

COMMUNITY

Early Okanogan had its own Turkey Drop

THE THANKSGIVING Turkey Drop, from the TV comedy "WKRP in Cincinnati," has become somewhat of a Thanksgiving tradition, with the vision of live turkeys being hurled from a helicopter as a publicity stunt engraved in many people's minds.

If you're unfamiliar with the Turkey Drop, clips from the episode can be found on YouTube.

The idea was that turkeys would be thrown from the helicopter and left to fly where they may, with crack WKRP news reporter Les Nessman providing commentary and wishing everyone a happy Thanksgiving.

But the problem is that domestic turkeys don't fly. Being bred for meat, their bodies are too heavy for their wings to lift. More svelte wild turkeys can fly short distances.

What ensued was a flock of birds plummeting to earth and Les, broadcasting live, borrowing from the Hindenburg disaster broadcast and exclaiming, "Oh, the humanity!"

WKRP wasn't the first to use live turkeys as an advertising ploy nor the first to drop them from on high.

In Okanogan County a hundred years ago, folks were well-acquainted with "Turkey Day," an early version of the turkey drop that was more successful and a bit more humane.

O.H. Woody, editor of the Okanogan Independent, wrote about Turkey Day under the title "Holiday Advertising" in the April 1925 issue of The Washington Newspaper, a publication dedicated to the study and improvement of journalism in Washington.

The Washington Newspaper, a trade publication of the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association, still exists.

Woody wrote that Turkey Day and a Christmas Buyers' Carnival were sales events that stimulated advertising for him at The Independent. He described, for his fellow publishers, both promotions.

Turkey Day "has become a rousing annual event of a gala nature," Woody wrote. "Its

popularity and proven merit lend to the general carnival for holiday buyers."

C.E. Blackwell and Co. first tried Turkey Day at its Riverside store several years earlier. Blackwell was an early merchant in Okanogan County, with stores in several towns.

"The idea developed rapidly with repeated usage," Woody wrote. "As a novelty to stimulate advertising and produce collections and trade, it has proven effective both on a small and large scale, and publishers may advocate local adoption of a similar plan with confidence that once tried it will be repeated."

Woody then launched into a description of the promotion.

"The first 'Turkey Day' at Riverside was no more than a teaser idea to attract a large crowd to a fall sale on a single day. Announcement was made that ten turkeys would be released from the roof of the store under the scramble rule of 'catchers keepers.' Another turkey was given as a prize in a free guessing contest," Woody wrote.

Hundreds of people turned out in the first year, he recalled.

"The turkeys were tossed into the air, one after another, and only those who have seen such an event can picture the excitement and fun to onlookers and participants alike," he continued. "As the birds took off in various directions and for unpredictable distances, a howling, laughing, racing crowd of men and boys followed."

Woody doesn't say where Blackwell got the turkeys, but from his description of the event it appears they were domestic but probably not as top-heavy as today's birds, in that they could fly. The 1923 Turkey Day in Okanogan saw pure white birds set loose.

Blackwell's promotions were held the Saturday before Thanksgiving.

Okanogan's first Turkey Day was in 1923 and marked the opening day of a fall clearance sale that extended through Thanksgiving week.

"The amusement features of the original plan were retained, but business promoting ideas were added" to the Okanogan event, according to Woody. "At an announced hour in the afternoon, five turkeys were released from the roof of the (Blackwell) building. Free guesses were made by all visitors during the day on the weight of a big gobbler that paraded in a show window. The gobbler was the prize."

The Blackwell building, built in 1918, still stands on Okanogan's South Second Avenue. It was remodeled several years ago and houses shops on the ground floor and condominium apartments above.

The gala spirit of the Okanogan event "was aroused by the mirth-provoking antics of those attempting to gain possession of the birds tossed from the roof," Woody wrote. "In response to a natural question, it may be added that in no instance has there developed any display of cruelty against the birds. The free contest encouraged good will, and particularly enlisted the booster spirit of the youngsters."

Another dozen turkeys were given away by means of hourly drawings, with people getting tickets by making purchases or paying down their Blackwell accounts. People also could obtain a turkey by purchasing \$50 or more worth of merchandise.

To wrap up the week-long sale, a larger prize was on the line. A Victrola was given one year; a dining room suite another.

And, even though "a turkey is a turkey on Turkey Day," wrote Woody, no effort was made to provide large birds.

"Care is taken, however, that the birds are not scrawny," he continued. "They averaged nine pounds."

The Christmas promotion was an offshoot, with the Commercial Club buying items to be given away in promotional drawings.

Turkey Day was deemed a success and Woody remarked



at the number of collections on accounts that Blackwell received during the promotion's first year in Okanogan.

There was a downside the next year, as people withheld payments on their accounts until Turkey Day so they could pay more on their accounts and thus obtain more tickets for free turkeys.

"This feature will be over-completed by giving tickets on collections alone between the 10th of the month, the regular settlement date, and the opening of the sale," Woody noted.



The Blackwell Building remains a downtown Okanogan fixture.

DEE CAMP | The Chronicle

First snow

DEE CAMP | The Chronicle

A kitty checks out the Okanogan Valley's first snowfall of the season the afternoon of Nov. 18. About two inches fell in the Omak-Okanogan area. A hazardous weather outlook was in place through Friday evening. The forecast calls for mostly sunny weather through the weekend with patches of fog and high temperatures in the high 30s and low 40s.



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