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Groundhog weekend has happy beginnings

(picture in back)

When Kris Morris of Windsor married Joan McKenzie of Oliphant, the wedding triggered a chain of events, leading to fame and merriment for Wiarton citizens and visitors.

Groundhog Weekend is a direct result of that happy occasion which took place February 12, 1955.

Happy Day red roses and green fern set the scene for the Valentine theme wedding. Joan was attended by her sisters and niece. Kris' groomsmen were friends from Windsor.

However it was the guests

from many areas in southern Ontario that were responsible for the future festival held each year on the first weekend in February.

Joan's parents operated the store at Oliphant for many years. The summer people were their friends. At that time snowmobiling, cross country skiing, snowshoeing and dog sledding were not the popular sports they are today. Summer homes were built for summer living and not with permanent retirement in mind. Cottagers closed their cottages on Thanksgiving and

opened them the 24th of May. Very few saw the Bruce Peninsula in winter.

The wedding reception was held at the Arlington Hotel where most of the visiting guests had booked rooms. All of the guests were delighted and amazed with the beauty of the Bruce in its winter dress. Everyone wanted to repeat the party the following year.

Joan's cousin, Mac McKenzie, then with the provincial government in Toronto was made International President of the Groundhog Movement.

He organized and publicized

the 1956 party. The original wedding guests with other friends, all dubbed Groundhogggers, returned for a gala weekend. A large bonfire at Oliphant was built and the guests went through the mystic rituals relative to the appearance or non-appearance of the groundhog. Sleigh rides back and forth from Wiarton to Oliphant were enjoyed.

In 1957, the party was repeated. The number of visitors grew and the event caught the attention of the Canadian press. It was called by a T.V. reporter the only Groundhog Day celebration in Canada. All the local hotels were fully booked and the restaurants did a roaring business.

The Chamber of Commerce were impressed and the town took over the celebration in 1958. It was then called Grounde Hogge Festival.

Lois Taylor, age 17, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. C. J. Taylor, was the first Queen of the Festival. Julianna Akiwenzie, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Akiwenzie of Cape Croker, and Pat Couch, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ewart Couch of Adamsville, were the Princesses.

An impromptu parade by the Oliphant Light Infantry Band consisting of four trumpets and a bass drum led to parades in future years. There were sleigh rides and skating in the arena, many of the skaters in costume.

By 1959 the festivities included a seven piece German Band and the Velvetones quartet. Dancing on the ice in moccasins was enjoyed as well as many outdoor events. Again Wiarton hotels reported capacity bookings.

The next year the Festival went into a new decade well established as one of the best winter fun events in Canada. It has flourished yearly and is now sponsored by the Lions Club assisted by many other organizations.

All this is the result of Joan McKenzie and Kris Morris choosing early February for their wedding day. The happy couple went off to sunny Florida for their honeymoon however.

Mrs. Hyatt 1980 crowned queen

Last Thursday evening at the ball diamond, Ron Boyd, president of the Rotary Club officially opened the 42nd Annual Rotary Village Weekend with these words, "It's the Big Show for the Big Year."

The evening also witnessed the selection and 'crowning' of the Centennial Queen who will rign over Wiarton's Centennial events throughout Homecoming Week.

The Centennial Queen is Mrs. Bertha Hyatt.

On behalf of the Centennial committee Mrs. Hyatt was presented with her Royal ribbon by Margaret Wyonch.

The other three finalists in the Centennial Queen contest were Mrs. Florence Lemcke, Mrs. Eula Farrow and Mrs. Olive Schroeder. Each lady received the special Centennial pin as a gift.

Monique Craig, representing Wiarton Flowers, presented the Queen with a bouquet of flowers.

Emcee of the opening ceremonies was Al 'Red' Leeder, who also helped to coordinate many of the Rotary Village Weekend's activities, in particular the Musical Variety show at the Public School grounds Sunday evening.