Ohio raises millions of turkeys

Thanksgiving in many ways is an agricultural celebration. A time when the harvest is done and families have time to gather and share their many blessings.

The modern Thanksgiving celebration in the United States originated with Lammas, a British celebration of an abundant wheat crop. On this day, farmers attended the Loaf Mass and brought loaves of bread as a token of thanks.

Turkey did not become part of harvest celebrations until European explorers first came to the New World. Early explorers quickly acquired a taste for the indigenous fowl and brought New World turkeys back to Europe.

By the 1500s, turkeys originating from these first turkeys were being raised domestically in Italy, France and England. When the Pilgrims and other settlers arrived in America, they were already familiar with raising and eating turkey and naturally included it as part of their Thanksgiving feast.

The first recorded observance of Thanksgiving in America was a religious occasion that did not include the feast now associated with the holiday. The charter given to early Virginia settlers required a day of observance to thank God for his provisions. This first group gathered on Dec. 4, 1619, at the Berkeley Plantation on the James River.

Two years later, the residents of Plymouth rejoiced about an abundant crop and Gov. William Bradford proclaimed a three-day harvest festival.

The colonists and about 90 Native Americans enjoyed an enormous feast during this festival. It is this particular feast that is usually referred to as the First Thanksgiving.

In the middle of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day, to be celebrated on the final Thursday in November 1863. Presidents after Lincoln continued to annually declare the final Thursday in November to be Thanksgiving Day.

This tradition continued until 1939, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared the fourth Thursday as Thanksgiving. November that year had five Thursdays. Thanksgiving has been on the fourth Thursday ever since his declaration.

Since 1947, the National Turkey Federation has presented the president of the United States with a live turkey to celebrate Thanksgiving. The annual presentation of the turkey to the president has become a tradition in the nation’s capital, signaling the unofficial beginning of the holiday season.

The official presidential turkey has been pardoned by presidents since John F. Kennedy. The pardoned turkey is often sent to a farm to live the rest of its life. In recent years, the presidential turkey has finished its life at Gobblers Rest at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Cooper Farm of western Ohio provided the presidential turkey in 2014, reminding us that turkey production is an important industry in Ohio. Of the top-producing turkey states, Ohio is number 10.

In 2018, Ohio raised 6.7 million turkeys and produced 236 million pounds of turkey meat. Ohio’s turkey industry supports other industries and provides employment opportunities.

Ohio’s turkey flocks consume around 4.5 million bushels of corn each year — benefiting area grain farmers. The turkey industry provides approximately 3,000 jobs for Ohio families. Earnings from Ohio’s turkey industry are estimated to be $101 million.

Surveys have indicated that approximately 88 percent of Americans say they eat turkey on Thanksgiving. The average size of a Thanksgiving turkey is 16 pounds.

The last survey taken, in 2016, states the average American eats the equivalent of one Thanksgiving turkey per year or about 16.7 pounds.

Minnesota traditionally raises the most turkeys in the U.S., about 42 million a year. North Carolina is the second-largest producing state with 31.5 million.

Two-thirds of the turkeys raised in the U.S. come from six states: Minnesota, North Carolina, Arkansas, Indiana, Missouri, and Virginia. In 2018, the U.S. raised 244.8 million turkeys — plenty for America’s appetite.

Whether you eat turkey or not, as you sit down with friends and family this Thanksgiving, remember to thank a farmer for making your meal available and affordable.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Lentz is extension educator for agriculture and natural resources for the Ohio State University Extension Service in Hancock County. He can be reached at 419-422-3851 or via email at lentz.38@osu.edu.

Lentz can be heard with Vaun Wickerham on weekdays at 6:35 a.m. on WFIN, at 5:43 a.m. on WKXA-FM, and at 5:28 a.m. at 106.3 The Fox.