

Groundhog Day - A Pennsylvania Dutch Celebration

This is a newsletter about a holiday that celebrates our Pennsylvania Dutch (Deutsch) heritage. Important to know - Pennsylvania Dutch is an old dialect of German - it has no relationship to the Dutch spoken in Holland. People who are Pennsylvania Dutch are descendants of immigrants from Germany who arrived in the 1700's bringing their language, customs and beliefs with them. Our Dreisbach-Dresbach ancestors lived in Pennsylvania and therefore we are all a bit Pennsylvania Dutch, regardless of where we live or how many nationalities we have acquired through other ancestors and/or adoption.

I begin this newsletter on a personal note. As a child we lived in the country and several times I accompanied my father when he went to shoot groundhogs on an early spring day. I remember him carrying them home, dangling by the hind legs. In our barn, and out of sight of my mother, he gutted, skinned and cut up the carcasses. When done, he brought this to the kitchen where he seasoned the meat and put it in a large pot that went into the oven for many hours. My mother would have nothing to do with this. I do not know if she ate groundhog meat or not - but I certainly did. It was not common, but other farm families also ate groundhog.



A little biological information: Groundhogs, also called woodchucks, are part of the marmot family that create and live in burrows.¹ Found in both suburban and woodland clearings, they can grow to be 2' long and weigh up to 12 pounds. They have legs designed for digging and large front teeth that they must wear down by constant chewing on wood and grass.

Groundhogs are undeniably humorous - they get up early in the morning to feed, eating a wide variety of vegetables, grasses and fruits along with occasional insect. They love garden produce and there is a delightful video of a groundhog enjoying veggies in a garden.² By mid-afternoon they're eaten their fill and now take the rest of the day off to nap in the sun. In late summer the serious work of preparing for hibernation, which lasts from October through March, will begin.

Their burrows can be up to 40 feet long, have several entrances, and contain numerous chambers with various functions. One chamber is for hibernating, another is for birthing their young in April, while other chambers are for storing food. There is a specific one for defecating (and like cats, they cover their excrement with loose dirt specifically kept for that purpose).

Do groundhogs really emerge from their burrows in early February? According to Penn State Berks University Emeritus Professor of Biology, Stam Zervanos, they do! Well, *male* groundhogs leave their burrows in early February to start searching for females. Female groundhogs emerge just a bit later, and stay near or just inside the door to their

¹ Copyright 2014 by Massachusetts Audubon Society, Inc. (Mass Audubon), 208 South Great Road, Lincoln, MA 01773. All rights reserved. Some materials delivered from this website may contain other proprietary notices and copyright information relating to those materials. <https://www.massaudubon.org/learn/nature-wildlife/mammals/woodchucks-groundhogs/about>

² To see the video go to: https://blog.therainforestsite.greatergood.com/chunk-the-groundhog/?gg_source=TRS&gg_medium=house&gg_campaign=Ad-720x360_Blog_Brazen+Groundhog+Steals+Veggies+From+Man%C2%92s+Garden+And+Then+Eats+Them+While+Staring+Int+The+Camera_TRS&gg_content=2020-01%2F7

burrow. After the males have determined where desirable females are located, both sexes go back to their comfy chambers and spend a little more time in hibernation. In March, they all come outside at the same time and mating begins - males know exactly where the females are, so mating is not delayed by a search!³

While groundhogs actually come out of hibernation for a short period of time - they are not weather prognosticators. People have actually done serious scientific studies looking at sunshine (i.e. shadow sightings) and temperatures in the following six weeks. Suffice it to say - there is no proven correlation - but don't tell that to the farmers and others who firmly believe what the groundhog has to say.



Early Origin of Groundhog Day: A day in early February, between the 2nd and the 6th, was celebrated in many cultures. It lies mid-way between the winter solstice, December 21st when the days are shortest, and the spring equinox, March 21st, when day and night have equal length. This half-way period, when days are clearly longer and hope of spring is a reality was of great importance to our ancestors. It was the time when they looked at their stores of food, wood and candles and see if they had enough to last until spring. Had they calculated right? Had they worked hard enough? Or would they have to depend upon the kindness of relatives, neighbors and friends to survive the winter. It was important to know how much longer winter would last!



In ancient Germanic lands, the appearance of a bear, emerging from hibernation in early spring, was used as the weather prognosticator. One can imagine that staking out the den of a bear was potentially dangerous. It may have been for this reason that a different animal, the much smaller hedgehog⁴ became the weather 'man'. When German immigrants came to Pennsylvania, they brought their customs along, including the prediction of weather by a hedgehog. However there are no hedgehogs in North America, and so the not too dissimilar looking (although much larger) groundhog became the animal of choice. See photos at left.

Two hedgehogs. Wikipedia

The festivals of Imbolc and Candlemas : The pagan holiday of Imbolc was celebrated in early February. As days grew longer, Imbolc heralded approaching warmer weather and marked the clear return of the sun. Even today, parts of this tradition linger in some countries. In France, for instance, crepes are the traditional food for February 2nd because the large round pancakes are reminiscent of the sun.

As was the case with all important pagan celebrations, when Christianity arrived it gave them new meaning. Imbolc became Candlemas, a holiday that marks the presentation of the baby Jesus at the temple, as well as the purification of Mary 40 days after giving birth. The name of the festival, Candlemas, derives from the practice in which beeswax candles were blessed by the priest and distributed to parishioners. This custom also derives from the pagan past. After the long nights of November, December and January, supplies of candles were growing low. The freshly smelling beeswax candles celebrated light and the coming of spring. With the arrival of Christianity, the candles became a symbol of the Light of Christ. Candlemas has been celebrated since the 4th Century. Interestingly, with its link to the end of Mary's confinement after Jesus birth, in some countries this has become the time when Christmas decorations are taken down.

The Germans, who came to Pennsylvania in the 1700's, brought their celebrations with them. Although a fairly minor festival, Candlemas must have been important to a farm-based community. The doldrums of winter were nearly over, it was time to think and plan for spring planting. Most importantly, the farmer had to make sure that half of his winter

³ National Geographic <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/2/150201-groundhog-day-punxsutawney-pennsylvania-phil-holiday-winter/>

⁴ Top photo: Wikipedia: A young Hedgehog (Erinaceus europaeus) by Gibe *first uploaded in de.wikipedia on 3. Sep 2004 12:07 (Europäischer Igel, GNU-FDL, selbst fotografiert) {{GFDL}} <de:Bild:Igel.JPG>

Bottom photo: <https://www.needpix.com/photo/1267373/hedgehog-cute-hand-spur-prickly-sting-chestnut-pointed-finger>

fodder remained, enough to sustain the animals until there was grass for grazing. For women, winter was the time they spent spinning wool. It was a chore that could be done by dim firelight. By early February the days were noticeably longer, it was light until supper time, and the women could turn to other chores.

How was Groundhog Day chosen as a celebration? World War I created a strong reaction against anything German. During the war and in the period afterwards, many Pennsylvania Deitsche concealed their heritage. They stopped using the dialect and tried to appear as "English" as possible. However, by the early 1930's there was an opposite reaction, people wanted to celebrate their heritage - and maintain the Pennsylvania German dialect. According to the author, William Donner, this desire is what precipitated the rejuvenation of a minor holiday and led to the formation of the groundhog lodges. It led, in fact, to the founding of the most famous of these, "Grundsow Lodge, Nummer Ains, on die Lechau", in 1934.

Groundhog Day was not a new celebration. The prediction of prolonged winter or early spring, as made by an animal briefly emerging from hibernation, was folklore with an unbroken past. The festival was maintained by agricultural people for whom weather prediction was involved with survival. In the 1930's, a group of men from Allentown, PA were casting about for a way to celebrate their German dialect. They were familiar with the event where a groundhog predicted the weather for the next six weeks. Moreover, celebration of the groundhog prognosticator, Punxsutawney Phil was now widely known having begun as early as 1887.

Lichtmess	<i>Candlemas</i>
Schpinne vergess	<i>Forget spinning</i>
Bei Daag zu Nacht gess'	<i>It's light at supper time</i>
Un's halb Fudder gefiediart	<i>And half the fodder has been eaten</i>

The old and well known maxim above is evidence of a continuing Penna. Dutch knowledge and celebration of an early February celebration - recorded by Alfred Shoemaker, from *Serious Nonsense*, p.32)

Punxsutawney is near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, far from the Pennsylvania Dutch country but a large number of dialect speakers had moved to this area. The relationship between Punxsutawney Phil and the formation of the first Groundhog Lodge is unclear but involves a famous champion of the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect, "Pumpernickle Bill" (the pen name of William Troxell, a native of Allentown, PA).

In 1933, Troxell led a series of meetings to set up a groundhog lodge with the aim of preserving the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect. Many people in attendance were members of secret societies including the Masons, Elks, and Shriners. Using knowledge of these groups, Troxell formed groundhog versammlinge (gatherings) in southeastern Pennsylvania. As "Pumpernickle Bill" he had access to newspaper columns and radio stations to promote his lodges. In 1934, the combination of Punxsutawney Phil, the continuance of celebrating Groundhog Day in Pennsylvania Dutch culture, and the organizational and promotional abilities of William Troxell culminated in formation of a new secret society, dedicated to the preservation of Pennsylvania Dutch - Grundsow Lodge, Nummer Ains, on die Lechau.

Membership was, and still is, an entirely male fraternity based on the ability to converse in Pennsylvania Dutch. It included, and still includes, a wide social spectrum from farmers, tradesmen, and salesmen to professionals (teachers, lawyers, doctors, judges) and local manufacturers (a pretzel bakery owner, etc.). When it began, the Lodge had a secondary purpose in addition to preserving the dialect - to bring laughter and joy to the dark times of the depression. (The book, *Serious Nonsense, Groundhog Lodges, Versammlinge, and Pennsylvania German Heritage* by William W. Donner is the source of the information below, and I recommend his book if you want to learn more about this topic.)

Structure of a Grundsow Lodge meeting: The most important part of a Groundhog Lodge meeting was to speak Deitsch (i.e. Pennsylvania German/Pennsylvania Dutch). Arrivals were greeted by a sign that said "Fom loch ob wert Deitsch g'schwetzt" (From the door on, only Deitsch will be spoken). Use of English words resulted in a fine and at the end of the meeting, all money collected was donated to a charity.

According to Donner, meetings of all Groundhog Lodges are similar. It begins with a ceremony to bring in the groundhog. A bell is rung, the lights are lowered and a live band strikes up rousing music. Men in top hats carry in a stuffed groundhog inside a glass case and put it on the speaker's podium where two other stuffed groundhogs already reside. The assembled men then sing "America" (My Country 'Tis of Thee) in Deitsch. This is followed by the Pledge of Allegiance with the words printed, in Deitsch, in the program.

Next a "Solemn Minute" to remember people who died during the past year, followed by a prayer offered by a local pastor, in Deitsch. The serious mood continues with the Swearing of the Oath, although this event is lightened significantly by the fact that all the men, who refer to each other as *Breider* (brothers), stand up and imitate the posture of a groundhog with arms against their chest and hands out in front like paws! The Oath is a secret to be kept among the members and is the means by which old and new members of the lodge are united. Oddly enough, it varies from year to year!

After this comes Dinner! At the first meeting of the Lodge, groundhog meat was served! At that time, and it was at the height of the depression, eating groundhog was done by many people - as I mentioned, my family ate the groundhog my father had killed and butchered. However this apparently did not meet with great approval because the second year, the Lodge served buffalo. The current menu is a pretty standard buffet dinner - although it also features some typical Pennsylvania Dutch foods like cottage cheese with apple butter (lotwarick mit schmeerkase) and chow chow (pickled vegetables).

Following dinner people sing songs, in dialect of course. A favorite is "Schnitzelbank" - a song that many of us raised in the Pennsylvania Dutch country can still sing - at least a verse or two and the chorus! It has a place at every lodge meeting. "Schnitzelbank" is a curious choice because the song arrived with German immigrants in the late 1800's and early 1900's and, as such, does not qualify as being a Pennsylvania Dutch song. Nevertheless it was and is enormously popular, no doubt partly because of the lyrics which include a verse about a pile of manure!

The Grundsow Lodge meeting features, of course, the weather prediction by the groundhog! This is a report by a person who had been detailed to observe "a" groundhog and report on whether a shadow was seen or not. The report is always humorous and includes a description of other groundhog actions (think - mating behavior). There also are skits and dramas, always humorous and often venturing into areas that are not deemed to be 'politically correct'.

During the weather prediction, a man, or several men wearing top hats walk to the front of the hall to ask the groundhog for his prediction - spring coming soon, or 6 more weeks of winter. In one version, the men encounter a groundhog who has emerged from his burrow but is nursing a sore tail that had been half shot off the previous summer by a farm boy. The groundhog is not in a good humor. The men say "My good friend, here we stand and want to talk with you. The winter was long and the north wind cold, the snow was deep and the ground frozen hard. We are tired with this unpredictable weather. Speak, groundhog, say when the spring will come." The groundhog grumbles his reply "When it rains, it gets wet. When it snows, it turns white, when it freezes, it is icy. When winter is over, spring must be here." (This kind of oracle speech, without giving an obvious answer - is traditional when interpreting what the groundhog says or does.)

The men want clarity. They say: "Jar, Jar, sell is recht." ("Yes, yes, that's right."). The chief questioner faces the groundhog and accuses him of knowing what the weather will be but not being willing to tell them. "E'r wees es

Ich ferschprech gedrei tzu dem
Fahne fun die fereenichte Schtaate
fun Amerika, und des Land fer des
er schteht, ae Land, Unnich Gott,
ewich fareenicht, mit Freiheit Un
Gerechtigkeet fer all.

(I pledge allegiance to the flag of
the United States of America, and
to the Republic for which it stands,
One Nation, under God,
indivisible, with Liberty and
Justice for all.)

allrecht." ("He", i.e. the groundhog, "knows it, all right".) "Sell hen m'r jo schun all gewisst. Frog weider." ("We already knew all that. Ask some more.") says another man.

The groundhog, thoroughly irritated at being questioned says: "Sag mir. Was dheedet i't dhu wann d'ir sechs woche imme loch lewe misst mit re alde besse, gretzige, bissiche gundsau, ass dich in dei schwans beisst ass halwer abgschoose war letsch summer von so 'm langlechticher bauersbu." ("Tell me - what can you do when you must live six more weeks in the hole with an old, angry, complaining, biting groundhog [wife] who bites you in the same tail that was half shot off last summer by a Lancaster farm boy!") It was decided that he had seen his shadow since the groundhog was complaining about having to go back into his den, with his crabby wife, for six more weeks. He'd seen his shadow and there would be six more weeks of winter.

There is always a main speaker at the Groundhog Lodge meetings, one who uses humor to deliver a serious message - in dialect! Humor is the keystone of the meeting and of the Lodge itself. Pennsylvania Dutch humor has always had "earthy" roots. My father, who was a salesman and interacted with many people, had a huge store of jokes. Any joke he told was designed for the person hearing it and if it elicited just a smile or a faint chuckle, a subsequent joke would be of a different variety. When my father told an off color joke and it was received with a guffaw - there would be many more to follow. This was in essence the same sort of thing that happened at the Lodge meetings.

The often scatological content of Pennsylvania Dutch humor reflected working with the earth, animals and basics attributes of being alive. That people could make jokes of something as serious as life and death is a testament to their strength and to their ability to enjoy life. According to William Donner, "...the lowly groundhog and the earthy humor are part of an important message concerning the knowledge and experience of the common person... The meetings provide a message about traditional values and allow participants to view both past and present with new perspectives."⁵

As the meeting came to its conclusion, the Word of Honor was spoken. Patriotism was, and is, at the heart of the Grundsow Lodge. People were extremely proud of their Pennsylvania Dutch German heritage, but were even more devoted to their country. They saw these attributes as part of the same spectrum and felt that love for one should not, could not, exclude love for the other. The Word of Honor expresses these feelings. Although said in dialect, here is the translation:

*I am proud of our Pennsylvania Deutsche Flag; and also the Mother Tongue; of the Ship that brought our Forefathers here; the Church that keeps us on the right path; of the Plow that helped us on the land; of the Arts that give us time to do the things we enjoy; of the Wagon that took us across this large land; of the Colors, red, white and blue, that show we are first of all American and of the Keystone that keeps us Pennsylvania Deutsche together for Posterity.*⁶

Conclusion and last words: At the end of every Grundsow Lodge meeting, the members recite this motto:

Leiwer Gott im Himmel drin,
Loss uns Deutsche was mire sin;
Und erhalt uns alle zeit
Unser Deutsche feelichkeit.

*Dear God in Heaven
Let us Deutsche be what we are
And preserve for all time
Our Deutsche merriment.*

Punxsutawney Phil: Any discussion of Groundhog Day has to include the most famous groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil and Gobblers Knob the place where he makes his yearly appearance. Although this Groundhog Day celebration is German in origin, it is only peripherally related to the Pennsylvania Dutch. Punxsutawney is a small town near Pittsburgh, far outside the area settled by Pennsylvania Dutch. In the 1800's the area was settled by many new German

⁵ W.W.Donner, *Serious Nonsense*, p. 95.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 58, 59.

immigrants who worked in the steel mills. Like the German immigrants of the 1700's they brought the groundhog tradition with them.

The fame of Punxsutawney Phil is largely due to the 1993 movie, "Groundhog Day". Although ostensibly the movie takes place in Pennsylvania, it was filmed in Woodstock, Illinois. The movie stars Bill Murray as Phil Connors, a TV weatherman assigned to cover Groundhog Day at Punxsutawney. Connors is caught in a time loop, condemned to repeating Groundhog Day, over and over in an endless cycle. What he does to break the cycle is the crux of the movie. Murray is hilarious and if you have not seen this movie, I highly recommend it.



Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog day, 2018. Wikipedia

Finally - the accuracy of groundhog predictions: Several studies have been made and all show that groundhog prediction of the weather is less than random chance. Wikipedia published the results of a study that says that the groundhog's accuracy between 35% and 40%.^{7,8} Trust the weatherman.

Punxsutawney Phil's predictions^[16]

							1887	1888	1889
1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899
1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909
1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919
1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928	1929
1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
2020									

2019 and 2020 was the first, and only time when "Early spring" has been predicted two (2) years in a row.

- "Long winter" (103)
- "Early spring" (20)
- "War clouds have blacked out parts of the shadow." (1)
- No appearance (1)
- No record (9)

⁷ "Groundhog Forecasters versus the U.S. Temperature Record". NOAA National Climatic Data Center. Retrieved January 31, 2013.

⁸ Groundhog Day forecasts and climate history. *National Centers for Environmental Prediction* (February 2, 2019). Retrieved February 2, 2019