mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why do people eat turkey on Thanksgiving?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, it's Doug! Turkeys, like this one I have here, are such strange-looking birds. Don't you think? Someone named Charlotte has a question about turkeys. Let's give her a call now.

[Video Call]

- Hi, Doug!

- Hi, Charlotte!

- I have a question for you. Why do people eat turkey on Thanksgiving?

- Oh, that's a great question.

It's not many holidays people celebrate where there's a bird connected with it. I mean, when you think of your birthday you think of cake, right? It's not like people go, oh hey happy birthday, here's a birthday chicken. But on Thanksgiving for so many Americans it's all about the turkey. And turkeys are such a strange bird too, aren't they? These birds are huge. It's a wonder they can even fly. If you'd been a chicken farmer and you'd never seen a turkey before, you'd think you'd hit the jackpot—that's a lot more meat! Then there's how they sound. What other bird makes a sound like this? So weird! But maybe most impressive of all is how they look. The males look different from the females with a long bright red snood—that fleshy thing that hangs over their beak. And with those huge tail feathers that they can fan out in a display. All so that each male can put on a dance for the females. They really do this, a turkey dance. So what

gives? Why are turkeys such a huge part of one of our major holidays? Well, whenever you want to find out why there's some tradition that people have, something they do regularly every year, the way I try to find out is to look for experts on the past. I look for a historian, someone who keeps track of the stories and events that happened before you and I were alive. Lots of historians have written books and webpages about how different holidays got started, including the holiday of Thanksgiving. I didn't know the answer to this question until I started looking, and I was surprised to find out that Thanksgiving is a holiday that goes way, way back in history. In ancient times lots of people all around the world would have a big feast, or meal, at some point in the fall season. It would be a big celebration. Now, why do you think that is? Why a big celebration in the fall? And why, especially, a feast, or a big meal?

VIDEO 2

Well, the reason for this big feast every fall was because that is the time of harvest. The time when food would have finished growing for the year and be ready to collect. It was a time of celebration, a time to finally feel relaxed after so much hard work. And for many people, a time to feel thankful, too. Thankful to friends and family for all their hard work together. Thankful for the good weather. Thankful for plenty of food saved up for the winter. In the country of England in particular, it became popular to combine the fall harvest with the idea of giving thanks and calling that day Thanksgiving. And so it became a holiday in England. The word Thanksgiving is English, but in England, while these Thanksgiving feasts would have had bread, maybe some chicken and gravy, maybe some apples, what they didn't have was turkey. That's because by this point the people living in England had no idea that turkeys even existed. Turkeys, you see, were a bird found only in the continent of North America. They're special to North America. While the Europeans and other people in the world had no idea turkeys existed, the indigenous,

or First Nations Peoples of North America, knew all about them. And turkeys were an incredibly valuable part of their lives. Indigenous people of Mexico, such as the Mayans and the Aztecs, were some of the very first turkey farmers. They'd raise and breed turkeys, and just like chickens, they'd use them for their eggs. Yeah, you can eat turkey eggs. They'd eat the meat of the turkey, too. And they'd use the turkey's beautiful feathers for decorations and ceremonies. The kind of turkey found in Mexico, called the ocellated turkey, has especially shiny and colorful feathers. When the English started coming to North America they brought their celebration of Thanksgiving with them. Their feast had always included foods they were used to, but when they arrived in North America—now they were in the land of the indigenous people of North America. These people grew and ate foods the English people had never seen; corn, cranberries, pumpkins, squash, and turkeys. The English people living in North America soon started to include these indigenous North American foods in their Thanksgiving meal. Now here's the funny thing. Even though Thanksgiving, with that name, started out as a holiday celebrated by the English it isn't really celebrated much in England anymore. But in the United States and in Canada, where many English people moved, it stayed a holiday. In fact, it's become a major holiday, and turkeys have become a symbol of the entire day. People hang up turkey decorations and sometimes dress their pets in turkey costumes. And even though it was the English who may have named it Thanksgiving, it's not a holiday that's about celebrating a certain people or a certain country. Anyone can celebrate Thanksgiving. For many people living in North America today, this is a holiday about getting together with close friends or family and taking time out of our busy lives to be thankful for all that we have. No matter where you come from, and no matter what you eat. That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Charlotte, for asking it!