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WIARTON — How seriously do they take all that Wiarion Willie groundhog-and-shadow stuff around here?

Officially, it's serious business. But sometimes during the week-long festival that follows the animal's Feb. 2 weather forecast, it gets a little hard to separate fact from malarky.

Some people actually eat groundhog as part of the festivities. At least, that's what they said around the Wiarion and District Curling Club as the annual groundhog bonspiel went into its final ends Saturday afternoon.

"There's nothing wrong with groundhog," festival organizer Peter Pegg said. "They only eat the best of grass."

Ray Marklevitz's Wiarion Groundhog Stew recipe is on page 28 of the curling club's cookbook, right beside Joyce Brown's Bavarian Supper For 2 and Pat Sam's Beef with Bok Choy.

The traditional midnight meal at the annual groundhog bonspiel is Marklevitz's stew. And runners-up receive a stuffed groundhog trophy.

But festival organizers have hinted there are internal disputes among Wiarionians about the true identity of the town's weather forecasting animal.

For almost a generation now, successive town mayors have stirred early from bed annually on Feb. 2 to wander the snowy meadows north of here looking for small shadows.

Custom has it that the furry creature emerges from winter hibernation to scout the approach of spring. No shadow means spring is just around the corner.

Wiarion has turned all this into a disputed claim to fame as world groundhog capital. Punxsutawney, Penn., makes the same claim and competes with its brown marmot Phil against the Wiarion albino Willie in what amounts to a continent-wide publicity binge for both communities.

The animal weather watch has become an elaborate ritual complete with formal attire. But in Wiarion, there's another side to it all.

Pegg suggested Saturday that the albino groundhog advertised to the world as Wiarion Willie may actually be an imposter.

"The real Willie is a brown one," Pegg said cautiously.

The community festival that follows Groundhog Day is a major source of funds for local projects. This year, the money goes toward renovations of the Bruce Peninsula hospital.

Broomball tournaments, a casino night, festival queen pageant and several dances all with a groundhog theme form the core of an intense weekend of activity coordinated by the Lion's Club.

Pegg worried about offending officials of the town's Business Improvement Area who handle the albino Willie. But that didn't stop him from raising questions about the accuracy of this year's

ing the traditional stew using young animals shot in summer and frozen for use in February. This year's stew came from the home of curling club president Bill Glassford and his wife Judy.

"It tastes the same as rabbit," Marklevitz said. But groundhogs are very fat, and cooks must take care to remove musk glands from under the animal's legs before cooking.

forecast, which had predicted an early spring.

Warm weather earlier in the week seemed to confirm the forecast. Organizers cancelled ice sculpture, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling events scheduled for Saturday.

But winter struck back overnight Friday, and Pegg quietly expressed his doubts.

"Sure, spring is just around the corner," he said. "But where is the corner?"

"Remember," he went on. "We don't know if that's the real Wiarion Willie."

For more than a decade, a pair of hand-painted groundhog pennants has dominated one wall of the curling rink. But the noble groundhog on the pennant is brown.

And the trophy for bonspiel runners-up is a stuffed groundhog with brown fur and a small bullet hole behind one ear.

Marklevitz, the man who devised groundhog stew a decade ago, was actually accused of cooking Willie one year when nobody could find a groundhog on groundhog day.

Club members take turns cook-

"We don't shoot any white ones," Marklevitz said with a big smile. As he smiled he added that the groundhog weekend helps shorten Wiarion's lengthy winter no matter what the groundhog forecast says.

"It'd be pretty hard to exist all winter without a weekend like this."

Groundhog stew recipe

Ray Marklevitz's Wiarion Groundhog Stew recipe:

- 1 groundhog
- 4 large potatoes
- 4 large carrots
- 2 large cooking onions
- 1 cup peas
- ¼ cup cornstarch
- 1 parsnip
- ½ small turnip
- 3 tbsp. worcestershire sauce
- 1 clove garlic
- salt and pepper to taste
- flour
- butter

Skin and clean groundhog. Remove musk glands found under legs. Wash and soak in salt water overnight. Remove and cut in

pieces. Place in pressure cooker with water.

Cook until meat falls off bones. Dust with flour and fry in butter until brown. Add water to make gravy and clean fry pan.

Clean, dice and cook all vegetables. Place in large pot and cook until tender. Add browned groundhog and gravy stock.

Stew should be just covered with liquid. Add garlic clove crushed, worcestershire sauce, salt and pepper to taste.

Bring everything to a boil. Add cornstarch and water to thicken.

Serve with lots of beer on Feb. 2 and maybe we will have an early spring. Serves 4 - hungry.

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