Thanksgiving is an American tradition, but it can be celebrated anywhere in the world. As our Outrigger ‘ohana counts its blessings this Thanksgiving weekend, we have much to be thankful for. In particular, we can be grateful for the strength of the hospitality industry throughout the Pacific region over the last year. A significant rebound in the demand for travel has revved up the “economic engines” of Hawaii, Guam, Fiji, Australia, Bali and Thailand, stimulating these economies and creating many excellent job opportunities. It’s a welcome relief after several difficult years.

Certainly there are many areas of the world that have not been so fortunate. Political unrest, tsunamis, hurricanes, terrorism and economic downturns have plagued many areas of the world. As we write, the television set in the next room is loudly reporting on the exchange of rockets, bombs and artillery shells between Israel and Gaza. Business editors are describing the crises that plague the economies of Europe. In the U.S., political leaders are working round the clock to keep the country from plunging off a “fiscal cliff.”

In contrast, here in the Pacific region, we have had an outstanding year by all measures. So this year, 2012, it is especially meaningful that we pause and reflect on our good fortune.

As every American schoolchild knows, we trace Thanksgiving back to the Pilgrims who, 391 years ago, after surviving the terrible winter of 1620-1621 at Plymouth, Massachusetts, sat down with their Native American neighbors to give thanks. The Pilgrims certainly had good reason to be thankful. In the previous winter, nearly half of them had starved or frozen to death or perished from disease. Things were looking up over the summer and fall as they refined their survival skills and, with the help of their generous neighbors, replenished their food supplies. How thankful they were to have a decent chance of surviving the coming winter!

Over the course of history, the reasons to celebrate Thanksgiving have evolved with the times. The early New England settlements designated Thanksgiving days somewhat randomly from year to year, when crops and weather were good.

During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress appointed one or more Thanksgiving days each year. In 1777, General George Washington proclaimed a Thanksgiving in celebration of a crucial victory at Saratoga, New York. In 1789, Washington, now the president of the new country, issued the first national Thanksgiving Day proclamation to celebrate the conclusion of the war for independence and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution.

While today we celebrate for one day, centering around a special, celebratory meal often shared with family and friends, the Pilgrims celebrated with three days of feasting. The dates and length of celebration have seen surprising variation over the years. From the era of the Founding Fathers until the time of President Abraham Lincoln, each state chose its own date for the celebration. In 1863, Lincoln set the last Thursday in November as a uniform date, nationwide.

In 1939, during the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the holiday forward to the third Thursday in November in an effort to extend the pre-Christmas shopping season and thus stimulate the economy, which was still suffering from the Great Depression. However, two years later, after much debate, the date was moved back to the fourth Thursday in November, where it remains today.

What Americans eat for Thanksgiving has also evolved with time. Today it just wouldn’t be Thanksgiving without turkey, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie. But the Pilgrims ate a very different meal – a smorgasbord of venison, clams, mussels, lobster, eel, beans, peas, corn, onions, squash, ducks, geese, wild turkeys and even swans! Notice that the bread, mashed potatoes, butter, beef, pork and sugary desserts were missing!

Over our nation’s history, various types of activities have been associated with Thanksgiving. Originally it was basically a religious holiday with all members of a community giving thanks to God for their blessings. Many families today also give thanks to God with a prayer before eating – on this day especially, if not all others.

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In early years, shooting contests were popular events as community members competed for bragging rights and perhaps a turkey or pigeon for the dinner pot. In some parts of the country, one can still find Thanksgiving turkey shoots today. The guns are real, but you'd be unlikely to find live birds being used as targets.

Big city parades have been popular for many years. In the 1920s, city children would dress up in old, worn-out clothes, smear ashes on their faces and beg in the streets in “ragamuffin parades.” That practice has disappeared, but today the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City, with its enormous floating balloons, is televised nationally and has become such a tradition that many people think of it as the “Macy's Day” parade.

Watching football and other televised sports such as college basketball, golf and auto racing has also become a centerpiece of many families’ Thanksgiving celebrations. Perhaps the most unusual televised event today is the World Champion Punkin Chunkin (punkinchunkin.com) contest, a charity benefit for which teams gather in Delaware and compete to hurl pumpkins as far as they can. This year’s event, which actually took place Sunday, November 4, was broadcast on the Science Channel on Thanksgiving evening.

Thanksgiving is indeed a great American custom. Like all cultural events, it has evolved greatly since it began, and it continues to change with the times. There is a core message of “giving thanks” however, that still rings true, no matter where or how it is celebrated.

Here at Outrigger, this is our 65th Thanksgiving celebration, and every year there is reason to be thankful. This year, 2012, we have been extraordinarily fortunate and it is most appropriate that we pause and count our blessings. In addition to this year’s business success, we have a wonderful ‘ohana, which now spreads across half the globe. This is the nicest group of people you are likely to meet anywhere, and we work in a company that places employees first and prides itself on providing them many opportunities to excel and grow. We are fortunate indeed.