

# Native saved Pilgrims from

# starvation

OHSWEKEN — Last year I wrote about how Thanksgiving started among the Pilgrims. Our Canadian Thanksgiving developed from the American holiday so it is not strictly a U.S. story. The Wampanoag Indian called Squanto, who could speak English, was a large part of the story. He almost singlehandedly saved the Pilgrims from starvation. Without him, the Pilgrims would have had very little to be thankful for.

Squanto had learned to speak a bit of English when he accompanied an English sea captain as he traded along the New England coast. Squanto guided the traders to friendly Indian villages. In return he was taken to London, England, and abandoned there by the captain. After three years there he had learned to speak English even better. He managed to find a ship which was going near the vicinity of Cape Cod so he signed aboard and worked his way back.

However, his troubles still weren't over. Before he reached his home he was captured by other Englishmen and shipped back to Europe, with other Indians, as a slave. Because he could speak English, he was taken in by Catholic monks in Spain. They helped him find his way back to England. The rest of the shipload of Indians were sold and never heard from again.

Seven years after he first left, Squanto again reached the shores of Cape Cod. This

## Our Town

George  
Beaver



time he made it back to where his home village had been. It was deserted. At the village of another tribe nearby, he received the bitter news that he was the last Wampanoag still living.

According to the English version of history, the Wampanoag Indians were wiped out by diseases for which they had no resistance. All this was supposed to have happened in the seven years that Squanto was away. There are other less popular versions that tell of hundreds of Wampanoags being loaded into ships at Plymouth to be sold into slavery. We know what happened to Squanto, so this seems more likely to have been their fate. The first version just sounds better to European ears because it takes the responsibility off the Europeans for the extinction of the Wampanoags.

The last Wampanoag on earth did not seek vengeance on the English.

Instead, he helped them to survive. As he walked through their pitiful imitation of an English village, he saw that they needed some lessons on how to obtain food in this different land. He showed them food beneath their feet. There were clams and other shellfish in abundance under the sands of the beaches but the foolish Englishmen thought they were poisonous. He showed them how fish could be caught and corn could be grown.

The natives of North America were a religious and thankful people. Some Indian nations had not one but several thanksgiving festivals during the year to give thanks to the Great Spirit. Squanto could very easily have been the one to suggest a Thanksgiving day.

Within two years of helping to save the Pilgrims from almost certain death, the last of the Wampanoags himself died of a European disease. He was only in his twenties. Perhaps it was for the best. If he had lived too long among the Pilgrims he may have found out what really happened to his people. Then he may have regretted helping the Pilgrims unselfishly.