INTREPID BUT NEARLY FORGOTTEN BRADFORD LED PILGRIMS THROUGH YEARS OF TRIAL

Editor's note: Almost forgotten in the shrouds of history is a remarkable man, who should be ranked with the great in the founding of the nation. There could hardly be a better occasion than now to remind America anew of the life and times this notable figure-- to whom we owe the idea of Thanksgiving observance.

By, Hugh A. Mulligan, Associated Press Writer

Posterity has dealt indifferently with William Bradford, the Pilgrim governor who proclaimed the first Thanksgiving Day back in 1621.

By all rights of character accomplishment, of wisdom and courage, of over-all inspired leadership, Bradford should be revered as a great American, a figure on a par with Washington and Lincoln in our national gallery of heroes.

But somehow, dimly viewed through the mists of history, his image has been obscured by the fame of Miles Standish, John Alden and Priscilla Mullin, whom Longfellow ennobled in his fanciful recreation of the Plymouth story.

Or else he has been confused with the stern, witch-hunting Puritan governors of the neighboring Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Bradford certainly loomed larger in the life of Plymouth than Standish. The latter was his close friend and military adviser for many years. He also loomed larger than John Alden and Priscilla Mullin, whom he joined together in a civil marriage ceremony shortly after becoming governor

Only 31 at the time of his election, a silk weaver by trade and a Pilgrim by rigid choice of conscience, Bradford was to be governor of Plymouth for 30 of next 35 years and to put indelibly the stamp of his remarkable character on the New World's first successful experiment in democracy.

It was he who molded Plymouth into what it was to become: A shining symbol of harmonious self government, of a hard working, God fearing free society ruled by love and laws, at peace with its neighbors but ever ready to defend itself in case of attack, a symbol that was to have an effect far beyond the boundaries and far beyond the life span of the tiny colony.

Massachusetts Bay eventually swallowed up Plymouth. But Plymouth's way prevailed in shaping the mighty nation that found its seeds in these small beginnings.

Born at Austerfield in Yorkshire, in March, 1590, William Bradford lost his father when he was a year old, and upon his mother's remarriage, went to live with his grandfather.

When both his mother and his grandfather died within a few years, he was orphaned to the care of two stern uncles, Robert and Thomas Bradford.

Lowborn, uneducated, an orphan at 8 and a religious dissenter at 12, Bradford had in him the makings of the first authentic American: The pioneer, the rebel, the independent thinker, the self made man.

Other New England Colonies were run by university men. Virginia's governors came from the Royal Court. But Bradford was homespun and self taught; neither birth nor wealth assisted him in fulfilling his destiny.

He took over the fortunes of the colony at a desperate time. John Carver, the first governor, fell dead of sunstroke on a balmy April day shortly after the Mayflower sailed home to England. His death climaxed a series of grim tragedies that decimated the Colony in the first few months in the New World.

Of the 102 Mayflower passengers who survived the hazardous 65 day ocean voyage to step ashore on that bleak and forbidding coast, only 56 lived through the first winter

Scarcely 20 men were on hand in the Common House to pick the new governor. The young man they chose already knew much of suffering and of sorrow In the cold, dark waters off Province town, his 23 -year-old wife, Dorothy Bradford, lay buried. On a bitter December day, while her husband was off in the long boat on the final expedition that resulted in the discovery of the fine harbor at Plymouth, she had either jumped or fallen from the high deck of the Mayflower. Plymouth was a widowers' world.

Miles Standish, Edward Winslow, Isaac Allerton, the men who helped Bradford most in that first trying year, all had lost their wives in the terrible general sickness which the governor so touchingly describes in his remarkable history of "Plymouth Plantation": "But it pleased God to visit us then with death daily, and with so general a disease that the living were scarce able to Bury the dead, and ye well not in any measure sufficient to tend ye sick."

But somehow, through sickness and death, through threat of starvation and Indian attack, through the howling storms of winter and the drenching rains of spring, Plymouth endured.

By fall, the governor could proclaim a day of thanksgiving and invite the local Indians to share.

The feast that lasted three days and saw Miles Standish drill his little company up and down Plymouth's Main street for the dedication of the 90 braves who showed up. What had Plymouth to be thankful for?

Against the approach of another severe winter, seven one-room houses and four supply buildings stood in a neat row. There was a good harvest of 20 acres of Indian corn, and fish and fowl abounded at their doorstep Some beginnings had been made in the beaver trade, so they had hopes of paying off their staggering debt to the merchant adventurers in London who underwrote the voyage. And, best of all, they had signed a peace treaty with the local Indians. It was to remain unbroken during the life of the Colony.

From the first landfall, the sighting of the clay bluffs of Truro, Bradford rapidly grew in stature in the eyes of his fellow colonists. He took part in all the hazardous explorations up and down the coast, sloshing through snow on those long night marches, falling into an Indian deer trap, chasing after "savages" who watched them furtively from the woods but seldom ventured closer, finding their cache of corn and an old iron kettle, and finally exchanging arrows in that famous first encounter, which fortunately drew no blood but left each side with a healthy respect for the other.

These adventures steeled Bradford for even tougher trials in the years ahead. After that first grim winter, the first Thanksgiving day proved only a brief respite from the dangers and misfortunes that constantly beset the colony.

The harvest had hardly been gathered in when the Fortune sailed into Plymouth Harbor with 35 more hungry mouths to feed. Worse still, loaded with otter, beaver, clapboard and other fruits of the pilgrim labor, she was hijacked by French pirates on the way back to England. Her cargo of furs alone would have paid off the colony's debt but her loss and similar tragedies left the pilgrims wallowing in financial difficulties for another 25 years.

Bradford ruled Plymouth with an almost instinctive blend of tolerance and firmness. In the midst of a two month drought, he decreed a day of prayer and fasting and saw it rain that very night.

For years he struggled to free the colony of debt. He codified its laws, married its lovers, presided in its court, directed its trade, prophesied in its church on Sunday, negotiated its treaties with the Indians and the new colonies spring up all around.

Somehow, in the midst of everything, the governor found time to begin jotting down in a vellum bound journal his history, "Of Plymouth Plantation," now regarded as an American masterpiece.

Five times he declined to run for governor, but they always prevailed upon him the following year to resume his office. Then the neighboring colonies confederated into a United Colonies of New England, Bradford twice served as president and four times was a commissioner.

Each passing year saw old friends pass away or move to newer settlements. Brewster died in 1643. Standish in 1656.

Still Bradford held on, walking proud in his robes of office : the green gown with the violet cloak, the leaden colored suit with the silver buttons.

His people knew him as a man of "cheerful frame of spirit," "loving unto all," "a person of great gravity and prudence---and for one of that persuasion very pliable, gentle and condescending," "discreet and grave," "prudent and Godly."

Before he died he gave them his blessing in a remarkable poem fashioned by his own hand:

Farewell dear children whom I love
Your better Father is above
When I am gone He can supply,
To Him I leave you when I die.
Fear Him in truth, walk in His ways
For He will bless you all your days.
My days are spent, old age is come,
My strength it fails, my glass is run.
Now I will wait, when work is done
Until my happy change is come,
When from my labors I shall rest
With Christ above for to be blest."

Cotton Mather wrote that "he died May 9, 1657, in the 69th year of his age, lamented by all the colonies of New England as a common blessing and a father to them all."

With a volley of muskets and a roll of the drums, the only ceremony that the Pilgrims allowed, they laid him to rest on the little hill above the town, overlooking the bright blue bay where the Mayflower once rode at anchor with its precious cargo of continent builders.