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CINDY OTT'S
OBJECT ANALYSIS OF THE GIANT PUMPKIN

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If one judges the quality of a metaphor by the size of its image, then the ultimate symbol of nature's abundance has to be the Atlantic Giant (AG) pumpkin.[1] Developed in the 1960s by Howard Dill of Windsor, Nova Scotia, these dime-size seeds produce pumpkins that average between four hundred and five hundred pounds, with some reaching almost a ton.[2] Christy Harp of Massillion, Ohio, holds the current world record for the 1,725-pounder she entered in the Ohio Valley Giant Pumpkin Growers Weigh-Off in October 2009.[3] The Associated Press photograph of Harp is typical in the way it depicts the grower's outstretched arms unable to reach even halfway around the colossal body of orange flesh. A scene of pickup trucks with beds filled to the brim or a grown adult comfortably nestled inside a single specimen document their comically huge size. The enormousness of these pumpkins incites hyperbole. When a bystander at a giant pumpkin-weighing contest in Allardt, Tennessee, in the 1990s asked how much a pumpkin weighed, someone replied, "I don't know, but I hear some boy took a picture of it and the picture alone weighed seven pounds!"[4]

Because of their great girth, most giant pumpkins are flat on one side, making them unable to sit upright like a jack-o'-lantern. Although many growers would probably protest, it is hard to say that they are beautiful. They are deeply ribbed with dark orange to light gray skin and lopsided, rather obese fleshy forms. Their thick rind, sometimes measuring a foot across, supports their immense weight; yet the meat is dry and stringy, and so practically inedible.

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Figure 1.

Christy Harp poses with her world record 1,725-pound giant pumpkin at the Ohio Valley Growers Weigh-Off in Canfield, Ohio, on October 3, 2009. Credit: Scott Heckel, Canton Repository.

By the end of the season, a forklift and elaborate pulleys and levers are required to pick the pumpkins up. Every October images and tales of their production are ubiquitous in television, radio, and newspapers, including the erudite business daily the *Wall Street Journal*.[5] In past eras, they were on display at World's Fairs. Watermelons, tomatoes, and corn also attain outrageous proportions, but the pumpkin draws the most competitors and popular interest. As one expert noted, "The real show stoppers are the giant pumpkins."[6]

While the giant pumpkin looks like a wonder of nature, it is just as much a product of history and culture, that is, as much an idea as a plant type. If the appeals of gardening and the grand size were the only factors that motivated these growers, then a giant squash, which is botanically identical to the pumpkin, should be just as popular, but it is decidedly not. As Howard Dill stated, "There is always something about a giant pumpkin that has the power to make people happy."[7] Through an object analysis of the giant pumpkin, I uncover what that something is.[8] I interpret its physical form, including its size, weight, and color, in terms of its cultural meanings and historic legacies.

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Figure 2.

A giant pumpkin rind defies all sense of proportion. Credit: Don Langevin and GiantPumpkin.com.

Making the pumpkin itself the subject of inquiry requires paying attention to the physical thing and its role in the history, instead of simply examining people's assumptions about the pumpkin or uses for it.[9] Focusing on the object helps you ask questions you might otherwise miss, like in what ways has the plant shaped people's concepts of wild nature or American cultural identity? Finding the answers is never simple. You cannot explain a 1,725-pound pumpkin by any one factor alone, which is one of the great values of studying material culture. Understanding the giant pumpkin requires a close reading of not only the physical thing but also its history and the mix of cultural factors that have influenced its physical form, definitions, and meanings over time. Studying an object, therefore, encourages an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together fields of study often isolated from one another. For instance, in my reading of the giant pumpkin, I explore botany, economics, art and literature, agricultural practices, foodways, and the ties among them dating back to the Renaissance. I argue that the outrageous proportions and orange color of the giant pumpkin are as much about Americans' great passion for agrarian life and a desire to perpetuate a rural identity, however fanciful that may be, as about the great natural proclivities of the plant. Giant pumpkins are made up of not only plant DNA but also cultural values relating to a belief in the goodness of nature and in agrarian virtues.

What makes the giant pumpkin a particularly provocative topic to study is not only its huge size and animated growth but also its almost complete lack of utilitarian function. The apple, banana, corn, and watermelon offer their own storybooks of lore and fable, yet part of their allure is their succulent flesh and practical uses.[10] Not so with the giant pumpkin. It has been well over a hundred years since the pumpkin of any sort has served much pragmatic use

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Figure 3.

Howard Dill sits in a patch of Atlantic Giants, the variety he developed in the 1960s, ca. 1990. Credit: Don Langevin and GiantPumpkin.com.

in American culture, yet it still has an awesome physical presence that inspires deep human attachments. The enormous size and impracticality of the giant pumpkin, in particular, attest to the value of its meanings over its meat. The giant pumpkin offers a case study of how Americans have employed nature and history to create personal and national traditions and the effects of these traditions on the world around them.

The only thing small about a giant pumpkin is the seed. The seed that Harp planted to produce her pickup-sized pumpkin is a part of the Howard Dill legacy. Dill developed the AG seed from the *maxima* species of the *Curcubita* family, which includes pumpkins, squash, and gourds along with melons and cucumbers. Varieties within the same species, like an orange field pumpkin and a zucchini (both *Cucurbita pepo*), can cross-pollinate, leading to a mix of shapes and forms that have perplexed plant taxonomists for ages. The vegetables are native to the Americas, and their great productivity and yields made them a common part of the diet and folklore of many American Indian and early Euro-American communities. Mammoths, in particular, did not appear regularly in seed catalogs until the early nineteenth century. In 1822, Samuel Deane's *New England Farmer* noted, "a new and very large species of pumpkin has lately been introduced into this country, of which it is said more than five hundred pounds can be raised from a single seed."[11] Another observer at the time enthused about a 116-pounder, "This is, indeed, a huge and ponderous vegetable."[12]

Seed selection is one of the most important factors in creating a giant among giants because of both the seed's physical traits and the sense of heritage it perpetuates. Dill's AG is descended from the Goderich Giant, a cultivar used by William Warnock to produce pumpkins that received national exposure at both

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Chicago's 1893 and St. Louis's 1904 World's Fairs.[13] Almost all of the seeds of the heavy hitters originated with Dill, who owns a U.S. patent for his variety.

Growers closely track the lineage or provenance of prizewinning pumpkins like victorious racehorses. Dan Langevin's 1993 *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins* contains full-page genealogical charts for some of the heaviest pumpkins ever grown.[14] Growers identify individual pumpkins by name of grower, year of production, and weight. For example, one grower on a popular AG LISTSERV noted, "In 1995, George Lloyd crossed the 1994 614 Neilly with the 1994 752.8 Craven, producing the 687.5 Lloyd."[15] Some growers bid for seeds on online auctions, paying over a hundred dollars for one top-quality seed from a "stud pumpkin," as the heaviest, more pedigreed pumpkins are known.[16] The fact that there is something called a "pumpkin expert" tells you something about the vegetable itself. Growers' development of the science of giant pumpkin production and their creation of volumes of instructional materials infuse each individual specimen with a body of knowledge and a sense of biography. The pumpkin, like the 2009 1,725 Harp, comes to stand for people, not just nature.

The transformation from seed to prizewinner takes a combination of human ingenuity and natural proclivities. For most AG growers, propagating a giant pumpkin is a recreational pastime, not gainful employment.[17] Christy Harp is a high school math teacher. Yet this labor of love is an all-encompassing pursuit. Another grower, Don Block, a factory worker from upstate New York, is a good case in point. For several summers in the 1990s, Block spent countless hours in his garden cultivating giant pumpkins. After planting the seeds, he weeded, watered, fertilized, pruned, and carefully planned to ensure that the pumpkins stayed healthy and reached their full potential weight. Block commonly trudged out to his patch two to three times a night to check for intruders, both quadruped and biped.[18] When his well ran dry one year, he ran a hose three hundred feet from his pumpkin patch to his brother's well and bathed at his sister's house. Block might sound like a fanatic, but he is one of the thousands of stockbrokers, nurses, mechanics, professionals, and laborers of all sorts (rarely working farmers) who passionately and, some say obsessively, partake in the pastime of growing giant pumpkins.

Following the process of getting from the seed to a world-champion pumpkin is essential for understanding the thing itself and the meanings people invest in it. Giant pumpkins require between 120 and 150 days to reach full maturation, and growers chart, record, calculate, and measure every aspect of the plant's environment and development. Success like Harp's depends on a delicate balance between providing the plant with enough elements for it to achieve its full potential weight but not overdoing it so the pumpkin cracks, rots, or, even worse, explodes before showtime. Likewise, the cultivation of these pumpkins is neither as cheap nor as easy as pumpkin cultivation historically was. Quite the contrary, it is expensive and labor intensive. Participants commonly speak about skipping summer vacations to tend to their plants. Wayne Hackney,

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a TV repairman from New Milford, Connecticut, estimates, "[It] cost me a dollar a pound." But, he adds, "It was worth it."[19]

Propagating a giant pumpkin takes personal commitment. Each grower constantly and incessantly pampers and prunes the plant, leaving as little as possible to chance. The growers hand-pollinate the flowers to ensure strong genetics. Once the vegetable begins to set, they remove all but the strongest vine so that the plant's energy is fully directed toward one, or sometimes two, specimens. Growers often clip and trim vines so that they grow in a direction that maximizes the vegetable's enlargement. Botanists classify the resulting pumpkin as fruit because, like an apple or a berry, it is a seed packet encased in flesh that develops from a flower. Yet because of its culinary uses, like the tomato, most Americans consider the pumpkin a vegetable. All kinds of contraptions protect the plant in every stage of its development. Seedlings have their own little greenhouses to warm them and protect them from chilly spring winds. At the end of the season, blankets and canopies provide each fruit with its own private shelter from the burning heat of the summer sun. Growers wage constant battles against insects and disease.

Estimates as to how much water a pumpkin should consume to make it as big as possible are different variations on the same oversized theme. One grower calculated that he gives his pumpkin three hundred gallons a day. Another claimed to give it 1,800 gallons of water at a single serving.[20] Water is so important because a pumpkin turns water into pounds of flesh. Harp's pumpkin gained thirty-three pounds a day during its peak growing time.[21] Another grower observed a pumpkin that grew at a rate of more than an inch every three to four hours.[22] As one expert noted with both awe and trepidation, "they grow so fast they can literally tear themselves apart!"[23]

The increased popularity of growing giant pumpkins over the last thirty years has swelled at a rate surpassed only by the dramatic growth of the thousand-plus-pound monstrosities themselves. Creating a pumpkin as big as Harp's is a team effort. Growers communicate through a network of organizations, such as the Great Pumpkin Commonwealth (GPC), the World Pumpkin Confederation, the International Pumpkin Association, and the Giant Urban Pumpkin Growers of America, which is "dedicated to growing and venerating giant urban pumpkins."[24] The organizations all have local and regional chapters totaling hundreds of thousands of members.[25] Harp is a member of the Ohio Valley Giant Pumpkin Growers, which is a subsidiary of the GPC. Growers post messages daily on dozens of Internet sites dedicated to the "sport." On one site called "Pumpkins," I received more than five hundred messages in a three-month period in the summer of 2001.[26] Growers seek and give advice and offer congratulations and condolences to those who pursue the production of a scale-breaking, super-sized pumpkin.

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Figure 4.

Growers inspect the underside of a giant pumpkin being lifted for weighing at the World Championship Pumpkin Weigh-Off in Half Moon Bay on October 12, 2009. A 1,658-pound monster from Iowa set a new record for the festival. Credit: PI/Terry Schmitt.

The destination of most giant pumpkins is one of dozens of annual pumpkin weigh-offs staged across the continent, which have historic antecedents in produce contests at county and state agricultural fairs. The weigh-offs are often the key attraction at festivals, where pumpkins of every sort are celebrated. Warnock's 403-pounder exhibited at the 1904 World's Fair held the world's record until 1976, when a 451-pound pumpkin won the U.S. Pumpkin Contest in Churchville, Pennsylvania. Howard Dill, the only repeat performer, held the record from 1979 to 1982 with pumpkins weighing just less than five hundred pounds. Nowadays, the elite of the sport consider a five-hundred-pounder a lightweight. In 1996, Paula and Nathan Zahr were awarded a $50,000 prize for being the first to surpass the coveted thousand-pound mark with a 1,061-pound pumpkin, a record that some compared to breaking the four-minute mile on the track.[27]

The great lengths growers go to produce such fantastically huge, unwieldy vegetables were questioned by one of their own. "We're overfeeding them. We're overwatering them. It's like we're growing a fat person … and it is not as healthy as a lean person," exclaimed Edward Gancarz, who was the 1990 World Pumpkin Confederation title holder with an 816-pound pumpkin.[28] His skepticism about the process and the product raises a question: why are so many people—nonfarmers at that—exerting so much effort to grow pumpkins? In other words, what is the fuss all about? Perhaps it is the contest prize money. Harp won $2,500 for her 1,725-pound effort.[29] Perhaps it is the love of

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competition and of working in the garden. But why a pumpkin? The answers take us from the process of its physical production over a season to the historic development of its cultural meanings over centuries.

One obvious reason is because the pumpkin is big. It is a thrill to produce such a huge specimen. World-record holder Harp stated, "I grow giant pumpkins because it's fun being outside and really neat to be able to test nature and see how fast these things can grow."[30] Because it is a "live product," to use the words of Howard Dill, the growth of the pumpkin is never fully predictable, however.[31] Even with many human interventions and additives to push plant growth to extremes, it is still a natural object that cannot be completely manipulated. While these qualities are true for almost any plant, the pumpkin's tremendous size, output, and animated growth have made it a particularly powerful object to define the forces of nature that defy human control. When growers produce the biggest pumpkin possible, they are creating not only a gigantic plant, but also a natural symbol that has deep cultural roots. Looking back briefly at those roots helps explain the size of Harp's pumpkin as much as its genetic history.

From the time Europeans first set foot on American soil, descriptions and illustrations of the continent featured the pumpkin as a symbol of the land's natural bounty and primitive way of life. Renaissance art, such as Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione's 1645 *Earth's Fertility*, which portrays a large pumpkin at the foot of a wild centaur within a mythical harvest scene, imagined the plant as a primal, unpredictable force of nature.[32] The painting's symbolism derived from the pumpkin's prolific and unwieldy nature and from its origins in the Americas, which many Europeans conceived as a vast wilderness. Colonists' reliance on the pumpkin to survive during the difficult early settlement period turned it into a point of national pride in later years. When an American visiting Paris in the 1850s touted, "France can not boast of a Niagara or the biggest pumpkin," he equated the vegetable with one of the nation's most famous natural wonders.[33] Yet unlike Niagara Falls, which Americans revered as a sublime totem of their country's natural gifts (to the point of overrunning the landmark with tourists), the pumpkin inspired as many jokes as it did praise. It stood as a sign of natural abundance to be sure, but within the context of an increasingly urban and industrial society in the mid-nineteenth century, it also represented an archaic world that was the antithesis of modern life. The pumpkin's size and animated rate of production and its affiliation with an old-fashioned way of life inspired romantic visions of agrarian life, but also dozens of silly American tall tales about country people and rural living. They include one about a vine that grew "at a pace faster than a galloping horse" or wrestled a farmer like it was a boa constrictor and another about fruit as big as a house and "approaching the size of young mountains."[34]

All of these stories and images about the bountiful and unruly pumpkin explain the vegetable's incarnation into the Halloween jack-o'-lantern, which is exactly where Harp's giant pumpkin was headed after the weigh-off.[35] When most Americans think about the pumpkin today, they imagine the

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jack-o'-lantern, not these other symbolic representations just described. But these older renditions of the wild pumpkin are the antecedents for this most iconic of all pumpkin imagery. And they explain the great value growers and spectators place in the pumpkin's size. The pumpkin and the jack-o'-lantern are practically synonymous now; their meanings and reputation have become one and the same. The two had completely separate histories until Halloween reached American soil in the mid-nineteenth century, after many Irish came to the United States to escape the potato famine. Halloween is an ancient Celtic fete of Samhain, the God of the Dead, and jack-o'-lantern is one of the wild spirits that haunt the night. At Halloween's inception in the United States, Americans made the holiday a night of parlor games that playfully conjured up the wild spirits and harvest celebrations of lore.

In that era, the jack-o'-lantern pumpkin was a macabre and volatile trickster with a body, arms, legs, and feet to propel him. Nowadays many caricatures and stories of the jack-o'-lantern pumpkin depict it as a healing and benevolent force in people's lives. One of the most popular new portrayals of the giant pumpkin is in *It's A Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, a 1966 Halloween television special, based on the beloved Peanuts comic strip by Charles Schultz, that still reruns annually.[36] In this story of a gang of neighborhood kids on Halloween night, the philosopher of the group, Linus, awaits the Great Pumpkin who "rises out of the pumpkin patch and flies through the air and brings toys to all the children in the world." While Linus's friends ridicule him for believing in this pagan spirit in modern times, the audience is left feeling compassion toward him and his faith in the Great Pumpkin—an idyllic natural force. Harp's giant pumpkin gives form to these romantic ideas about nature because of its cultural legacies, not just its physical size.

Children's and pumpkin's mutually reinforcing symbolism of natural exuberance also help explain the oversized pumpkin's appeal. American artists began conflating the two in the nineteenth century when perceptions of young children changed from little adults who needed to be disciplined to free spirits who needed to express themselves. "Pumpkin" has become a common term of endearment for children. Photographs of a small child sitting on or holding a pumpkin in a pumpkin patch are ubiquitous in calendars, office cubicles, studio portraits, and just about every American newspaper in the month of October. Dill even promotes the association on his seed packet cover. One of the sweetest examples is a Libby's canned pumpkin advertisement from 1995, which features a photograph of two cheerful toddlers sitting inside a giant pumpkin with pumpkin stem hats. The ad states, "Two pumpkins are better than one," suggesting that the contents of its can are as sweet and wonderful as two rosy-cheeked babies.[37] People value the pumpkin because, similar to healthy babies, it exudes a sense of natural goodness and well-being.

While the pumpkin's natural attributes shaped its cultural iconography, its cultural iconography, in turn, shaped the vegetable's natural form. The great though cumbersome weight, as opposed to simply the size, of

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Harp's 1,725-pounder testifies to the value of its imagery over its practical functions. Although it alone could practically feed a herd of cattle, its unmanageability and poor quality flesh nullify its usefulness, beyond bragging rights to its producer. It is a show crop rather than a utilitarian crop, a visual wonder more than a meaty morsel. An 1879 *Rocky Mountain News* article explains its importance as an object of display: "The pumpkin is a gorgeous fruit, principally celebrated for its services to agricultural fairs.... It must be remembered that pumpkins of mastodonic size are valued, like the very fat women and overgrown pigs which are placed on exhibition, rather for their weight and size than for any other quality.... Its bigness is all it is valued for."[38] The reporter's comparison of the pumpkin with a pig and a woman underscores the pumpkin's value as a metaphor to talk about not only nature but also human relations and identity, in this case, gender relations and the body.

The turning point, when Americans made the pumpkin simply an object of display detached of any practical utility, came in the early nineteenth century. Farm journals' and seed catalogs' endless reports about the enormous weight and size of mammoths caught the attention of merchants around the country. They took notice of the spectacle the giant pumpkin engendered and displayed them in their shops. Instead of offering them for sale for food or fodder, merchants used the pumpkin as a marketing gimmick to draw in customers, thereby infusing the pumpkin with a new economic value it never achieved for its practical uses. "As a natural curiosity it is worth the attention of any person to go and view it," remarked the Washington, D.C., newspaper *Daily National Intelligencer* in 1814 about a mammoth pumpkin on display in the city.[39] A merchant described a mammoth on public view at a Massachusetts nursery that "astonished the gazers."[40] One man was "moved to write a poem about it," he contended, and another "declared that he positively stood in awe of it."[41]

Clothes proprietors from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Boston, Massachusetts, held contests offering merchandise prizes to the persons who could most accurately guess the number of seeds in the giant pumpkin on display. A Boston dry goods store owner named "Mr. Wallenstein," explained an 1890 article in the *Atkinson Champion*, "placed a large pumpkin in his show window and advertised that any person purchasing one dollar's worth of goods should have a guess at the number of seeds it contained, and that the person guessing the number, or the nearest to it, should be entitled to a first prize of a plush cloak....[42] With nine people tied for first place and three for third prize, the publicity stunt must have worked. Little has changed about this aspect of the giant pumpkin except the increase in weight. These days, giant pumpkins are intended for photograph-taking more than anything else. One might end up on the local news or even *Late Night with David Letterman* after a weigh-off but rarely if ever a livestock feed lot, much less a dinner plate. Serving any practical purpose is completely beside the point–the great weight is a testament to that.

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While the pumpkin's huge size is attributable to plant genetics and Americans' ideas about nature, and its massive weight is evidence of the value of its symbolism over its practical uses, its orange color tells us something about Americans' desire to feel connected to nature and to perpetuate a sense of rural identity. Both celebrating and bracing from the effects of modernization and capitalist expansion, Americans have long turned to nature and rustic rural life as a refuge and a source for powerful stories to explain who they are. The American agrarian myth, the idea that farming inculcates good values of hard work and self-sufficiency and therefore promotes good citizenship, found expression for generations in art, literature, political philosophy, farm and land policy, and also in this big orange vegetable.[43]

Harp's pumpkin is not deep orange like some pumpkins but more of a pale orange with slight tints of gray, especially around its bottom half. Even at the same weight, if it had been more gray in color, it would have been disqualified from the competition. Dave Stelts, who grew a 1,662-pound deep orange pumpkin in 2009, stated, "We'd like to have them all this beautiful—a nice, shiny, bright orange color. But sometimes they get a little opaque, like you see in the world record-holder for the Harp's. But with this one we got really lucky. It turned out a beautiful, shiny orange."[44] While growers are all hoping for that vivid orange hue, some AG seed stock will produce fruit that is orange and others green or bluish-gray. Sometimes growers do not even know, or cannot be certain, if they are propagating one or the other until the fruit sets. The World Pumpkin Confederation, an organization devoted to the sport of giant pumpkin growing, has a rule that for an entry to be considered a pumpkin, "the fruit must be 80% orange."[45] They categorize the rest as squash. Most squash are barred from pumpkin competitions, even though it is essentially the same vegetable. Those competitions that make no distinctions between the two types are disqualified from joining in the major weigh-offs. There is no difference between a pumpkin's and a squash's genetics, cultivation, nurturing, and weight—only between the attitudes toward them. Squash compete in weight and girth but not in meaning.

To understand why a pumpkin means something different from a squash requires interconnecting the crops' physical traits, market status, and uses. For hundreds of years, no one made such distinctions. People on both sides of the Atlantic thought about and used them interchangeably. With increasing prosperity and a greater number and variety of crops available, Americans became more discriminating in the early nineteenth century. Squash were the types they continued to eat at the table. The orange field pumpkin was the type they deemed least desirable because of its stringy innards and bland flesh, though some farmers kept them in production as cheap supplement for livestock fodder because they were so prolific and easy to propagate. Most varieties of winter and summer squash lost their vibrancy as a symbol of nature and a primitive way of life because they

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were so much a part of the modern world, appearing in markets and on dinner plates on a regular basis.

Because the orange field pumpkin was divorced from antebellum America's expanding marketplace and associated with an old-fashioned subsistence farm economy, it remained a powerful object to talk about nature and a rustic way of life, symbolism long associated with all forms of squash. The orange field pumpkin became *the* pumpkin only partially because of its natural attributes. It also became *the* pumpkin because of people's ideas about it. Americans linked the orange pumpkin's physical qualities, economic standing, and uses to construct an image of a rural way of life that was the basis for popular views of the nation's history and identity. As many Americans felt they were losing connections to the natural world, an authentic way of life, and their cultural roots, the orange field pumpkin, in particular, helped them rebuild those connections. That is the first step in explaining why Harp's pumpkin had to be orange.

What the orange field pumpkin lost in practical usage and economic value, it gained in symbolic power. Americans gave it a vibrant life in stories and holiday rituals that helped them talk about the meaning of nature within a rapidly developing urban and industrial society. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau claimed, "I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion."[46] To Thoreau, the pumpkin was an icon of nature, antithesis of all that modern America stood for. Its natural earthiness and simple wholesomeness offered a spot where one might discover oneself and the meaning of life. Such prominent cultural luminaries as John Greenleaf Whittier and Winslow Homer immortalized pumpkin farmers and their harvests in literature and works of art reproduced in popular magazines. Pumpkin pie became the celebratory finale at Thanksgiving when Lincoln declared the day a national holiday in 1863. It was only the second national holiday after Independence Day and the first to celebrate the harvest as emblematic of the country's natural wealth and rural life as a place of national heritage.

During the two world wars, American artists parlayed the pumpkin into a patriotic symbol of the home front, adding another layer of meaning to the vegetable. A Thanksgiving postcard published around the time of World War I depicts an oversized golden pumpkin with the words "Peace and Prosperity" written across it. The pumpkin embodies the simple things in life that are found in the classic American dream, such as the rewards of hard work in a land of opportunity, and therefore serves to invigorate the war effort. The image illustrates Americans' embrace of this bountiful natural specimen as an icon of cultural values. The giant pumpkin's plainness yet goodness, its naturalness yet sturdiness, come to stand for American culture itself.

You see these themes repeated in giant pumpkin production literature that infuses the vegetable with old agrarian myths about the value of hard work and

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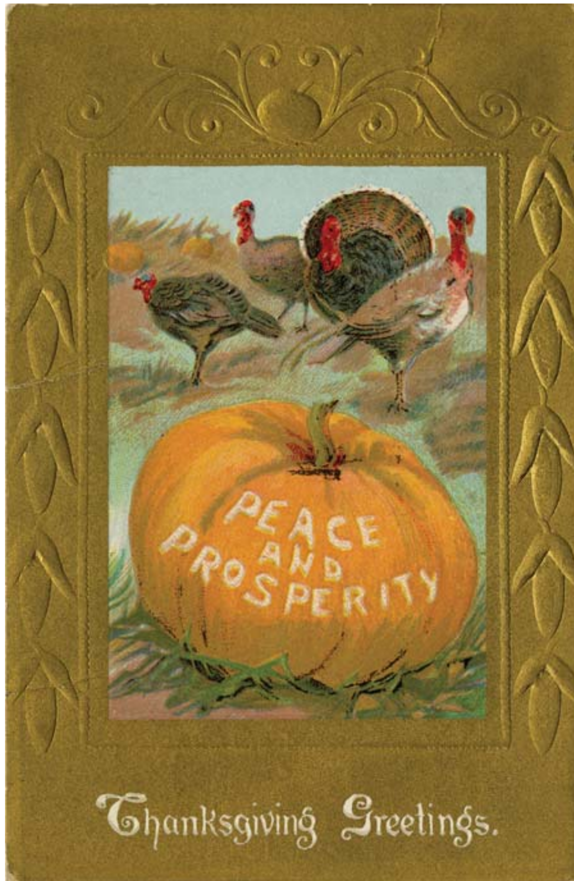
Figure 5.



Thanksgiving postcard, ca. 1910s. Credit: Warshaw Collection of Business Americana Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

toiling in the soil and celebrates growers' strong work ethic and generosity. For example, Langevin's instruction book *How-to-Grow a World Class Giant Pumpkin* refers to a top competitor at the Big E (Eastern States Exposition) as "a hard working, devoted family man who contributes much of his time to pumpkin growing organizations, the community and his church."[47] Participants in the world of weekend pumpkin farming conceive of it as a morally and physically uplifting pursuit. By growing giant pumpkins, people can be close to nature and live out the agrarian myth in their own backyards, on rooftop patios of downtown Los Angeles apartment buildings, or in the thickets behind an inner city neighborhood house museum.[48] Pumpkins—historically the most common and least commodified field crop—give great symbolic weight

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to the growers' endeavors, not to mention the simple pride in their ability to produce such physical tonnage.

The combination of their physical attributes and their historic associations make pumpkins quintessential emblems of agrarian prowess. Often detached from the land at their regular jobs, many Americans feel nostalgic for some contact with the natural world. By growing giant pumpkins, suburban and urban folks gain access to the farming experience and thereby feel closer to nature and the mythic American agrarian way of life. Full-time pumpkin farming is both impractical and probably inconceivable to most participants. Besides having neither the land nor the equipment to run a full-scale pumpkin farm, what would they do with two hundred twenty-pound pumpkins? However, one four-hundred-pound giant pumpkin suits suburban needs by producing the ultimate symbolic farm produce at incredible scale but in limited space. Giant pumpkins epitomize the modern celebration of the symbolism more than the substance of a pumpkin. It is no wonder that champion grower Gancarz believed there was something unnatural about the vegetable: it is as much a container of human values as a wonder of nature.

An object analysis of the giant pumpkin proves that rural nostalgia is not simply ideological. To get close to nature, create a sense of heritage, and build a communal identity, Americans have relied on the actual, physical pumpkin. The ideas and the physical thing lose meaning without one another. The pumpkin is an especially compelling case study about how Americans make nature meaningful not only because of the powerful stories and traditions nature has inspired but also because people's ideas about it have literally changed, physically, the pumpkin itself. Giant pumpkins are commemorative objects like souvenirs. Rather than possessing intrinsic worth, they are valuable as holders of memories, experiences, and ideas. A souvenir fulfills a yearning to feel connected to a place, person, or way of life unobtainable any other way.[49] You cannot go back in time, for example, but you can buy an object that represents that time period. The most famous giant pumpkin grower, Howard Dill, professes that the giant pumpkin's attraction is inexplicable, that it simply makes people happy. By drawing on sources from the past, I have argued more specifically that the pumpkin helps people feel close to nature and rural life and creates a sense of identity. Natural goodness, agrarianism, and communal values are intangible sentiments you cannot own, but you can grow and display pumpkins to exhibit your appreciation and personal identification with them.

A giant 365-pound pumpkin sat on display across the concourse from the pavilion where Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous frontier speech at the 1893 World's Fair, an event that celebrated American progress, ingenuity, and modernity and attempted to articulate an American identity to the world.[50] Certainly it was there because it was an awesome natural specimen, but mostly, I argue, organizers featured it at the fair because it embodied the stories Americans liked to tell about themselves that rivaled those of the famous

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historian himself. By propagating the ancestral seeds from that pumpkin, generations of giant pumpkin growers like the math teacher Christy Harp have not only perpetuated a botanical species but also kept a sense of American agrarian identity alive.

NOTES

1. Another giant variety is Burpee's Prizewinner, but it cannot compete with the Atlantic Giant for size. The title phrase is taken from "Extravagances of Nature," *Boston Gazette*, October 27, 1819, quoted in Thomas F. De Voe, *The Market Assistant* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 346.
2. See Al Kingsbury, *The Pumpkin King: Four-Time World Champion Howard Dill & the Atlantic Giant* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1996). Dill died in 2008.
3. Premier Star Co., "World Record Giant Pumpkin," Pumpkin Nook, www.pumpkinnook.com/giants/giantpumpkins.htm (accessed February 10, 2010).
4. Steve Bender, "Champion Vegetables," *Southern Living*, October 1995, 96.
5. Ray Vicker, "Pumpkins, Plywood, Squash and Balloon: A Tale of Five Cities," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 1981.
6. Don Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins* (Norton, MA: Annedawn Publishing, 1993), 6.
7. Michael Vitez, "The Great Orange Hope," *Inquirer: The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, October 29, 1995, 16.
8. I rely on the ideas and methodologies of material cultural studies in this work. See Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Henry Glassie, "Artifacts: Folk, Popular, Imaginary and Real," in Marshall Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, eds., *Icons of Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1970), 103–122; Jules David Prown, "Style as Evidence," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1980); Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982); Sigfried Gideon, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1948); Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, eds., *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982); Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture: A Research Guide* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985); Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Material Life in America, 1600–1860* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988); Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley, eds., *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (New York: Berg, 1999); Ian M. G. Quimby, *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York: Published for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, DE, by W.W. Norton, 1978); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Bill Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

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1986); Victor Buchli, ed., *Material Culture: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences*, 5 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2004); Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Malden: Polity, 2009); Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Malden: Polity, 2010).

9. Jules Prown's methodology recommends a very close reading of objects as a way to get at their meanings and to reduce the influence of a researcher's own preconceived notions. For an overview of his methodology, see Prown, "Style as Evidence" and "Mind in Matter." The idea that things have agency and that one cannot conceive of a meaning of a word without the thing itself (like snow, for example) is a particular argument of Bill Brown's "Thing Theory." See Brown, *A Sense of Things* and *Things*.
10. David Scofield Wilson and Angus K. Gillespie, eds., *Rooted in America: The Folklore of Popular Fruits and Vegetables* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2002); Dan Koeppel, *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit that Changed the World* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2008); Betty Fussell, *The Story of Corn* (New York: North Point Press, 1992); John McPhee, *Oranges* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967).
11. Samuel Deane, *New England Farmer; or Geological Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1822), 353. Its origins are discussed in W. S. Clark, "A Squash in Harness," *The Horticulturalist* 30 (July 1875): 193-196.
12. "A Mammoth Squash," *The Farmer and Gardener*, October 27, 1835.
13. Don Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins, II* (Norton: Annedawn Press, 1998), 45.
14. Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins, II*, 50-51.
15. Lyle Rockwell in a letter to the LISTSERV pumpkins@mallorn.com, April 16, 2001.
16. Quotation is from Katy Kelly, "Growing Great Pumpkins, an All-Consuming Passion," *USA Today*, October 4, 1996. An example of an online seed auction is at the Web site BigPumpkins.com, www.bigpumpkins.com/MsgBoard/ViewBoard.asp?b=26 (accessed February 11, 2010).
17. For guides to growing giant pumpkins see Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins*; Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins, II*; Don Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins*, III, Norton, MA: Annedawn Publishing, 2003; Don Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins the All Organic Way* (Norton: Annedawn Publishing, 2009); Michael Evans, "Big: The Pumpkin: A Tale of International Intrigue Takes Shape as Three Towns Named Shelburne Plot to Grow the Biggest Pumpkin," *National Gardening*, October 1988, 18-21; Catherine Yronwode, "Here's How to Grow Giant Vegetables!" *Organic Gardening* 41 (December 1994), 22-29; and Paul Dunphy, "The Great Pumpkin: Breeders Continue to Improve the Easy-to-Grow Jack-o'-Lantern," *Horticulture*, October 1992, 40-44.
18. Block and other growers are featured in Vitez, "The Great Orange Hope," 12-17 & 21.
19. Alan Sternberg, "A Growing Concern: Rivals in Big E Pumpkin Contest Throwing Their Weight Around," *The Hartford Courant*, September 28, 1984.
20. The growers are Richard and Lloyd Koch who competed in the Circleville Pumpkin Show weigh-off in 1998. See Mary Bridgman, "Pumped Up," *The Columbus Dispatch*, October 16, 1998.
21. "Largest Pumpkin World Record Set by Christy Harp," World Records Academy Web site, www.worldrecordsacademy.org/nature/largest_pumpkin-world_record_set_by_Christy_Harp_90368.htm (accessed August 10, 2010).

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22. This observation was noted on the Pumpkin Nook Web site, http://members.aol.com/ezpumpkin/ hitters.htm (accessed October 8, 1999).
23. Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins*, 71.
24. The mission statement is from the Giant Urban Pumpkin Growers of America Web site, www.gupga.com (accessed February 21, 2001). The organization is no longer in existence.
25. Although the sport seems to mostly be characterized by camaraderie, rivals have developed between the leaders of some of these different organizations. See Vitez, "The Great Orange Hope," 16.
26. The email address for the LISTSERV is pumpkins@mallorn.com (accessed during the 2001 growing season).
27. Jim Rhett at the Cornell Pumpkin Festival in Churchville, PA, interview by the author, Churchville, PA, October 14, 1995. The four-minute mile comment is from Howard Dill, quoted in Yronwode, "Here's How to Grow Giant Vegetables!" 22.
28. Giant pumpkin LISTSERV at pumpkins@mallorn (2001).
29. BigPumpkins.com, www.bigpumpkins.com (accessed May 20, 2010).
30. Christy Harp, video interview, World's Record Academy Web site, www.worldrecordsacademy.org/nature/largest_pumpkin-world_record_set_by_Christy_Harp_90368.htm (accessed August 8, 2010).
31. Howard Dill, giant pumpkin seed brochure, 1995.
32. A brief essay and reproduction of the painting appears in Marzia Cataldi Gallo e Farida Simonetti, et al., *Il Giardino de Flora: natura e simbolo nell'immagine dei fiori* (Genova: Sagep Editrice, 1986), 30-32 and plates VIII and IX.
33. James Jackson Jaarves, *Parisian Sights and French Principles Seen Through American Spectacles* ... (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852), 30.
34. The horse tale is from "A bit of a Punkin," *Yankee Blade* 4, December 4, 1847, quoted in Richard M. Dorson, *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow: New England Popular Tales and Legends* (Boston: Harvard College, 1946; repr., New York: Russell & Russell, 1970), 132. The boa tale is from *Hoosier Tall Stories* 26, Federal Writers Project of Indiana, WPA, 1937. In Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif Index of Folktales of England* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966), X1402.1. A similar tale describes a pumpkin chasing a man on horseback across a field. The man climbs up on a leaf and calls for help. See Benjamin A. Botkin, ed., *Treasury of American Folklore* (New York: Wings Books, 1993), 601. The house and mountain tale is from "A Great Pumpkin Story," *New England Farmer*, December 11, 1844, 192.
35. "Largest Pumpkin World Record Set by Christy Harp."
36. The most well-known version of the tale is the television special, *It's a Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* (Paramount Pictures, 1966). The character and storyline also appear in Charles M. Schultz, *How Long, Great Pumpkin, How Long?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1977). See also David Michaelis, *Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).
37. The Libby's advertisement appeared in *Parade Magazine*, November 12, 1995, 11. Anne Geddes is the photographer.
38. "The Pumpkin in Kansas," *Rocky Mountain News*, October 18, 1879, 4.
39. "The Biggest Pumpkin Yet!" *Daily National Intelligencer*, Washington, DC, October 25, 1814.
40. Clark, "A Squash in Harness," 13-14.
41. Ibid.
42. "The Pumpkin Cut: Wallenstein, of the Boston Store, Distinguishes Himself," *The Atkinson* [Kansas] *Champion*, November 30, 1890. 19th-Century Newspapers

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online database, http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark (Accessed September 5, 2008).

43. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950); Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Michael Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Lawrence Buell, "Pastorial Ideology Reappraised," *American Literary History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 1-29.
44. Dave Stelts quoted in Michael Inbar, "Pumpkin Sets New World Record: 1,725 pounds," "Today," http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/33379464/ns/today-today_halloween_guide (accessed August 24, 2010).
45. Langevin, *How-to Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins*, 1. The Great Pumpkin Commonwealth stipulates that it must be 75 percent orange to yellow. The Safeway World Champion Pumpkin Weigh-Off, www.miramarevents.com/weighoff/facts.html (accessed May 20, 2010).
46. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods* (New York: The New American Library, 1960; repr., Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 30.
47. Langevin, *How-to-Grow World Class Giant Pumpkins*, 20.
48. Information on the woman who grows pumpkins at her Los Angeles apartment building is from The Pumpkin Nook, www.pumpkinnook.com (Accessed April 10, 2001). The person who grows pumpkins in the urban neighborhood is Joe Mills, a photographer working at Dumbarton Oaks House Museum in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC. Joe raised the largest pumpkin in the District on the house museum property. Joe Mills, author interview, Washington, DC, February 1998.
49. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 135. For Marx's theory on use and exchange value, see Karl Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. David McCellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For Jean Baudrillard's theory of display value, see Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981).
50. Its exhibition at the fair was noted in *Burpee's Farm Annual* (1899).

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