

Groundhog lore

by Sarajane Williams

Groundhog Day is traditionally celebrated in this region on February 2. If you're not from around here, you might be asking, "Why?" Well, it didn't begin with the 1993 "Groundhog Day" movie, starring Bill Murray. The origin of the tradition goes back long before German immigrants arrived in colonial Pennsylvania.

In the ancient Celtic world, at the astronomical mid-point between the winter solstice and spring equinox, a St. Brigid's Day celebration, also known as Imbolc, was held. Revered as a Celtic goddess, and later as a Christian saint, Brigid was associated with the sacred flame. Gaelic, Teutonic and Christian beliefs started to become interlaced around the time of the Roman conflicts in 4th- and 5th-century Europe. Thereafter, the celebration of light, known as Candlemas in Christian traditions, was usually celebrated on the eve of February 2, or during the full moon closest to the first spring thaw. It was customary for clergy to bless candles that were distributed to early European Christians. A lit candle was then placed in each window of the home, to bring light in the dark of winter on Candlemas Day. It was believed that if the weather was fair on February 2, and the sun cast a shadow on a hedgehog or badger, six weeks of cold and stormy weather would follow.

When German settlers arrived in Pennsylvania in the early 18th century, they deemed the indigenous North American groundhog, to be an appropriate substitute for the European hedgehog. The groundhog, also known as *Marmota monax* or woodchuck was the most plentiful hibernating mammal in the region. They have also been called whistle pigs because when alarmed, they use a high-pitched whistle to warn the rest of the colony. Farmers were dependent on good weather, so the prognostication from an intelligent groundhog was most welcome, although the furry vegetarian critters were not welcome in the garden. The early Pennsylvania Germans determined that if a groundhog crawled out of his hole a sunny day on Feb. 2 and saw his shadow, he would return to his underground abode for six more weeks of napping during the snowy winter. If the day was cloudy, moderate weather was predicted for the second half of winter, and if it snowed on that day, there would be a good year ahead.

Despite the somewhat-low accuracy of the groundhog's predictions, a proclamation by the editor of The Punxsutawney Spirit newspaper marked Pennsylvania's first official celebration of Groundhog Day on February 2nd, 1886. To date, winter prognostications by groundhog Punxsutawney Phil have been correct only 39 percent of the time. But that might not be bad, compared to the accuracy of current-day weather predictions that dare not venture past five days.

Groundhogs not only played a useful part in assisting our ancestors to determine when to plant their crops, but they became a viable food source for the settlers, as well. According to author and food historian William Woys Weaver, woodchuck when roasted, marinated, smoked or served in a stew, tastes similar to squirrel or rabbit, but without the strong, gamey taste. When properly prepared, with axillary sweat glands removed, young groundhog has been lauded as a gastronomic delicacy. Groundhog hunts and dinners became popular income-generators for local fund-raising events.

In 1933, in the aftermath of WWI's anti-German sentiment, the first plans were made in Allentown, for Grundsow Lodge gatherings to be held on February 2, on Groundhog Day. Since then, Pennsylvania Groundhog German men have continued to attend the annual Fersommling, not only to learn the groundhog's annual weather prognostication, but also to share and instill pride in their common ethnic heritage by speaking in the dialect, eating traditional foods, and expressing their humor and fond memories and customs through poems, skits, songs and speeches. Despite being a traditional dish, groundhog is not served at the annual meetings because the members prefer not to eat their mascot.

There are currently 17 extant Grundsow Lodges that have followed the tradition of the Nummer Ains an Da Lechaw (Number One on the Lehigh (River)) and are dedicated to keeping the language and customs of the Pennsylvania Germans alive.

The perennial groundhog has become such a wonderful cultural icon and has served our ancestors in such vital ways. It makes one wonder, "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck, if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

Sarajane Williams is president of the Lower Macungie Township Historical Society.

For more information, please visit: www.LMThistory.org.

© 2013