America’s Thanksgivings

David Walsh
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In an effort to give a livelier and more in-depth picture of modern life, American novelists such as John Dos Passos—*The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936)—introduced “newsreel” sections including headlines, advertisements and popular songs. We hope the following selections will provide some sense of American reality on Thanksgiving Day 2018.

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— “There aren’t many downsides to America’s humming economy. ” (Wall Street Journal)

— “On his days off from his $7.50-an-hour job as a cook at the Chicken Hut restaurant in Riverdale, Ga. [Georgia] , Laugudria Screven Jr., 23, travels more than 25 miles across Atlanta to sell plasma. By offering up his arm to a technician’s needle twice a week at $50 a shot, he scrapes together enough to pay his $360 rent.

“Yet donating plasma takes a toll on Screven’s body, leaving him drowsy and weak. And even with the extra income, he says he sometimes can’t afford to eat more than once a day. Often he comes home to a refrigerator that contains little more than mustard, ketchup and peanut butter.

“‘I sell my blood to pay my bills,’ he said, rubbing his arm as he waited for a bus in East Point, Ga. ‘It’s kind of messed up. If I were paid a fair wage, I wouldn’t have to go through this. ’” (*Los Angeles Times*)

— “Set on 40 acres in Newport, Rhode Island, Castle Hill Inn, a Relais & Châteaux property, provides guests with a classic New England Thanksgiving. Chef Lou Rossi—an alum of NYC’s three-Michelin-starred Per Se—showcases the local harvest with appetizers like Native littleneck clams, Matunuck oysters and chilled white shrimp, plus herb roasted Helger’s Farm turkey with sage gravy and cranberry sauce, and a selection of pies, pastries and tarts. The hotel also features a spa, the Retreat at Castle Hill by Farmaesthetics, and has a selection of romantic and rustic rooms and cottages available by the beach, overlooking the harbor, and on its namesake hill. [A room in the Superior Beach House is $1,091.45 a night including taxes and fees.] (Town & Country)

— “Hundreds of people in need lined Bleecker Street in downtown Utica [New York] to receive a free Thanksgiving day meal to make with their families. … This year roughly 700 meals were donated, an increase of about 200 from last year. In Utica 1 in 3 people are living in poverty, according to DataUSA.” (WKTV)

— “Despite a relatively good economy, local food pantries are seeing a double-digit increase in the number of hungry residents. Des Moines [Iowa] pantries normally expect about a 3.5 percent increase each month, compared to the previous year. But for the last six months, that increase has more than tripled in the metro area, said Rev. Sarai Schnucker Rice, executive director of the Des Moines Area Religious Council, which oversees the network of 14 local pantries.” (*Des Moines Register*)

— “Though major cities, such as Dayton [Ohio], are often thought of as having the most households facing hardship, several of the Gem City’s suburbs actually rival it. Thousands of families around the Miami Valley are not necessarily in poverty but are still struggling to get by financially, according to the United Way report.” (*Dayton Daily News*)

— “Three dynastic wealth families—the Waltons, the Kochs, and the Mars—have seen their wealth increase nearly 6,000 percent since 1982. Meanwhile, median household wealth over the same period went down by 3 percent. …

“The median family in the United States owns just over $80,000 in household wealth. The richest person in the United States (and the world), Jeff Bezos, has accumulated a fortune nearly 2 million times that amount. The Bezos fortune expanded by $78.5 billion just in the last year to $160 billion. Even at the recently increased wage of $15/hour, a full-time Amazon worker would need to toil for 2.5 million years to generate this much money.” (Institute for Policy Studies)

— “Gone are lucrative manufacturing positions [in Indianapolis, Indiana] that could elevate a family into the middle class, even without higher education. Those jobs were in city neighborhoods. They offered salaries high enough to pay for homes, send kids to college, and build up savings accounts. And there were tons of them. At their peaks, the General Motors stamping plant employed 5,600 people, Western Electric had 8,000 workers, and RCA had 8,200.

“But today, scattered brownfields—some with crumbling buildings, some vacant lots—are the only remnants of those once-bustling factories. …

“Stefanie Bell and Steven Pedrazoli—and their 8-year-old son, Chance—are living that new reality. Both parents have regularly worked, but the family is homeless. They’ve been living since April at Dayspring Center at 1537 Central Ave.

“Bell, 37, a server, has uncertain wages because she relies on tips and a $2.13 hourly wage that barely covers taxes. During some shifts, the money at Primanti Bros. restaurant downtown is good. During others, factoring in $3.50 for a round-trip IndyGo bus fare, it’s barely worth showing up. The night before meeting with IBJ, Bell made just $30 in tips, despite

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working 5 p.m. to close." (*Indianapolis Business Journal*)

— "There are a lot of things in life you might expect to cost $150,000—just probably not a Thanksgiving dinner. And yet, that's exactly what Old Homestead, a New York City steakhouse, is offering this year with what it bills as the most expensive Thanksgiving dinner in history, topping the record set by the $76,000 dinner the restaurant offered last year.

"This year's dinner, which at a total price of $150,000 is nearly three times more than the average U.S. household income, comes complete with all of the world's finest ingredients, as well as keys to a 2018 Maserati Levante nestled inside a $135-per-pound free-range, organic turkey sprinkled with gold flakes." (Yahoo Finance)

— "Near where he slept on a Salinas [California] sidewalk Monday night, David Rodriguez, 39, regularly gets meals at Dorothy's Kitchen in Salinas' Chinatown. He has not gone to the nonprofit's Thanksgiving festivity before, but he plans on going for the first time Thursday.

"Born and raised in the Salinas Valley, Rodriguez grew up going to his grandmother's for Thanksgiving. Homeless since 2012, Rodriguez said he considers many others in Chinatown—a neighborhood often synonymous with poverty—like his family. The opportunity to share his childhood tradition with his new family would mean a lot to him, he said." (*The Californian*)

— "The 8th Annual Readers' Choice Survey from Business Jet Traveler provides an interesting look into why people fly privately, what they want in their private jets, where they are going, who they fly with, their favorite aircraft and more. … First some good news. If flying privately and planning to fly privately are signs of a strong economy, readers are quite optimistic. While 45% of respondents said they flew about the same amount as the previous year, 22% said they flew more and 8% said they flew much more, compared to 14% who flew a bit less and 12% who flew much less. Looking ahead, 44% of the magazine's readers said they will fly about the same during the next 12 months, 34% said they will fly a bit more and 11% will fly much more, compared to just 11% who predict they will fly less." (Forbes)

— "Last August, Destini Johnson practically danced out of jail, after landing there for two months on drug charges. She bubbled with excitement about her new freedom and returning home to her parents in Muncie, Ind. She even talked about plans to find a job.

"Eight months later, Johnson, 27, lay in a coma, silent except for the beeping of machines. She looked small and pale, buried in a tangle of hospital bedsheets and tubes, after suffering a dozen or so strokes as a result of her latest opioid overdose.

"Her mother, Katiena Johnson, kept vigil at the intensive care unit at Ball Memorial Hospital in Muncie every day, fretting not only about whether her daughter would live, or how much brain damage she'd suffered, but also how to pay for the myriad costs resulting from the latest harrowing chapter of Destini's opioid addiction. Katiena Johnson says her daughter is regaining consciousness and is out of the ICU." (NPR)

— "We are especially reminded on Thanksgiving of how the virtue of gratitude enables us to recognize, even in adverse situations, the love of God in every person, every creature, and throughout nature. Let us be mindful of the reasons we are grateful for our lives, for those around us, and for our communities. We also commit to treating all with charity and mutual respect, spreading the spirit of Thanksgiving throughout our country and across the world." (Donald J. Trump's Presidential Proclamation on Thanksgiving Day, November 20, 2018)

— "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! AMERICA FIRST! …

"There are a lot of CRIMINALS in the [immigrant] Caravan. We will stop them. Catch and Detain! Judicial Activism, by people who know nothing about security and the safety of our citizens, is putting our country in great danger. Not good!" (Donald J. Trump's tweets, November 21)

— "Some vehicles made it out in time the day the Camp Fire [in northern California] ignited. Others became grenades after being hit by flaming embers. The worst of it may have happened in a town called Paradise, approximate population 26,000. 'I was driving down Neal Road, and the houses by the horse stables were already on fire—the side of the road was on fire as we were driving through,' said David Cuen, a Paradise resident who I met at a tent encampment of Camp Fire survivors in a Walmart parking lot in Chico. Neal Road is one of only three roads from Paradise with access to Highway 99. It was one of the few ways out: 'I look in my rear-view mirror, count back 10 cars, and the 10th or 15th car, it blew up. The flames had overwhelmed all the cars by it. And the cops were making people get in cars that had room. So, you're talking four to five people in each car.' Cuen spent the week after escaping the fire sharing a tent with his wife and her family." (*Slate*)

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Vast popular hardship and suffering, on the one hand, and almost indescribable wealth and social indifference, on the other. Two parties of the corporate oligarchy, dedicated to war and political reaction. The impossible economic and political conditions must produce sooner rather than later the greatest social upheavals in American history.

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