

## Thanksgiving - A Day of Mourning

For most people in the United States, Thanksgiving is a feast day celebrating the Pilgrim's survival of the grim conditions they weathered for the first few years upon their arrival on the shores of New England.

However, for many Native Americans, Thanksgiving is a day of mourning. Their remembrance of those first few years differs sharply from the Pilgrims' accounts and from the presentation of this history in textbooks.

The first official "Day of Thanksgiving" was proclaimed by Governor Winthrop of The Massachusetts Bay colony in 1637, seventeen years after the Pilgrims came ashore in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Their survival that first winter was largely due to the theft of corn from the Wampanoag Indian burial ground, commemorated to this day with a plaque at Corn Hill in Truro, Massachusetts.

According to the Wampanoag version of this history, the Thanksgiving proclamation was issued to celebrate the safe return of men from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who had gone to Mystic, Connecticut to participate in a battle that led to the massacre of over 700 Pequot women, children and men.

Each Thanksgiving, the United American Indians of New England (UAIN) and their supporters gather on Coles Hill in Plymouth, Massachusetts to remember the history as it has been handed down through their Native American culture. In their words, it is a history of "genocide, theft of lands, and never ending repression."

The UAIN commemoration has taken its place in the growing Indian rights movement that, like many current rights movements, found its origin in the nineteen-sixties rights revolution. Inspired by the civil rights movement, the American Indian Movement (AIM) burst on the scene with the seizure of Alcatraz Island in 1968, followed by the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1972. They organized a "Trail of Broken Treaties" to highlight Indian grievances against the federal government.

On February 27, 1973 AIM members took over buildings in the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in the heart of the Pine Ridge Reservation. This was the place where, in December 1890, hundreds of Ogala Sioux were massacred by the US cavalry. Their intention was to highlight problems with the

tribal government. What followed was a 71 day siege by Federal Marshals, the US Army and the National Guard.

Learn more about the siege and its bloody end from the perspective of AIM leader Russell Means, who organized the take over of Wounded Knee:

[http://www.russellmeans.com/read\\_02.html](http://www.russellmeans.com/read_02.html)

and from the perspective of the US marshals who took part in it.

<http://www.usmarshals.gov/history/wounded-knee/index.html>

Though less militant today, the wider movement continues to organize for better living conditions and employment and educational opportunities on Indian reservations. It continues to challenge racist native caricatures, such as those used by sports teams, and works to free its political prisoners. These include Leonard Peltier, the AIM member who was convicted – many say mistakenly -- of killing two FBI agents during a shoot out at the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1975. The movement also continues to confront the dominant culture with its version of the “settling” of the North American Continent. UAINÉ’s Day of Mourning is such a confrontation.

The National Day of Mourning began in 1970 when a Wampanoag man, Wamsutta Frank James, was asked to speak at an official Massachusetts state dinner celebrating the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pilgrim landing. However, instead of writing a speech that reflected the Pilgrim’s account of the holiday, he wrote a speech from the Wampanoag perspective that the Massachusetts officials refused to allow him to give.

For many years, the Day of Mourning took place without much interference from the Town of Plymouth. However in 1997, as the annual march through the town was beginning, state and local police blocked the street to stop the procession. When the marchers tried to get through the police line an altercation erupted which led to the arrest of 25 demonstrators. The police claimed that UAINÉ did not have a permit to demonstrate. UAINÉ claimed that they did not need a permit to walk on their ancestral land.

The American Civil Liberties Union successfully defended those arrested. A year after the arrests were made a settlement was reached with the Town of Plymouth that provided for:

- • The right of the United American Indians of New England to demonstrate on Cole's Hill above Plymouth Rock and to march through Plymouth on the National Day of Mourning in perpetuity without the requirement of a permit.
- The dropping of all charges against the Plymouth 25 defendants.
- The payment by the Town of Plymouth of \$100,000 to the Metacom Education Fund to be used, among other things, to promote the true history of Native Americans. Two plaques were to be placed in the town, one on Cole's Hill commemorating the National Day of Mourning (see footnote for the text), and one in Plymouth's Post Office Square recalling the history of Metacom (also known as King Philip), whose head was posted on a pike in that square for 25 years after he was killed by the British for leading a rebellion against the colonists (see footnote).

In its statement announcing the settlement UAINÉ proclaimed,

"Plymouth has agreed to make the truth part of its celebration of the pilgrim myth of thanksgiving. Under the terms of this agreement, we will have a number of important opportunities to address the lies and inaccuracies about "thanksgiving" and the history of indigenous peoples that have been disseminated not only in Plymouth but also throughout the country. We are confident that this agreement represents a tremendous victory for the struggle of Native people to have our voices heard and respected."

## **Footnotes**

### **Text of Plaque commemorating Day of Mourning:**

"Since 1970, Native Americans have gathered at noon on Cole's Hill in Plymouth to commemorate a National Day of Mourning on the US Thanksgiving holiday. Many Native Americans do not celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims and other European settlers. To them, Thanksgiving Day is a reminder of the genocide of millions of their people, the theft of their lands, and the relentless assault on their culture. Participants in a National Day of Mourning honor Native ancestors and the struggles of Native peoples to survive today. It is a day of remembrance and spiritual connection as well as a protest of the racism and oppression which Native Americans continue to experience."

**Text of King Philip Plaque:**

“After the Pilgrims’ arrived, Native Americans in New England grew increasingly frustrated with the English settler’s abuse and treachery. Metacomet (King Philip), a son of the Wampanoag sachem know as the Massasoit (Ousamequin), called upon all Native people to unite to defend their homelands against encroachment. The resulting “King Philip’s War” lasted from 1675-1676. Metacomet was murdered in Rhodes Island in August 1676 and his body was mutilated. His head was impaled on a pike and displayed near this site for more than 20 years. One hand was sent to Boston, the other to England. Metacomet’s wife and son, along with their families of may of the Native American combatants, were sold into slavery in the West Indies by the English victors.”