

PROJECT LIFESAVER NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2021

ESS Wings

The Ambassador's Column

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GROUNDHOG DAY

THE AMBASSADOR'S COLUMN

BY RON YEAW

INTRODUCTION

Punxsutawney Phil, in company with the Inner Circle, will be making his live annual prognostication from Gobbler's Knob in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania on February 2nd. The day will be celebrated in both the United States and Canada.

Historically, the month of February has borne special significance for people living in the northern regions of the world who are subject to harsh winter weather. For them, there has long been a desire for methods of predicting when spring will arrive and the warmer temperatures will return. For farmers waiting to plant or harvest crops, sailors, ship dispatchers, or anyone planning a journey, accurate foreknowledge of weather conditions is important. Prior to advances in technology that led to the development of weather forecasting into today's predictive science, people used their experiences to make predictions. This is evidenced through the various traditions, rites, and celebrations that have prevailed for thousands of years, many of which have been a function of astrological conditions. Throughout history, both superstition and mythology have also played significant roles in the efforts to predict the weather. The activities of hibernating animals, such as badgers, bears, and groundhogs, have long been a part of such legends, reflecting human recognition of the fact that animals use their instincts to guide their behavior. In January and early February many Americans and Canadians yearn for the return of warmer climates when they can experience much more pleasant conditions. For residents of the southern latitudes of the United States the need for such forecasts seems remote and difficult to relate to as they are not subject to the snow and bitter cold as are the residents of the northern latitudes.

EARLY HISTORY

Groundhog Day has its origins in the celebration of the Catholic holiday of Candlemas, which can be traced to the Greeks. According to Greek mythology, Prosperine (the daughter of the Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and grain) had been abducted by Pluto and taken into the underworld. One night, Ceres led a progression of candle-bearing followers through the winter darkness in search of her daughter. As the legend goes, this candlelight procession became an annual event. The sacred light progression was adopted by the Christian Church as a day to bless and distribute candles as symbols of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, who was a "light of revelation" for the Gentiles. Legend states that a clear and sunny processional day would bring at least forty more days of snowy and rigorous weather. An overcast and generally miserable day would signal the promise of an early summer. The ancient Greek civilizations, with their predominantly agrarian economies, would celebrate the late winter months by performing

rites to the rising power of the springtime sun with hopes that the weather would soon be favorable for their harvest yield. The Romans celebrated the tradition on February 1 as the Feast of Lights, where lighted torches were carried in procession in a ritual of springtime rebirth. By the 17th century, the Feast of Lights had become known as “The Purification of Mary” and the date had been changed to February 2.

In 1694, Italian Pope Sergius I replaced torches with candles in the procession and the festival becoming known as Candlemas. Gradually, the traditions of Candlemas became associated with different folklores. Poems from Scotland, England, and Germany contain the lines:

For as the sun shines on Candlemas Day,
So far will the snow swirl until May.
For as the snow blows on Candlemas Day,
So far will the sun shine before May.

Groundhog Day can also be traced to Imbolc, one of the four principal festivals in the Gaelic (Ireland and Scotland) and Celtic (Britain, Ireland, France, and Spain) cultures. Celebrated annually on February 2, the date falls halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox in the Northern Hemisphere and was a seasonal turning point of the Celtic calendar. Later adopted as Saint Brigid's Day in honor of Brigid the Irish Goddess of Healers, Poets, Smiths, Childbirth, and Inspiration, Imbolc was traditionally a time of weather prognostication and included watching to see if serpents or badgers would come out of their winter dens. The lighting of candles and fires, which represented the increasing power of the sun and the return of warmth, were important aspects of the festival.

Over time, the festivals of Candlemas and Imbolc became united, as both were celebrated on the same day. The Germans added the belief that an animal, initially a badger, if frightened by seeing his shadow on Candlemas, would foretell another six weeks of winter.





MODERN TIMES

The German folklore belief that badgers could predict the weather was brought to America during the early 18th century by German immigrants. After settling in Punxsutawney (84 miles northeast of Pittsburgh), they replaced the badger with the groundhog. They turned to the groundhog because there were no badgers in the area where they settled and groundhogs share similar body shapes and burrowing traits with badgers. Another possible explanation for the selection of the groundhog is that the Delaware Indians, who had established a campsite in eastern Pennsylvania in 1723, considered groundhogs (also referred to as woodchucks) to be their honorable ancestors. The name “woodchuck” comes from the Indian legend of “Wojak, the groundhog”, considered by the Indians to be their ancestral forefather as they believed that life began as animals in “Mother Earth” that emerged centuries later as humans.

The first reference to a Groundhog Day in the United States was found in a February 5, 1841 entry in the diary of James Morris, a Berks County Pennsylvania shopkeeper. The first official Groundhog Day was celebrated on February 2, 1886 in Punxsutawney, a city populated predominantly by Germans. In 1887, a spirited group of groundhog hunters there dubbed themselves “The Punxsutawney Groundhog Club”. One member of the Club was newspaper editor Clymer H. Freas. He and William Smith, a congressman and newspaper publisher, organized and popularized what became the annual festival in Punxsutawney.

Many Canadians celebrate Groundhog Day and it is growing more and more popular. Some churches there also celebrate Candlemas on this day, while others use the day to take down their Christmas decorations. Groundhog Day is not a public holiday in Canada. Some Canadian areas around parks and streets may be busy or congested in towns where Groundhog Day events are held.

The most famous groundhog is Punxsutawney Phil. Phil’s full title is: “Seer of Seers, Sage of Sages, Prognosticator of Prognosticators, and Weather Prophet Extraordinary”. A club of Phil enthusiasts takes care of the rodent year round. Phil’s permanent residence (with his “wife” Phyllis) is in his climate-controlled habitat adjoining the town library, where they thrive on a diet of dog food and ice cream. A select group of townspeople, known as the “Inner Circle”, plan the annual ceremony during which Phil’s prediction is made. A few days prior to each February 2nd, Phil is moved to his temporary home on Gobbler’s Knob, a wooded knoll in a rural area about two miles east of the town.

Before sunrise on the famous day, amidst a festive atmosphere of music, food, speeches, and skits, Phil emerges from his temporary electrically-heated burrow beneath a simulated tree stump. Attended to by members of the Inner Circle, recognizable by their top hats and tuxedos, Phil announces his meteorological prediction. He speaks to the Inner Circle's president in "Groundhogese", a language only understood by the incumbent president. The president then translates Phil's prediction to the crowds in attendance and to the world. As many as 40,000 people have personally witnessed the event. If Phil sees his shadow, he will predict six more weeks of winter weather. If he does not, he will then predict that spring is imminent. The Pennsylvania German dialect is the only language spoken at the event. Those who speak in any other language must pay a fine, usually in the amount of nickel, dime, or quarter per spoken word. The money is placed into a bowl in the center of a table and used to defray the costs of the event. The first trek to Gobbler's Hill was made on February 2, 1887 and the ceremony was held there in secret until 1966. According to legend, over the entire history of the ceremony, there has only been one Punxsutawney Phil. He reportedly gets his longevity by drinking one sip of a secret Groundhog Punch recipe, called "the elixir of life", every summer at the club's Groundhog picnic. This sip magically gives him seven more years of life. In reality, groundhogs have a maximum lifespan of ten years in captivity, but much shorter in the wild.

THE GROUNDHOG

A variation of the North American marmot (a burrowing rodent) and a member of the squirrel family, a groundhog has reddish brown fur and a rough bushy tail. Also called a woodchuck, it is a very nervous animal and shies away from all human presence. After a deep and long slumber from late fall until early spring in its hole, an animal living in the wild will come out its burrow. It gets terribly scared and, with the slightest provocation, will sprint back into its hole. This may explain why, after such a long time detached from the world during its underground sleep, it will simply get startled by its own shadow on a sunny day and run back to its cozy, secure home and remain there for a few more weeks.

THE DATE

Theories other than those of Candlemas and Imbolc as to the exact date of February 2 are based on the fact that, in Western countries in the Northern Hemisphere, the official first day of spring (the spring equinox on March 20 or 21) is almost seven weeks (46 - 47 days) after Groundhog Day. About 1,000 years before the Gregorian calendar replaced the Julian calendar in 1562, the spring equinox fell on March 16, which is exactly six weeks after February 2. In the early days of the transition, the legend of basing the arrival of spring (whether it is imminent or six weeks away) on an animal's behavior and setting the date as February 2, could have been a folk embodiment of the confusion created by the collision of the two calendars.

THE OTHER PROGNOSTIGATORS

Groundhog Day is celebrated in both the United States and Canada thereby keeping the tradition alive and attracting the attention of tourists and media alike. Many towns in both countries boast of having their own weather-predicting groundhog in place of Phil. Some of the most famous are:

- Canada:
1. Brandon Bob in Brandon, Manitoba
 2. Balzac Billy in Balzac, Alberta
 3. Shubenacadie Sam in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia (Sam is always the first groundhog in North America to make a prediction)
 4. Gary the Groundhog in Kleinburg, Ontario
 5. Wiarton Willie in Wiarton, Ontario
 6. Spanish Joe in Spanish, Ontario
 7. Brandon Bob & Winnipeg Willow in Winnipeg, Manitoba
 8. Fred la Marmotte in Val D'Espoir, Quebec.

- United States:
1. General Beauregard Lee in Lilburn, Georgia
 2. Staten Island Chuck and Pothole Pete in New York City
 3. Jimmy the Groundhog in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin
 4. Dunkirk Dave in Dunkirk, New York
 5. Woodstock Willie in Woodstock, Illinois
 6. Sir Walter Wally in Raleigh, North Carolina
 7. Pardon Me Pete in Tampa, Florida
 8. Buckeye Chuck in Marion, Ohio
 9. Holtsville Hal in Holtsville, New York

SUMMARY

According to the members of Punxsutawney's Inner Circle, Phil is the only true weather forecasting groundhog and his predictions have been correct 100% of the time. A Canadian study of 13 cities in the past 40 years puts the groundhog's prediction success rate at 37 percent. The United States National Climatic Data Center credits the groundhog's accuracy rate at around 39 percent.

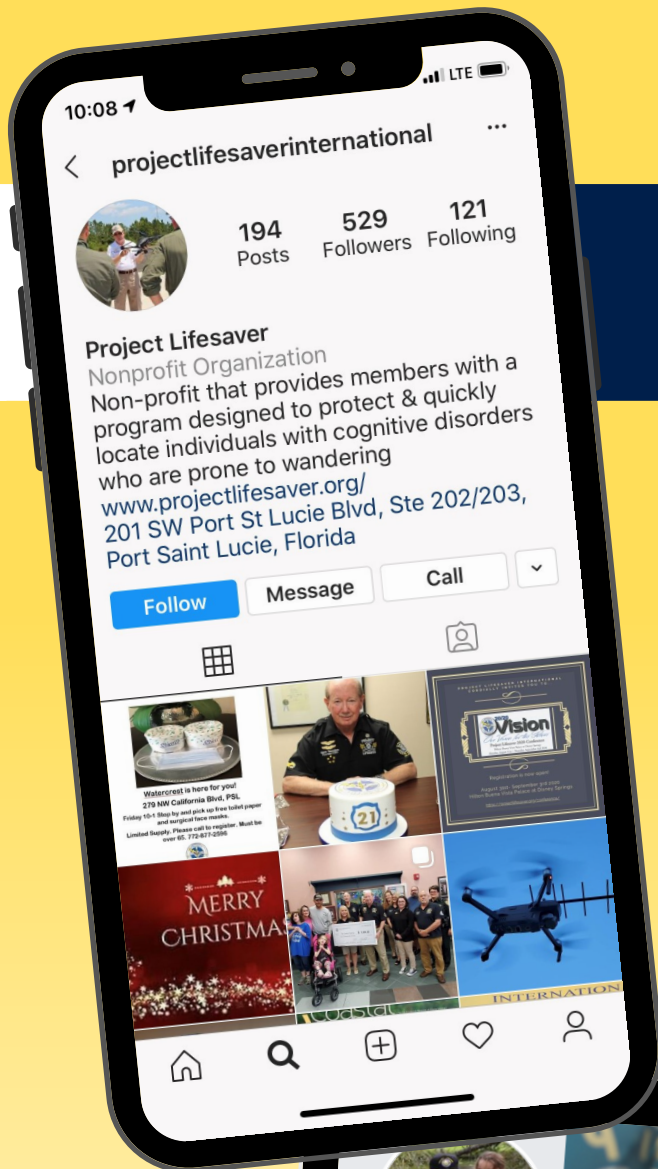
The observance of holidays such as Groundhog Day is reflective of the human desire to create times to celebrate and have the opportunity to spend time together in an enjoyable fashion. Thus, Groundhog Day continues to be observed, despite the fact that predictions based on an animal's behavior have absolutely no value with regard to future weather conditions. In the astrological sense, an early spring does not exist as there are always six more weeks of "winter" after Groundhog Day.

THE ANGELS PROGRAM

Recognition for your hard work

Project Lifesaver's Angels Program is a program specifically designed to recognize public safety officers after completing their first rescue with Project Lifesaver's program. In order to qualify for this recognition, make sure to fill out your After Action Reports and submit them through the PLI Portal! If you have any questions, please reach out to Vanessa Dorrington, Angels Program Coordinator, at vdorrington@projectlifesaver.org.





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