

THANKSGIVING MYSTERY

When you grow up right smack dab in the middle of eight siblings, you can bet with certainty that boredom will rarely be a problem. There might be fights, conflicts, squabbles, sniping, hitting, pinching, hair-pulling, the throwing of hard objects, and there will be the conversion of seemingly harmless household objects to deadly weapons—mops, brooms, belts, ladles, shoes, yardsticks, soup cans, lunch kits, and even food. There will be an overdose of drama....somebody crying, somebody sobbing, somebody yelling, somebody laughing, somebody taunting, somebody accusing, somebody arguing, somebody howling.

But there just won't be any boredom. There isn't time for it. There isn't space for it. You're going to always be happy, or sad, or content, or mad, or outraged, or amused, or annoyed, or sick and tired of everything—but you're going to be *something*.

The very best times were when Mom and Dad were happy. When they were smiling, laughing, cutting up—they relaxed all of us. Their happiness was infectious. They made the whole house happy. Everyone smiled, laughed and got along. It made being at home fun and comfortable. But when they weren't happy—especially when they were good and pissed off—there was hell to pay. Always. Never an exception.

When I was a high school freshman, Thanksgiving Day was a combination of both situations. It was what Charles Dickens called the best of times and the worst of times. Thanksgiving Day of 1961 started out so wonderfully, and then ended so tragically. Not because of a death or serious injury. Not because of a house fire or car accident. Not because of illness, a peck in the eye by our parakeet or a bite on the leg by our dog.

Thanksgiving Day of 1961 ended disasterously because somebody, some low-life heathen, some scum-sucking moron committed the ultimate sin in our house.

Somebody wiped their ass with a wash cloth.

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A household of eleven humans, a dog, a parakeet, two fish, two turtles and a pet lizard can only be run efficiently with rules. *Lots* of rules. Rules having to do with everything from who takes out the garbage to who sweeps the floor to who does the dishes to who folds the clothes to who mows the lawn. Rules having to do with when we ate, what we ate, how we ate—how you asked for food (“would you pass the meatloaf please”), how you chewed your food (“close your mouth—I don’t want to see those beans”), how you left the table (“may I please be excused?”). Rules regarding the proper use of the telephone (how to properly make and receive calls), the television (talking only during the commercials, not sitting too close, etc.) and the radio (room door closed, volume down). We had rules about church, school, homework, dress, grooming, hygiene, birthdays, friends, speech, praying, singing, walking, bicycles, scooters, jump roping, snacks, matches, hair, teeth, and just about every aspect of our lives. And following the rules—*strictly* following the rules—wasn’t optional. It was mandatory. All infractions, without exception, were dealt with immediately and with enthusiasm. Punishment for breaking the rules was expected and our parents never disappointed. We had to be taught. Others had to be taught. These rules exist for a reason. You’re not free to pick and choose which ones you follow and which you don’t. You’re to follow the rules *exactly* as they’re laid out. No excuses. No mitigating factors were ever considered. You either followed the rules or you didn’t. And if you chose the latter, there was hell to pay.

Most punishment meted out in our house was physical. It had something to do with your body. You could get spanked—with a yardstick, shoe, belt or other flat, handy item. You could get sent to bed without dinner (though with nine of us looking out for one another, food was almost always smuggled to the prisoner). You might have to stand in the corner for an hour—and if you looked at anything other than the corner, you just got another hour added to your sentence. You had to write “lines”—several hundred identical sentences that always began with “I must not . . .” I must not talk back to my mother or father. I must not forget to clean up my room. I must not forget to take out the

garbage. I must not hit my brother or sister. And then, if you'd really screwed up, something the nuns (more about them later) called a "run-on sentence": I must not hide my liver and onions and then throw it away when there are starving kids in South America." For the life of me, I couldn't ever figure out how me eating that stinky liver and onions was going to make one of those starving Peruvian kids feel better, but that's what we were always admonished about.

We didn't have any "lines" for wiping your ass with a wash cloth, for the simple reason that no one ever anticipated such a heinous sin to ever be committed. Wiping your ass with a wash cloth was so off-the-chart that it wasn't even a rule. Having a rule prohibiting that would be like having a rule that said you couldn't pee in the Holy Water.

Thanksgiving Day began like all important days in our house—Mass. Since we lived directly across the street from the church, we were free to attend any Mass we wanted. Six o'clock Mass. Eight o'clock Mass. Ten o'clock Mass. Whatever you'd like. My brother and I usually went to early Mass (six thirty or eight) with our dad. Just the guys. Mass and Communion at eight and we were home, out of our church clothes, watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade by nine-thirty, chomping on a Western omelette and debating whether the Lions were going to upset the Packers again this year. Our grandparents—on my father's side—usually showed up by eleven. My grandfather was a former vaudeville, burlesque house, ragtime piano player who couldn't read a note of music, but could make our old parlor upright bounce like it had a life of its own. By noon, everyone had gone to Mass, the Lions were two touchdowns up on the Packers, dad was nursing his first Scotch and the house smelled like an aromatic nuclear bomb—a combination of turkey, dressing, pumpkin and pecan pies, sweet potatoes and giblet gravy.

Thanksgiving dinner was like no other. It was the only meal of the year for which our mother—a Steel Magnolia from rural Alabama—ever hauled out her "good china." Funny why she called it that. It was the only china she owned. So it wasn't like we had our *bad* china, or *everyday* china or anything like that. But I never heard her call her china anything but her *good* china. We actually had linen napkins, glasses made out of real glass, lit candles and real shiny utensils—some kind of "silver" I never understood. Thanksgiving dinner was the only meal we ate the entire year in which "the blessing" was different. As Catholics, we

recited scripted prayer. The “Our Father” (Protestants called it the “Lord’s Prayer”), the “Hail Mary” (later to become a pass that another Catholic—Roger Staubach—threw to a Protestant receiver named Pearson) and the “Glory Be” (which our maid said all the time when she’d been nipping a little too much) were the most common and frequently recited prayers—with the exception of “The Blessing.” You didn’t even take a sip of your milk until the food had been blessed. And The Blessing was always the same. Bless us Our Lord, for these, Thy Gifts . . . We said it three times a day, every day. That’s a little over a thousand times a year. After that many times, it became little more than an mantra—like the Pledge to the Flag. Words that had to be recited in a particular rhythm before the shoveling of the food could begin. But on Thanksgiving, our dad always said some stuff about our good fortune, our home, his job, our clothes, our car, America, our health and all of the other really nifty things we were thankful for. It always seemed strange to me to hear a “made up” prayer. It seemed like it probably didn’t count or something.

Another tradition in our family was my grandfather—the piano player—getting our mother so pissed off she could spit. As the meal began with the food parade—the serving of the turkey by dad and then the bowls of dressing, cranberry sauce, corn, sweet potatoes and salad being passed counter-clockwise—my grandfather would pick out a victim. Someone within arm’s reach. “Hey,” he’d inquire with his face all scrunched up, “do these sweet potatoes smell sort of funny?” There was always a victim because he was so damn sincere. He sold it so well. Right away, someone would bow forward to take a sniff and then *whack!* He’d cuff them on the back of the head and they’d end up with a facefull of sweet potatoes, or cranberry sauce or dressing. We’d all laugh, he’d roar and my mother would look like she could bite nails. “Do we have to begin *every* Thanksgiving dinner with one of my children wearing the food I’ve cooked all over their face?” My grandfather would be wiping the tears off his face and as soon as he caught his breath he’d reply, “I guess so, Annie.....as long as you keep raising dumb kids!” My poor dad, caught between the necessity of shared outrage to support my mom and the hilarity of his dad suckering another grandkid into sniffing his or her food would look like he was about to explode. But, eventually things would settle down and we’d have a scrumptious dinner.

Dessert wasn't served until later. We all had to help clear the table, wash and dry the dishes, take the leaves out of the table, carefully put up the *good* china, sweep the floor and take out the garbage. Then we watched the end of the Lions-Packers game or, weather permitting, went outside and threw the football around or played badminton or croquet. An hour or so later, after our food had "settled" (I never quite understood why, on this one day of the year, or food had to settle), we'd all get back together for dessert—plum pudding or pumpkin or mincemeat pie. As we were all standing in line in the kitchen to make our selection, I heard my mother let out a shriek. Not a howl of pain. Not a scream of surprise or terror. Not a wail of sorrow or loss. This long, ear-piercing, heart-stopping, top-of-the-lungs bellowing could have been caused by only one emotion: total and complete outrage.

Everyone in the plum pudding and pie line in the kitchen froze. No one dare move a hair. Sweet Jesus, I thought to myself, what in the *hell* was that? One of my younger sisters standing right in front of me was trembling. Was someone dead? What tragedy in the name of the Living God could possibly have evoked such a response from our mother? What would be so repugnant, so outrageous, so heinous as to make a human produce such a spine-chilling sound?

Within seconds, she appeared at the door between the hallway and the kitchen. Eyes wide as Mason jar lids. Brow furrowed. Teeth clenched. Jaw jutting forward. I'd never seen my mother like that—I hardly recognized her. She just stood there staring, glowering, wearing the most hateful, disgusting look a human could make. Slowly—*ever* so slowly—she raised her right hand. Pinched between thumb and forefinger was a light blue washcloth. She held it by the corner with her three unoccupied fingers sticking up in the air—like they were trying to avoid touching it. Like it was so filthy, so diseased, so *something* that contact with it had to be absolutely minimal. My first clue as to what the problem was came from my brother. He was staring up at her with his mouth wide open. In a soft but incredibly frightened tone, he said, "Oh, *shit!*" *Boy, I thought, there's a thousand lines of "I must not ever use foul language."* Then, for the first time, I noticed what he was looking at. As my mother held the wash cloth at arm's length from her body, it began to turn-slowly. It was no more than a foot from my face. As it rotated, I saw what my brother was oh-shitting about. Right there in the

middle was a dark brown diagonal slash across the middle of the cloth. The light blue background made the mark almost jump out at you. No concealing its presence, its identity or its origin.

Someone....someone in our *house*....someone in our *family* for God's sake, had wiped their ass with the wash cloth.

My parents were bleeding-heart liberals. My dad was a conventional FDR-New Deal Democrat from the north (Cleveland) and my mother a Dixie Democrat from the south (Alabama). They campaigned for Adlai Stevenson, marched in support of civil rights, and thought that Joe McCarthy and Dwight Eisenhower were warts on the ass of humanity. Whenever there was an election, we were all marched down to the elementary school—my parents' precinct—and spent the whole day handing out campaign literature. If a Democrat was in the race, my family was out there pushing for the votes.

But these two bleeding hearts had a dark side. They were firm believers in mass punishment. If something bad had happened and the culprit couldn't be identified, everyone got punished. Sure, there were innocent victims in the bunch, but mass punishment would assure them that the guilty got goosed, too. Apparently the injustice of punishing the innocent was less offensive to them than was the satisfaction of having stuck it to the guilty.

Thanksgiving of 1961 was a couple of decades before the Supreme Court's *Miranda* decision. In our house, you most certainly did *not* have the right to remain silent. Anything you said would be stuck so far up your butt that it would cross your eyes. And you didn't have the right to counsel. The so-called "presumption of innocence" was the correct answer on a civics test, but had no application in real life. Actually, we had just the reverse—a presumption of guilt. Unless you could prove your innocence, you were one guilty mofo.

How do you go about proving you didn't wipe your ass with a wash cloth? I had no freaking idea, nor did my siblings. So, we all ended up in our bedrooms under house arrest. My brother and I shared a room and

within less than a minute of incarceration we were quizzing one another.

“You wipe your ass with that thing?” I asked him.

“No way!” he responded. “You think I’m *crazy?*”

“Well,” I informed him, “you know that you and I are the prime suspects. They think this is much more of a ‘boy’ thing than a ‘girl’ thing.”

My brother was only 13 months younger than me. We were confidants. Comrades. Buddies. We never, ever lied to one another. I covered for him and he covered for me. When he told me that it wasn’t his ass that was wiped with the wash cloth, I knew that to be the truth. When I told him it wasn’t me, he believed me 100%.

So, we decided, one of our sisters had done it. Incredible. One of the many rules we had to abide by was the toilet paper rule. If there’s not enough left on the roll for the next butt that needed wiping, you took a fresh roll out of the linen closet by the bathroom door and placed it on the floor under the near-empty roll. Every once in a while someone would either overestimate the amount of toilet paper left on the roll, or underestimate the amount of wiping the next occupant would have to do, and you’d get caught short. The obviously solution was to duck-walk to the linen closet and fetch a fresh roll. You could raise hell about *who in the hell didn’t get out a new roll?*, but a confession would never be forthcoming. But regardless of how short you’d been caught, it never, ever justified reaching up on the towel rack, grabbing a wash cloth and dragging that mother across your ass. No one even considered that as a possible solution to the problem. No one, that is, until the slimy Cretin who’d dropped off a fresh load after Thanksgiving Dinner, 1961.

The Camp Commandant—my mother—reassembled all of the prisoners right at sunset.

“Everyone into the den . . . *now!*”, she’d yelled from the hallway. Away we went. A solemn procession down the hall, through the kitchen and into the den. Had someone confessed? Hardly. It was more likely that Oswald would confess to the Dallas Police Department in a couple of

years. “Yeah....I shot the bastard from the School Book Depository. He pissed me off big-time when he screwed up that Bay of Pigs thing.” A confession might have been forthcoming if the transgression was forgetting to take out the garbage or wipe off the table or fold the clothes. But this particular crime—this capital offense—this Worst Thing That Had Ever Happened in the History of Our Family—wasn’t something that someone would own up to. It was something that you’d take to your grave with you. Later in life you may come out of the closet and disclose your gayness, or the fact that you’re an obsessive-compulsive hand washer, or that you’d embezzled a bunch of money from your partner. But wiping your ass with a wash cloth on Thanksgiving Day was a little morsel of information hidden so far back in the recesses of your brain that after a little while even the transgressor began to doubt that they’d done it.

“Alright,” my mother said in a low and very menacing tone, “who did it?”

Silence. Everyone stared at the floor. My dad was sitting on the couch in silence, scanning all of us for the slightest hint of guilt. This was my parents’ version of the good-cop, bad-cop routine. Except it was simply bad-cop, bad-cop.

“Do all of you realize that not telling us right now that you did it is a sin?” Oh crap, I thought, here comes the Catholic guilt assault. No one feels guiltier than Catholics—even though many Jews try to embrace that distinction. “Worse,” she continued, “it’s a *mortal* sin.” Catholics divided all sins into mortal and venial. Kind of like felonies and misdemeanors. Venial sins—even hundreds of those things—won’t result in you spending eternity in The Big Fire. But just *one* mortal sin will do it. Commit a mortal sin and then die with that dude on your soul and it’s hair on fire, snakes nipping at your ankles and wild dogs biting the crap out of you.

“Do you?”, she snapped.

“Yes, ma’am,” we all mumbled

“Not telling us *right now* is a mortal sin, and every time we ask you

and you don't tell us, you're committing *another* mortal sin."

That won't get you anywhere, Mom, I remember thinking to myself. The Baltimore Chatechism had taught us that just one mortal sin was enough to condemn your immortal soul to hell for eternity. Just one. So what difference were mortal sins number two through a thousand? If you can't get any worse than hell, and you can't get any longer than eternity, why in the world would you ever worry about anything beyond *numero uno*?

The only consequence I could think of was when you went to confession. You had to confess all of your sins to the priest—and the frequency with which you committed them—and every once in a while that frequency thing could get you a pretty good mid-confession ass chewing. *I was disrespectful to my parents twice, I took the Lord's name in vain once, I left Mass early once, I was wasteful 6 times, I touched myself...WHAT? YOU WERE WASTEFUL SIX TIMES? WITH ALL OF THE STARVING CHILDREN IN THE WORLD AND YOU'RE THROWING AWAY FOOD? Well, Father, Spam makes me gag. I get sick just looking at that gelatin stuff. The way I figure it, Father, I eat my apple and Fritos, and if I took as much as a bite of that Spam, I could lose all of that. So in order not to waste the apple and Fritos by throwing them up, I just ditch the Spam sandwich. YOU'LL DO THAT NO MORE, YOU HEATHEN! FOR YOUR PENANCE, SAY TEN OUR FATHERS, TEN HAIL MARYS, NO SWEETS FOR A WEEK, AND YOU'LL EAT EVERY BITE OF EVERY SPAM SANDWICH YOUR SAINTLY MOTHER PUTS IN YOUR LUNCH!*

If I could figure out that multiple mortal sins had no more consequences than did one of those suckers, certainly my brothers and sisters could too. Fifteen minutes of berating, cajoling, belittleing and threatening us got my parents nowhere. The fact that all but one of us was innocent seemed to have little effect on our parents. Until the butt wiper came forward, we were all guilty in their eyes. Our parents' generation was the one that had interred whole families of Japanese Americans for the duration of World War II just because some of their distant cousins had *Tora, Tora, Tora!*ed our ass at Pearl Harbor. Forget that most of them had been born in the U.S. and had never even set foot on Japanese soil. Forget that many of them were serving in the Armed Forces at the time of the attack. Forget that the Bill of Rights had just as

much application to them as it did to any other American. If you had yellow skin, slanted eyes, ate raw fish and knew how to use chopsticks, you were locked up. Kids, parents, grandparents—everybody. If these two Greatest Generation members were going to send families to camps to live behind barbed-wire for years just because of their heritage, they sure weren't going to have any trouble sending us back to our rooms for wiping our ass with a wash cloth.

“Back to your rooms!” my mother had finally shouted, with her arm extended and pointing in the general direction of our bedrooms. *“And you can stay there until school starts Monday morning as far as I’m concerned.”* Crap. We knew two things for sure: there was no way in hell the transgressor was ever going to come forward now—it would be like a member of the KKK standing up at the NAACP convention and admitting to having been the Imperial Wizard himself; and there wasn't even a flicker of a chance that our parents—especially our mother—would relent. She didn't just ascribe to the Doctrine of Tough Love, she actually was its inventor.

And that's exactly how we spent Thanksgiving of 1961. Mass, breakfast, Lions vs. Packers, great dinner with my grandfather pushing my sister's face into her sweet potatoes, playing outside in the glorious Autumn sun and then all hell breaking loose. Thursday evening, all day Friday, all day Saturday and all day Sunday in our rooms. We were paroled for meals and chores, and for Mass on Sunday, but it was right back to the room. My brother and I played Hangman, juggled tennis balls, arranged all of our baseball cards in alphabetical order, re-read some of our *Tom Swift, Jr.* and *Hardy Boys* books, drew pictures of battleships, pulled legs off a roach we'd caught—anything to chase away the mind-numbing boredom. We were let out of our cages on Monday to make and eat breakfast, put out the garbage cans and then go to school. Things were ultra-tense around the house for the next week or so. Our parents were sore losers—and as far as they were concerned—someone had gotten away with a capital offense.

By Christmas of 1961 things were pretty much back to normal. We had a big Christmas dinner on my mother's good china, and my brother sniffed the mashed potatoes to see if they'd gone bad—only to get the back of his head smacked before he could react—and then my mother

jumping my grandfather about disrupting dinner again. We'd gone outside again to play after dinner and let our food settle. When we came back inside to get in the desert line, things were a little tense as we were momentarily overcome with *deja-vu*. We had several Christmas pies to chose from—pecan, coconut cream, apple and chocolate—and sampling more than one was permitted only on this, the birthday of Christ Our Lord. As we ate our desert we weren't interrupted with screams or soiled wash cloths. The drama of a month earlier seems to have rehabilitated whomever had done the dirty deed. I seriously doubted that we'd have any of *that* happen again.

After desert, we went back outside to enjoy the last hour of golden, late afternoon sunlight. We were big game players. Capture the Flag, Simon Says, Hide-'n-seek—games that involved a lot of humans but no equipment. A bunch of our neighborhood kids—our friends—joined us. In short order, we had over a dozen kids on line while my oldest sister shouted, “Simon says take five steps!” Those of us who hadn't been eliminated had gotten about two-thirds of the way across the back yard when something strange happened. Something *really* strange.

Harry Wilson lived in the house directly across the street from ours. He was two years younger than me and was generally considered to be the nastiest kid on the block. Always scratching places where your mother didn't want you to scratch. Had a perpetual runny nose—possibly because he was always digging in it with his index finger. Even ate his own boogers. Was unzipped about half the time, wore part of his last meal on his shirt and had perpetual piss spots in the crotch area. Harry was the kind of dirty, nasty kid who smelled bad, looked worse and if you ever had the misfortune to touch him, felt like he'd been dipped in the SCUZ.

On this particular Christmas afternoon, Harry had been eliminated by the very first command (*Stop!* Nothing about *Simon says stop!*, but the dumb little bastard kept walking). So he's standing over to the side with the other losers, and he's hopping up and down, like he has a bee up his ass or something. Then he starts whimpering. Now no one was paying attention to Simon—my sister—because Harry looks like he's about to explode or something. My sister finally says, “Harry....what in the *world* is wrong with you?” Harry hesitates a few seconds and then took off for

the back door of our house screaming on the way, “I’ve gotta go!”, and then the creep just barges in our house and is gone. That was a big no-no. You knocked before you went into someone’s house. It may not have been the rule at the Wilson house, but it sure was at ours. I ran into the house after him, but by the time I got to the bathroom door he’d closed and locked it. I waited on him in the hallway until he finally opened the door. He had a sheepish grin on his face as he barged past me and ran back outside. When I went out to rejoin the game, my brother met me at the door.

“C’mere,” he said, motioning with his head towards the back of the garage.

We walked behind the garage together and I asked him, “What’s up?”

He looked over at our siblings and friends who were about to choose up sides for Capture the Flag and said in a low tone, “Didn’t we play out here Thanksgiving afternoon while our food was settling?”

“Sure did,” I responded. “Pretty much the same group.”

“And wasn’t Harry here?”

I thought to myself and said, “I can’t remember.”

“Well, *I* remember,” he said with a growl. “He had cranberry sauce all over his tee shirt and looked like he was bleeding somewhere.”

“So what?” I inquired.

My brother slowly shook his head from side to side. “So *what?* How about the wash cloth in the bathroom that no one could ever explain?”

It fit like a glove. Nasty-ass Harry Wilson had gone in our house, launched the Queen Mary and then did something that was totally consistent with his miserable, filthy self: he wiped his ass with the wash cloth.

At that moment we knew we'd nailed the killer. Beyond a reasonable doubt. We talked a little further and decided that we'd wait until the game was over and there'd be a little payback when Harry walked between the houses to go home. Our plan worked perfectly. After the last flag was captured, the crowd of kids began to disperse.

"Harry....c'mere—I want to show you something!", my brother shouted with a warm, inviting smile on his face. "We found a dead snake over here!" *Nothing* intrigued Harry more than a dead anything. Dead frogs, flies, rabbits, mice—any dead creature fascinated him.

When he got between the houses he was in our snare. He looked around on the ground for the dead snake, and when he couldn't find it he asked, "Well, where is it?"

I walked slowly up to him and got almost nose-to-nose. I had to be careful because I didn't want to touch his damn nose. I was looking down at him as I was a half a head taller.

"Harry," I began, "you ever wipe your ass with a wash cloth?"

Even in the waning light I could see him pale. Then gulp. Then pale again.

"You lie to us, Harry," my brother said in a loud whisper, "and we'll set your damn hair on fire."

He began to cry. Just a wimper at first, and then body-racking sobs.

"But there wasn't no toilet paper!" he pleaded. "What was I supposed to do?"

My brother and I thought for a few seconds, and then he said, "Harry, that ain't our problem. Don't know what you do. But you *don't* wipe your ass with one of our wash cloths!"

If we'd started kicking his ass right then, we'd have killed him. So we talked for a few minutes, Harry kept sobbing—knowing that he wasn't about to get off the hook—and we stripped him and then chased him

home—stark naked. We folded his jeans, tee shirt and underwear and put them on top of his dad's Buick Electra in the driveway, and put his tennis shoes on the hood. We had no idea how Harry ever got in his house or past his parents or made it to some clothes, and didn't really care.

Harry never played with us again. If he was outside and we came out, he'd go inside. If we went in, he'd come out. His dad got transferred or something and they moved away about six months later.

We never told our parents what we'd found out. The fact was that we had no proof that it was Harry, we *had* stripped him which would have gotten us in big trouble if the truth be known, and the whole wash cloth thing was water under the bridge. The downside of telling on Harry was a lot more likely than the upside. So we just kept our mouths shut.

Our parents are both gone now. They went to their graves with the memory of that dark hash mark on the light blue wash cloth, probably wondering from time to time just how such an aberration could have happened in their house. Of all of the confessions we made to our parents in our later years—where those panty hose in the back of the '57 Chevy station wagon had *really* come from, what had happened to that fifth of 23 year old Scotch they'd been given for Christmas and then couldn't find and that kind of stuff, the resolution of the mystery of Thanksgiving of 1961 was never shared with them.