socially acceptable, even as young as 13. Despite this, four hours had passed and I'd consumed enough pumpkin pie to carry me through to next November.

No thanks were given, no board games played, and no Uncle drank too much and discussed the election. It was a lovely evening, with good food, but it was by no means traditional.

However, 15 exchange students from countries varying from England, Germany, Sweden and Africa got together on the Saturday for a massive 'friendsgiving.' These individuals are essentially my family whilst I'm out in the States, and it felt far more traditionally grounded. We cooked for a total of four hours, with various individuals in the kitchen, desperately proud of their cranberry sauce or lemon cheesecake. Board games, international music and giant jenga with a steady flow of wine produced what felt far more like the holiday we'd all heard about. And, of course, we ate so much we couldn't walk or breathe afterwards.

Unfortunately, we quickly learned 'Black Friday' is almost as big as Thanksgiving itself. To hear that shops now also opened on the Thursday to begin their sales was truly disappointing. America seems to push the ideals of family time and togetherness, whilst in reality people planned their holidays around their shopping trips. Has the 21st Century really become this driven by greed and consumerism?

The holiday is culturally different to Europe, and I won't pretend to understand how it truly came about, or why it remains to be so popular. It essentially felt like Christmas day, without the English mince pies of Christmas pudding. Having said this, the Saturday I spent with my 'UMD family' did seem to resonate some of the qualities Thanksgiving represents. We were grateful to be together, eating a warm meal in a beautiful place. I am sure that from now on, I will be making a note of the holiday. Despite its flaws, any opportunity to give thanks to families and friends, and acknowledge our privilege in society is a day that I am happy to participate in.



Alexandra Goodwin

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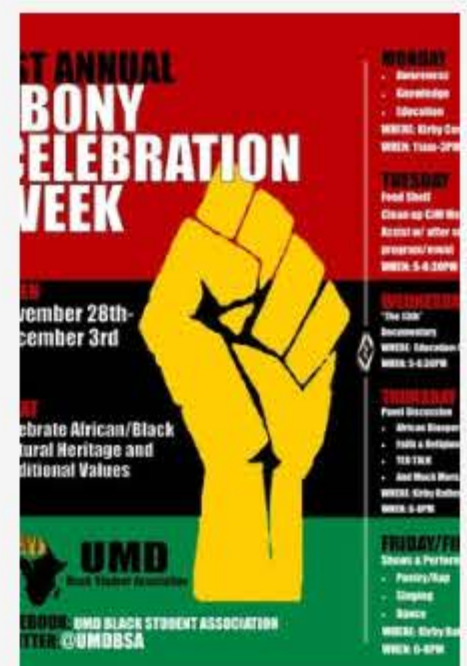


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