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Why Canadian Thanksgiving Comes Before American Thanksgiving

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Canadian Thanksgiving takes place this month (the second Monday of the month, which this year falls on October 12th). As we do every year, WPBS will mark both Thanksgivings (American Thanksgiving is the fourth Thursday in November, which falls this year on November 26th). While everyone knows that the two countries mark the occasion on different dates the reasons why are less well known – and there is more than one reason.

First of all, Thanksgiving is a celebration (and thanks) for the harvest. Canada's growing season ends earlier than most of the United States. In the Prairie provinces harvest gets underway in August and finishes by early October. As someone who lived in the Prairies for nine years, I can attest that frost and snow can arrive as early as August and are pretty much guaranteed by October. Harvest season runs a little longer in Southern Ontario



and B.C. but not much. By contrast, in the American Midwest and South harvest extends through the fall and so a late November celebration is not out of sync with the calendar.

Although the claim is debated by historians, Canada's first Thanksgiving is sometimes traced to October 1578 and English explorer Martin Frobisher - 43 years before the 1621 celebration that anchors the American founding story. Canada's version of Thanksgiving did not become an official holiday until the late 1800s and was heavily influenced by indigenous harvest festivals and European farming traditions.

In the 1920's Canada combined Thanksgiving and Armistice Day (November 11th) into a single holiday observed on the Monday of the week of November 11th. Given the sharp difference between the two occasions the combination didn't make a lot of sense and in 1931 the Canadian government decided to separate the two, renaming Armistice Day on November 11th to Remembrance Day which it remains today. Thanksgiving in Canada was then marked on different days until the decision was made to settle on the second Monday of October in 1957.

American Thanksgiving is a very big deal and carries a greater cultural weight with days-long preparation, a four-day weekend for most workers, travel frenzy and the busiest airport days of the year, Black Friday and NFL football. Canadian Thanksgiving is, by comparison, more muted and the dinner menu is somewhat more diverse (although turkey and pumpkin pie are staples in both countries' celebrations). My personal favourite on Canadian Thanksgiving is Tourtière (French Canadian meat pie) – much like turkey with stuffing and gravy, it is delicious and also makes for great leftovers for a few days afterwards.

No matter which Thanksgiving you celebrate (or, why not celebrate both?) – all of us at WPBS wish you a Happy Thanksgiving!