



## Paltry Poultry: The Tormented Turkey

by Laura Goldman

There are a lot of turkeys in California. Our golden state is the nation's leading producer of the literal variety — over 14.6 million are raised here annually (unfortunately the government doesn't release statistics on the figurative kind). Domesticated turkeys roamed South Bay ranches not long ago, but such suburban roosts are disappearing faster than open-air shopping centers. The only place you're likely to see a turkey around here nowadays is in the frozen food bin at your supermarket, or at some local poultry "farms," where ready-to-cook birds are delivered daily.

Ah, the poor, maligned turkey. According to the Pocket Dictionary of American Slang, a "turkey" is any "worthless, useless, unsuitable thing." Even chickens are smarter than turkeys — they cross the road to get to the other side, whereas dippy turkeys cross it because it's there.

In experiments conducted by bored ranchers, turkeys would not move when bits of straw were placed on their heads. Apparently they felt so loaded down that they stayed in the same position until

hunger forced them to move. The same reaction, or lack thereof, was observed when a chalk line was drawn in front of the turkeys. On the other hand, oddly shaped rocks, a pail in the yard or clothes on the line can put suspicious turkeys in a dither.

Sentimental fools as well, wild turkeys are easy targets for hunters. If one turkey is shot, others in the flock will hold a great wake around the body instead of flying away. Many moons ago, only children in Cherokee tribes hunted turkey; adults pursued more challenging game. The kids became experts at killing their prey, even though they had to shoot them directly in the eye with blow darts. Hence came the World War II expression "turkey shoot," Air Force jargon for an exceptionally easy task.

Like many television stars, turkeys are dumb but attractive. Back in 400 A.D., Mexico's Indians made clothes from the feathers and used the quills for the shafts of their arrows. They made eating utensils with the bones, but the meat was never the main course — religious or superstitious customs made turkey-eating taboo. It wasn't until the early 1500s that turkeys were first digested by Cortez and other Spanish explorers. They liked what they ate and brought some to Europe. A century later the Pilgrims brought several back to America and, as we all learned in school, turkey was served at the first

Thanksgiving dinner.

Turkeys weren't always so maligned. During the U.S.A.'s infancy, they were revered. Benjamin Franklin proposed that the turkey should be the national emblem, but the dignified bald eagle won out. "Proud as a turkey" was a common expression circa 1800 (and NBC might consider adopting it now).

But turkeys had less to be proud about as the years wore on. They were slighted in literature (is Turkey Lurkey any kind of role model for impressionable youngsters?), in theater (would you pay hard-earned cash for tickets to a turkey?) and in song ("Turkey in the Straw" is a perky little tune, but after reading about the effect of straw on turkeys, don't you wonder about the composer's sense of humor?). Fortunately, the average turkey lives no longer than 18 months, hardly enough time to develop a serious persecution complex.

If you're eating turkey on the 26th, whether it's Foster Farms' finest or a Swanson's Hungry Man Dinner, take a few moments to think about how that maligned creature spent its precious few days on this planet, about how its confused but content life was mercilessly ended with a swift decapitation.

Happy Turkey Day! ■

*Laura Goldman, a contributing editor of this publication, likes to talk turkey.*