

TO MARKET, TO MARKET!

AN ONLINE THANKSGIVING EXHIBITION
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Before the days of the freezer and the supermarket, where did Thanksgiving dinner come from?

Nostalgia may tell us that early Thanksgiving dinners were entirely homegrown, home-cooked and home-baked from scratch. This prospect would, however, not have pleased the Pilgrims! Their palates were accustomed to flavors native neither to Old England nor New England. Among the provisions on the *Mayflower* could undoubtedly be found the exotic spices that we now associate with the traditional tastes and scents of Thanksgiving - cloves, cinnamon, mace, nutmeg and ginger.

Although transportation was slow by today's standards, the Pilgrims were not an isolated people but, rather, part of a vibrant Atlantic rim economy. A market system soon grew up within America as well, with centralized "country stores" providing ingredients for many a Thanksgiving table.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, foodways were dramatically altered by three components. **One, shipping**, or transportation - as systems improved and more and more distant parts of America were linked, first by wagon and then by rail and truck, poultry and produce, fruits and grains, came from even further farms to local markets. **Two, "shaping"** - as increasing sophistication of food processing and packaging led to partially prepared or "ready-made" menu items, lightening the housewife's burden. **Three, shopping** - as changes in methods of buying and selling led to the demise of the corner grocery store and the rise of the self-service "supermarket."

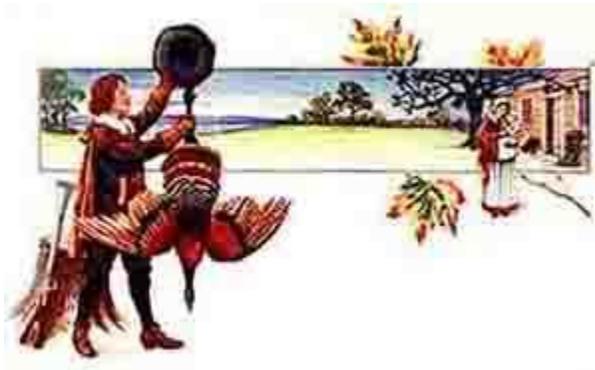
PLYMOUTH COLONY

The Pilgrims packed enough provisions onto the *Mayflower* to not only provide for the voyage but also to feed the settlers for the many months until crops could be planted

and harvested. Some provisions, such as butter, were meant to last even longer. We know that an extremely large quantity of heavily salted butter was purchased for the *Mayflower* voyage. William Bradford described how the Pilgrims, in order to complete their financing, were “forced to sell off some of their provisions to stop this gap, some three or four-score [60 or 80] firkins of butter, which commodity they might best spare, having provided too large a quantity of that kind.” (Samuel Eliot Morison notes, “this would mean 3360 to 4720 pounds of butter”!) There were no cows on the *Mayflower* and the Pilgrims did not know how long they would have to wait before dairy animals could be brought to New England!

William Bradford tells us one sailor who “went and got a little spice and made him [another sailor] a mess of meat.” Among the provisions on the *Mayflower* could probably be found many of the exotic spices that were used in the cuisine of “Old England.” Certainly, provisions lists of the 1630s, advising new emigrants about what to pack for the voyage, consistently listed among the “needfull things as every Planter doth or ought to provide to go to New-England” spices such as cloves, cinnamon, mace and nutmegs, as well as sugar, honey and dried fruit.

We have no “menu” for that famous “First Thanksgiving at Plymouth” in 1621.



All we know, in the words of Edward Winslow, is that “our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help besides, served the Company almost a week” and that the Native Americans in attendance “went out and killed five deer.”

“Fowling” encompasses any wild birds, including wild turkeys, which are recorded as being plentiful.) The records tell us that there were crops of Indian corn and barley; there MAY have been wheat from the stores brought on the *Mayflower*. Foods native to the area include walnuts, chestnuts, hickory nuts, gooseberries, raspberries, crab apples, cranberries, beans, pumpkins, squash and wild onions. The Pilgrims probably brought with them parsnip, carrot, turnip and onion seeds so these root vegetables would have been available. (The Pilgrims did not have apples, potatoes, sweet potatoes, sweet corn, celery or molasses.) They probably had eggs; we know they had butter!

And they undoubtedly had the spices that we now associate with the traditional tastes and scents of a New England Thanksgiving - cloves, cinnamon, mace, nutmeg and ginger.

Several 17th century estate inventories list these specific spices among the possessions of Plymouth Colony residents. In 1651, John Hazell's inventory listed not only cloves, nutmegs, turmeric, aloes, cinnamon, saffron, mace, pepper and ginger, but also white sugar. Sugar was an especially rare and valuable commodity in 17th century Plymouth Colony.



Nutmeg

How were the foodstuffs that had been brought on the *Mayflower* distributed?

The settlement of Plymouth had been financed as a joint stock venture. All the *Mayflower* passengers were stockholders and therefore entitled to a share in the general stores (which included not only tools and clothing, but foodstuffs such as butter and flour and spices). The stores were kept in a common warehouse (the "Common House"). This system came to an end when the stock company was dissolved in 1627.

There continued to be warehouses but they were now individually built and owned. As ships came in, goods were put into the warehouses and sold, at first, directly to the consumers and, then, to individual shop owners who sold to the consumers. There were shops in Boston by the 1640s; the contents of one shop, inventoried in 1647, included ginger, pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, sugar and raisins. The first shop in Plymouth Colony may have been that operated by Alexander Standish, son of *Mayflower* passenger Captain Myles Standish, who added a room onto his father's house in Duxbury specifically for that purpose.

Just as imported commodities were bought and sold, so too were homegrown commodities. Farmers may have been initially dependent on their own farms but specialization soon developed – not every farmer had a cow, not every farmwife was as skillful in carrying for poultry or in dairying. Soon, there were farms with surpluses of some provisions and shortages of others. A market system quickly evolved for purposes of distribution and exchange. The markets were held once a week, on Thursdays. This system was codified in 1638 when it was enacted by the General Court of Plymouth Colony, "that there shalbe a markt kept at Plymouth every Thursday, and a faire yearly the last Wensday in May, & to continue two days and a faire at Duxburrow the first Wensday in October yearly, & to continue two days for all cattell & comodyties."

Among the commodities grown in New England by the mid 17th century were the classic ingredients of the Thanksgiving dinner - turkeys, chickens, apples, pumpkins, squash, turnips, parsnips, carrots, onions and wheat (for the pie crusts!). Potatoes – now thought of as a staple – were not introduced into New England until the 1720s. By 1745, however, New England was growing enough potatoes to export. The other missing ingredient? Cranberries! Cranberry sauce had to wait for inexpensive sugar (cultivation of cranberries did not begin until 1816). Sugar and spices continued to be among New England's most significant imports.

FARMING EVOLVES

By the end of the 17th century, many farmers were specializing in specific crops; a thriving trade in foodstuffs was established between farmer and farmer, between farmer and city, and between farmer and foreign customer; a road system had begun.

Not all crops were grown in all areas. Wheat, for example, did not grow well in coastal New England. By the mid 17th century, the Connecticut River Valley had already begun to specialize in wheat; the area soon became New England's "bread basket."



Other areas, due to differences in climate or soil, specialized in cattle or corn, building up a surplus for export.

As farming became ever more specialized, commerce grew. Merchants traded nonfarm goods for farm products; they promoted trade between the specializing farmers; they also arranged for the export of farm goods. A large quantity of New England foodstuff was sent to Virginia (which concentrated almost exclusively on tobacco) and to the West Indies (which specialized in sugar production).



Commerce in early New England was carried on most effectively by water. It was prohibitively time-consuming to attempt to move bulky commodities any distance by land. The colonial governments recognized, however, the need for roads and legislated, first, their building and, then, their widening for the use of wagons and oxcarts.

The only significant change in commerce during the 18th century was the continuing growth of roads as additional areas of the country were settled.

A NEW ERA BEGINS

After the Revolutionary War and the installation of the new strong federal government, America and its businesses prospered. Currency was regulated, the interior of the continent was opened, population boomed (with a resulting growth in the market for farm products). Entrepreneurialism, unfettered by restrictive English law, flourished in a spate of transportation building: turnpikes (toll roads with charters from the state legislatures) to open up the backcountry; bridges to replace ferries; canals to link rivers and lakes. Yankee ingenuity also played a part! Eli Whitney's new invention, the cotton gin, made it possible to build all-weather roads. By 1830s, turkeys were being raised in herds and driven to market along the turnpikes, their feet coated with tar so they could withstand the journey.



Then, in the 1840s, the arrival of the railroads! Food could now be transported greater distances from the countryside into America's burgeoning cities. By the 1850s, the railroads had iced butter cars. The 1840s also saw the beginning of individual packaging, in sizes suitable for individual purchasers, with imprinted labels as well as the advent of tinned vegetables in America. Nathan Winslow of Portland, Maine, began to can sweet corn and, by the 1850s, he was selling his tinned vegetables to Boston specialty grocer S.S. Pierce.

The changes in the century ahead would be fast and furious!

The changes would come in:

SHIPPING. As transportation systems improved and distant parts of America were linked, first by wagon and then by rail and truck, poultry and produce and fruits and grains came from ever-more-distant farms to markets.

SHAPING. As the increasing sophistication of food processing and packaging led to partially prepared or “ready-made” menu items, the housewife's burden was lightened and out-of-season items and produce from faraway places became available for the Thanksgiving table.

SHOPPING. As changes in methods of buying and selling were introduced, the self-service "supermarket" arose.

SHIPPING

The debate of the early 1800s about which transportation method would link the country - would it be roads? would it be canals? - was changed forever in 1831 when the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad began America's first locomotive service on 14 miles of track. The commercial possibilities were soon obvious and freight, not customers, became the railroad's major burden.

Railroads grew rapidly but haphazardly, unsupervised by the state governments that granted them charters and largely disconnected from each other. America's acquisition of western territories (and the rush of hungry gold seekers to California) brought new force to the vision for not just more rails, but for a linking system.

Debates in Congress as to the best route for a transcontinental railroad (and the location of the lucrative end terminals) were heated, partisan and inconclusive. In 1853, then Secretary of War Jefferson Davis was directed to survey four different possible routes to the Pacific. All the proposed routes were found to be feasible – which did nothing to solve the political arguments.

Ultimately, it was the entrepreneurial spirit of several leading California merchants that resulted in the opening of the cross-country Union Pacific Railroad in 1869. Much of the money came from private sources, but the state and federal governments – recognizing the advantages of strengthening commercial and political ties across the country – had also lent significant dollars.



Poultry and produce could now travel across the nation to grace the Thanksgiving table.

Technical advances, such as heavier rails, better railway bridges, standardized gauge widths, national time zones, and larger and more powerful engines, led to greater

productivity in freight services and a decline in average freight rates. Produce could now be moved more economically for greater distances; local and regional markets became national markets. In 1916, 77% of America's intercity freight was being moved by rail.

THE GROWTH OF THE AMERICAN RAILWAY SYSTEM

BY	MILES OF RAIL
1840	3,000
1850	9,000
1865	35,000
1880	93,000
1890	164,000
1916	254,000

Produce could now be moved more economically for greater distances; local and regional markets became national markets. In 1916, 77% of America's intercity freight was being moved by rail.

National railroad connections brought southern produce to Yankee tables and a new Thanksgiving classic - the sweet potato, cooked in maple syrup or adorned with marshmallows - was born.



World War I brought competition for the railroads in the form of the new trucking industry and the beginnings of the interstate highway system.

The first motorized truck had been built in 1896 by Daimler. Trucking, however, had remained a local service because there was no national highway system on which the trucks could travel. This lack became urgent during the First World War when trucks meant for the use of the American Expeditionary Forces in France had to be sent by railroad to the east coast. With the railroads jammed beyond capacity, the US government undertook a bold experiment – driving trucks from assembly plants in Ohio to their transport ships in the east. The trip, from Toledo to Baltimore, took three weeks! Soon, other military truck routes were designated and trucks, loaded with spare parts and munitions, traveled to both coasts. The journey could be made but the damage to the existing inadequate roads was enormous.

In 1921, Congress passed a Federal Highway Act to provide funding to the states to create a paved system of interstate highways.

The Great Depression brought further difficulties for the railways, with almost a third of the nation's railroad mileage going into bankruptcy. The road system, however, continued to flourish – not from commerce alone, but from state and federally-funded projects providing jobs for America's legions of unemployed who built new roads and upgraded, widened and repaved existing roads.

The railroads were to some extent revived by the new diesel locomotive (first used in freight service in 1941) and by the country's vastly increased shipping needs during the Second World War, but the rails would never again dominate transportation.

The military needs of the Second World War resulted in the federal funding of a system of interstate highways. The bill was signed in 1956 by Dwight D. Eisenhower, who as a young soldier had participated in the US Army's first transcontinental motor convoy in 1919 (it had taken 62 days to travel from Washington D.C. to San Francisco!).



The percentage of the nation's intercity freight carried by the rails had slipped to 44% by 1965 and, by 1987, to 36%.

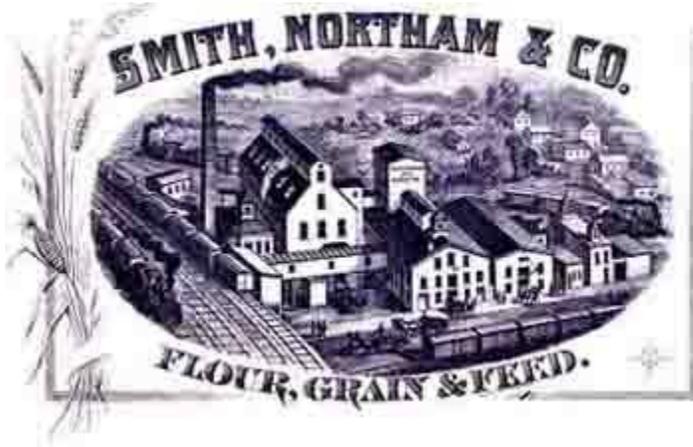
Trucks rule the day!

PROCESSING

The Pilgrim did not process all their food “by hand” – among the earliest industries established in Plymouth Colony was a water-powered grain mill. The earliest mill had been located near Billington Sea, a distance from town. Then, in 1632, the General Court authorized Stephen Deane to set up a water-powered mill on Town Brook; this mill was only in operation for about 2 years when Stephen Deane died. In 1636, John Jenney was authorized to "erect a mill for grinding and beating of corn upon the brook of Plymouth." Corn, for the Pilgrims, meant any kind of grain – wheat, barley, rye or actual corn.

John Jenney operated the mill until his death in 1644. After his death, his wife Sarah operated the corn mill. The mill was carried on by their son Samuel and then by outsiders, until its demise in 1847.

By the end of the 17th century, many farmers were specializing in specific crops. Wheat – an essential component of the Thanksgiving pie - grew particularly well in the Brandywine River Valley of Delaware, which also possessed strong water power and a navigable stream with which to transport processed flour to far-flung markets. This area became a center for flour mills and produced a number of inventions to make the process more automated and more efficient.



As Americans moved westward, they built water-powered grain mills to service their communities. As transportation improved and grain could be brought longer distances by rail, larger mills were built.

A New England native, Charles Alfred Pillsbury, built the largest flour-milling company in the world in the late 19th century. Located in Minnesota on the Mississippi River's only natural waterfall, Pillsbury & Company was founded in 1872. Wheat arrived by train from the western prairie, the wheat was ground by turbines powered by water, trains then took the wheat north to the port of Duluth and east to the country's major population areas.



PRESERVATION

In the days of the Pilgrims, food preservation consisted of drying, smoking, salting, pickling and making into conserve (or jelly). These techniques had been known and used for centuries.

The 19th century brought several new revolutionary techniques to food processing and preservation.

Vacuum packing in glass jars was a French discovery, developed in response to the needs of Napoleon's forces. The switch to metal cans made the process practical. One of the earliest U.S. canning factories was opened in Boston by William Underwood (Underwood "devilled ham" can still be found on supermarket shelves). One of Underwood's first products was unsweetened cranberries in glass jars, preserved without sugar. He also made cranberry jam and noted that "The cranberry jam is a sweetmeat and usually brings a high price. I have frequently sold it in India for \$1.50 per jar."

Nathan Winslow and his nephew John Winslow Jones of N. Winslow & Company, Portland, Maine, were the first to can vegetables in the late 1830s. The primary markets for this innovative food presentation were the miners of the California Gold Rush, exploring expeditions and military campaigns.

The interest generated by these users, along with the growing movement of settlers into the West, inspired others to enter the food processing business. Gail Borden saw the need for food that would take little space in a covered wagon and invented condensed

milk, advertised as being cleaner than the unprocessed milk available in city markets.

It took the Civil War, however, to make canned goods acceptable on the dinner table - soldiers returning from the front had gained a taste for canned goods and convinced their wives to serve them.



Technological innovations such as machines for shaping and soldering cans, and pressure cookers that controlled the temperatures at which the cans (and their contents) were boiled made mass production possible. The number of processing plants grew from less than one hundred in 1870 to nearly 1,800 at the turn of the century.

Canned and bottled fruit, vegetables, olives and pickles, even bottled mincemeat for pies, became commonplace on American Thanksgiving tables

All canned food is thoroughly cooked, destroying the bacteria and enzymes that can lead to spoiling. The food is then hermetically sealed to prevent new organisms from contaminating it. Canned foods do not need heavy salt or sugar but canning does lead to a loss of nutrient value in foods.

Another dramatic revolution in food processing and preserving arrived a little later in the 19th century. Mechanical refrigeration changed the way food was processed, the way food was transported, the way food was sold and the way food was cooked.

REFRIGERATION

In the 17th century, the only refrigeration available was that provided by nature. Unheated New England larders served as natural "freezers" during the winter months. During the rest of the year, root cellars provided an environment cooler than the "upstairs" air, but did not provide temperatures cold enough to preserve meat or dairy products for any length of time.

The Jamestown Colony in Virginia, perhaps inspired by the extreme heat of the region,

began harvesting ice as early as the 17th century, cutting it from ponds and lakes in the winters and storing it in caves and cellars to provide cooling during the summer. There is no evidence that the Plymouth Colonists, who "enjoyed" much more severe winters and more moderate summers, harvested ice.

During the 18th century, however, New Englanders recognized that their plentiful supply of winter ice was a commodity worth harvesting. Commercial harvesting of ice began in the early 1800s; Frederick Tudor of Boston, the "Ice King," became wealthy from selling Massachusetts ice overseas. He promoted the use of ice chests and taught the value of ice for food preservation.

By the 1850s, the first refrigerated rail cars, cooled by natural ice, were transporting perishable products – such as butter - from the country into the cities. The “history” of butter (so necessary for Thanksgiving cooking and baking) reflects several significant changes in food processing, in food packaging, and in the changes brought by the advent of mechanical refrigeration.

Specialization in agriculture came early to New England. Not every housewife had a cow and not every housewife was equally skilled at dairying. Soon, certain families and certain areas became known for their butter. Without refrigeration, butter had to be heavily salted in order to last.

As cities grew, grocers began to send wagons to the country to collect butter and transport it to markets. The advent of railroads brought greater range but it was not until the 1850s, with the first use railroad car cooled by ice, that lightly-salted dairy products, vegetables and fruit could travel any distance.

Railroads did more than take the processed butter to farflung consumers, they now transported cream hundreds of miles to large centralized creameries. The earliest of these creamery factories was started in upstate New York in 1861; they soon spread throughout the Midwest. The Elgin Butter Company, which utilized surplus milk from Gail Borden’s condensed milk factory, was established in 1871.

Ice cooling still had significant limitations and inventors worked away at the problem of true mechanical refrigeration - a closed system with a circulating refrigerant driven by a compressor. The first breakthrough was achieved not by the railroads, but by a French steamship, in 1877-1878. The technology was adapted to railway cars and, by 1900, the US railway system had about 50,000 refrigerator cars in service, with some using the new and expensive mechanical refrigeration systems but many more continuing to use ice and dry ice for cooling.

By the late 1920s, mechanically refrigerated trucks and vans began to appear, many of them specializing in the delivery of dairy products.



By 1940, refrigeration technology had been perfected, and mechanical refrigeration became commonplace for railroad cars, ships and trucks.

Another revolution occurred when refrigeration was introduced into homes.



Again, the first refrigerant was ice, which cooled an icebox. Although an enormous improvement over the root cellar, iceboxes were messy and would keep food for only 2 to 3 days. Housewives still had to spend considerable time at the market, as well as arranging for the delivery of ice.

Domestic-sized mechanical refrigeration units were first placed on the market in 1913. The cost, however, was prohibitive – at \$900, a refrigerator cost as much as a good car! Will Durant of General Motors saw the possibilities, however, and formed the Frigidaire Company in 1918. Frigidaire was soon joined by Kelvinator and General Electric; refrigerators became efficient and affordable.

About this time, in the early 1920s, a cooperative (later to be named “Land O’Lakes”) was formed. It was the first to sell butter in one-pound packages with individually wrapped sticks.

In addition to the taste of salt, packaging had been a major source of consumer complaints about butter.

Butter was generally packed in “firkins,” or wooden containers that held 112 pounds. After the firkin had been packed and closed, a small hole was bored and brine poured in to fill any vacancies between the butter and the firkin. This allowed the butter to be stored for a considerable length of time without refrigeration and was sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of shipping. The firkin, however, often left the butter with a “woody” taste and, sometimes, contaminated by mold.



1st CUSTOMER - Father, don't buy that butter, for I can smell the taint from the wood tub.
 DEALER - that cannot be, for I have scraped off over three pounds that was next to the tub, and it is nice creamery make.
 2d CUSTOMER - Yes, that butter I bought of you yesterday tasted of the wood tub; that's enough for me.

Packaging in tin overcame these drawbacks, along with the later innovation of paper liners. Vegetable parchment then replaced the paper linings – and is still in use today, due to its grease-proof character, its strength, and its odorless and tasteless properties.



DEALER - This butter is from the Gilt Edge Creamery, shipped in the Record Tight Package, which are double coated tin, tight cover, and air space between package and case, insuring the butter from air and heat influence.
 CUSTOMER - I make it a point to buy butter in those packages, as it possesses a rich flavor, without any package taints.
 DEALER - Exactly, and I don't scrape off any butter, as it is just as sweet next to the package as in the center.

Further technological advancements in the 20th century led to automatic molding, wrapping and packing, as well as the volume manufacturing of colorful cardboard cartons.

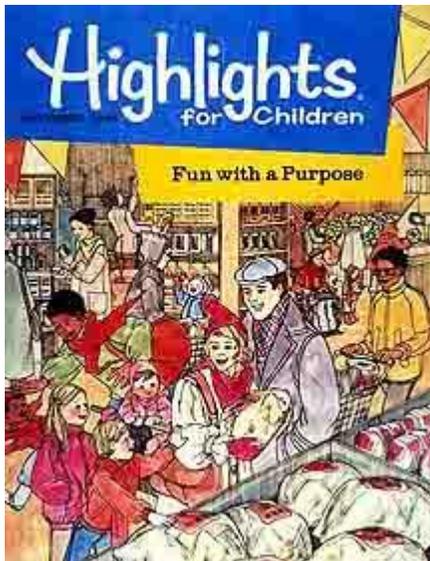
FREEZING

Between 1912 and 1917, Clarence Birdseye journeyed around the waters of Labrador, collecting furs for sale. He noticed the Eskimo method of quick-freezing foods and noted

that this method, in which items are frozen so quickly that only small ice crystals form, resulted in food with fuller flavor and better texture.

On his return to America, he entered the wholesale fish business and began to experiment with a system for packing fresh foods into waxed cardboard boxes and then flash-freezing them. In 1929, Birdseye sold his patents and trademarks to the company that later became General Foods Corporation; the first frozen foods appeared on the market in 1930.

The flash-freezing of foods in convenient packages is now a multi-billion dollar industry but the process was not instantaneous. In 1933, there were only 500 stores throughout all of the United States with the freezers needed to keep the new Birdseye frozen foods frozen solid! By the 1950s, 64% of all retail stores had frozen food "cabinets" and frozen food sales exceeded the \$1 billion mark.



The Thanksgiving turkey, once poked and prodded and pondered by the cautious housewife, was now available, preplucked, precleaned and frozen solid. The National Turkey Federation reported in 2005 that fifty-seven percent (57%) of those surveyed purchased a frozen turkey for Thanksgiving dinner; thirty-one percent (31%) purchased a fresh turkey.

The Thanksgiving turkey is responsible for another American dinner tradition. In 1953, C.A. Swanson & Sons of Omaha, Nebraska, had overestimated the amount of turkey they could sell - they were left with 520,000 pounds unsold! Without sufficient warehouse space to house the surplus, Swanson put the turkey into 10 refrigerated railroad cars, which had to keep moving to stay cold. The solution for using up the traveling turkey? A three-compartment foil tray filled with turkey with stuffing, peas and sweet potatoes (cranberry sauce was added in 1960). The TV dinner was born!



SHOPPING

The first shops in New England were established in Boston in the 1640s. Soon, each town on the eastern seaboard had its own small store - or two or three if the population was large enough. As settlers moved west and founded new communities, new general stores (which included food stuffs among their wares) were established to serve as middleman between the farmer and the consumer.

Early general stores kept their merchandise in boxes or barrels - the grocer provided the only access, taking orders, measuring out and wrapping food purchased. Nothing was prepackaged and the food sold was only minimally processed. There were no cans and no refrigeration.



Trips to the market had to be made on an almost daily basis and it was an important task for a thrifty housewife to choose the best possible Thanksgiving turkey for her family's table!

Modern chain stores had their beginnings in the grocery business. The oldest surviving chain store is A&P, begun in 1859 by George Gilman and George Huntington Hartford to sell tea, coffee and spices. By 1865, the partners had branched out into other food products and there were 25 "Great American Tea Company" stores. When the transcontinental railroad became a reality in 1869, the name was changed to the "Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company."

By 1878, A&P had 75 stores in operation and an additional 5,000 delivery routes covered by peddlers driving horse-drawn wagons. By 1887, A&P had \$1 million in sales annually.

A&P, like other chain stores, made a profit while lowering prices for the consumer by buying in bulk and eliminating a number of middlemen. A&P, and the other grocery chains that followed, succeeded because they brought service and value to the consumer.

Operating on the principles of speed and economy, the chain stores introduced the principles of modern selling:

- customers buy at prices set by the merchant
- the prices are set at a level designed to make a profit by moving goods quickly through the system
- goods are departmentalized so merchants can track their inventory and determine what is selling and what is not.

The chain stores were also able to operate efficiently because they set up their own distribution and promotion systems and, in many cases, even began to sell their own

branded proprietary products to the consumer. A&P's first brands were coffee (Eight O'Clock Coffee) and baking powder. By the 1920s, A&P was operating factories, packing plants and bakeries to produce its own private brands of butter, flour and canned goods.

Chain stores, at this time, carried only "dry goods." Meat, dairy, fruit and vegetables, and breads were sold by specialty stores - the butcher, the greengrocer, the bakery and the "milk man."

Methods of shopping changed more slowly than methods of food packaging. Even after some foods became available in cans or premeasured in consumer-sized boxes, all purchasing in grocery stores was done over the counter - in a personal one-on-one relationship with the grocer, who plucked the right can or package off the shelf and placed it into the hands of the consumer. This trade card for AMC flour, dating from the 1880s, shows the older method of food packaging - flour in a large barrel that would be measured out by the grocer - side by side with newer packaging methods such as the boxes visible on the shelves behind the grocer.



A&P introduced another modernizing step in 1913 when it introduced "Cash and carry" - no more credit, no more home delivery and no more phone ordering. Most of the savings were passed on to the customers, strengthening A&P's competitive edge. Grocery stores were still full-service. A customer would request an item and the clerk or grocer would supply the item.

This changed in 1917 with another revolution in the grocery business. The first "self-service" grocery store was introduced by Clarence Saunders, founder of the southern grocery store chain Piggly Wiggly. Self-service revolutionized the grocery business.

"Self service" meant that, instead of approaching a clerk standing behind a counter, customers would walk the aisles perusing the offerings and selecting their own goods before continuing on to a cashier. The savings in labor were obvious to the other chain stores, including A&P, and they soon followed Piggly Wiggly into the self-service mode.

Conservative financial policies saved A&P during the Great Depression. Their policy of single-year lease commitments, portable store equipment, and dispersal of funds among a wide number of banks allowed A&P to maintain low prices and even to grow their sales.

Chain grocery stores had now begun to offer other products beyond their customary dry goods, adding meat, dairy, produce and bakery sections to their stores. The result - the supermarket! A&P opened their first "supermarket" in 1936 with a store in Pennsylvania with over 28,000 square feet.



A 1947 Thanksgiving shopping ad for A&P

In 1940, A&P offered self-service meat and frozen food departments. The "personal touch" still remained (as it does today) in the deli and specialty butcher counters. By 1955, supermarkets were responsible for 60% of America's grocery sales.

Grocery stores have continued to evolve and, with the advent of one-stop shopping, all the ingredients of a Thanksgiving dinner - from the turkey to the pie - complete with the microwave in which to cook it and the dishes on which to serve it (and the floral centerpiece!) can be purchased at super-sized warehouse-style supermarkets.

Specialty stores continue to exist, of course, for the more discriminating cook. Even here, however, technology plays a role as free-range turkeys and the most exotic of spices can be ordered online and delivered to your doorstep.

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