

Getting the Goods on the history of GROUNDHOG Day

by Kristen Carter

It may seem strange that there came to be a special day celebrated in the name of a rodent. In the United States and Canada, February 2 is known as Groundhog Day, which, according to tradition, is the day on which the groundhog (also known as the woodchuck) judges whether or not winter will end soon. If it comes out of its burrow and does not see its own shadow, it is said, winter will not last long. However, if it fails to see it, there will be six more weeks until spring arrives.

But where does this odd ritual come from? In medieval Europe, the holiday known as Candlemas, or the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, celebrated a biblical event in which Mary took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem 40 days after his birth.

Candlemas fell on the day many northern European countries considered the start of spring, February 2. Today, this is the midpoint between winter and spring. Folklore had it that hibernating mammals would then emerge from their dens to predict the changing season. If the animal saw its shadow and feared it, causing it to return to its den, that meant the weather that day was sunny, and, consequently, winter would linger for another six weeks. Those six weeks would

bring the date to approximately the first day of spring in today's standard Gregorian calendar.

An interesting possible origin of the tradition may be traced back to a couple of English and Scottish sayings. The first has four lines, which read:

*If Candlemas be fair and bright
Winter will have another flight
If Candlemas be cloud and rain
Winter will be gone and not come again.*

The second is a couplet that goes:

*If Candlemas Day is bright and clear
There'll be two winters in the year.*

While those in North America use the groundhog as the animal prognosticator, Europeans of the time used various hibernating mammals, such as bears, hedgehogs, and badgers. For the Germans, it was the badger. When the Germans immigrated to the New World and settled in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century, they brought their

Candlemas tradition with them; the only problem was they couldn't find any badgers, so they relied on the native woodchuck

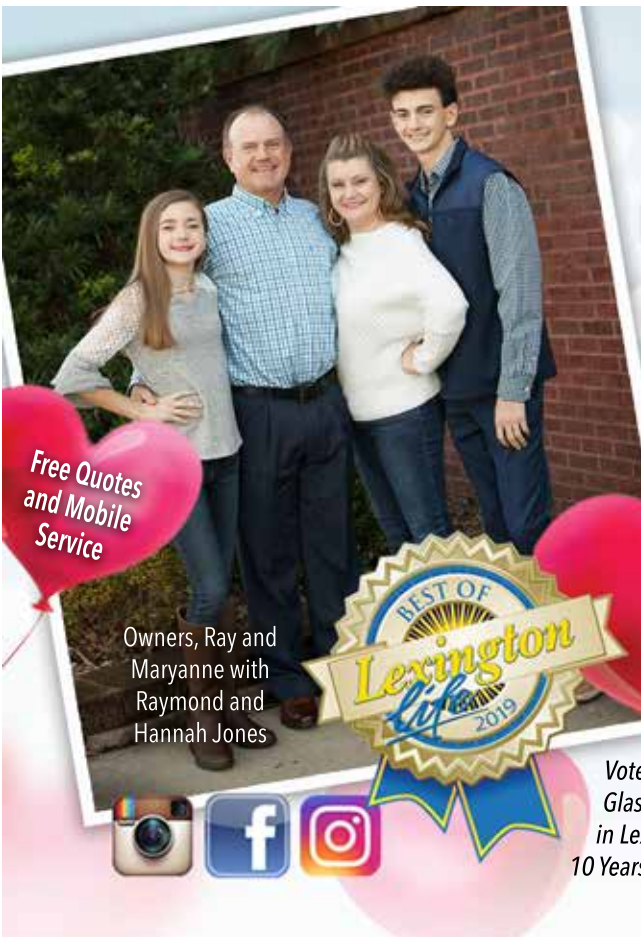




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instead. For Punxutawny Phil, the nation's most recognized Groundhog Day icon, we have the Germans to thank.

The rest of the story is purely Americana. In 1886, in the small Pennsylvania town of Punxutawney, the first annual



Groundhog Day festival was held. Since then, the holiday spread to the rest of the United States and Canada. The original Pennsylvania festival still remains the most well-known

and Punxutawny Phil the most popular groundhog. Each year, the festival consists of a group of men in tuxedos and top hats, known as the Inner Circle, taking Phil out of his den and having him “whisper” the prediction into the ear of his keeper. The keeper then announces the forecast to the eager crowd.

So exactly how accurate is Phil? Well, not very, according to the statistics. It is estimated by the National Climate Data Center that the rodent has correctly predicted the duration of winter 39 percent of the time since 1886. It's interesting that, despite the notion of an “early spring,” in reality winter typically starts at the same time of year, approximately six (but actually seven) weeks after February 2. This fact would bring the groundhog's accuracy way up because, more often than not, he foretells six more weeks of winter.

Some other fun facts about the holiday: Punxutawny Phil, according to the Inner Circle, is the same animal that gave the original prognostication in 1886 and has survived because of a potion he is given. In Canada, the spotlight shines on Warton Willie, a groundhog in Ontario and his successors, Wee Willie. The 1993 film *Groundhog Day* featuring Bill Murray brought attention to the celebration on a worldwide level.

While the religious significance of Candlemas may have largely disappeared, the tradition of an animal encountering its shadow has remained. Groundhog Day is an interesting case of how the meaning of one day has transformed dramatically throughout the centuries and the various cultures that embraced it. ■