

## This Day in History... February 2, 1887

# Happy Groundhog Day!

On February 2, 1887, the first official Groundhog Day event was held in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. However, the tradition dates back much further to the Christian holiday known as Candlemas, and likely even further to the pre-Christian Celtic holiday of Imbolc.

Historically, the ancient Celts celebrated holidays based on seasonal turning points. Imbolc fell halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. There are stories of Celts looking to see if snakes or other burrowing creatures had begun leaving their holes yet.

Like many pagan holidays, Imbolc was eventually Christianized and became Candlemas. On February 2, members of the clergy would bless and pass out candles to be used throughout the year. It was believed that if the sun was out on that day, the worst of winter was still to come, but if it was raining, winter was over.



*Candlemas is still observed as a Christian festival celebrating the return of light, representing protection and prosperity.*

In Germany, Candlemas included an animal – the badger – to predict the weather, and was also known as Badger Day. The German lore stated, “If the badger sunbathes during Candlemas-week, for four more weeks he will be back in his hole.” In different areas, other animals were used for the same purpose, including bears, foxes, and hedgehogs.

Dutch and German settlers brought this tradition to America, where the badger was replaced by the more common groundhog (also known as the woodchuck). The first written record of Groundhog Day in America was on February 2, 1840, in the diary of James L. Morris of Morgantown, Pennsylvania.

However, the 1887 celebration is often considered the first official Groundhog Day in America. On February 2 of that year, a group of citizens went to the Gobbler’s Knob part of town to observe the groundhog for the first time. Local newspaper editor Clymer Freas is often considered the father of “Groundhog Day” and many believe Groundhog Day events in America began in Punxsutawney.

Reportedly, the first groundhog was named Phil, and the group that held the event in Punxsutawney claimed he was the only true weather-forecasting groundhog. In spite of this, several other towns have their own celebrations and their own groundhogs, including Birmingham Bill, Staten Island Chuck, and Canada’s Shubenacadie Sam.



*In Alaska, they celebrate Marmot Day on February 2 in place of Groundhog Day.*



*Groundhogs are also known as woodchucks.*



*From the North American Wildlife sheet*

The Punxsutawney celebration is generally the largest, hosting as many as 40,000 people every year. As far as Phil’s accuracy, that’s up for debate. Over the years Punxsutawney groundhogs have predicted 105 extended winters and 20 early springs. One source claims he was accurate just 39% of the time. According to the Farmer’s Almanac, they’ve been accurate 50% of the time, while a team at Middlebury College states his long-term predictions were 70% accurate when measuring temperature highs and lows.

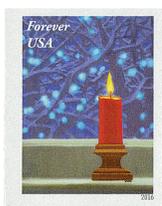
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