

The scoop from Willie and Phil

A couple days ago it suddenly hit me— today is Groundhog Day!
 Now I don't have any grandiose expectations about replaying Groundhog Day over a hundred times or more.
 Nor do I expect to wake up with actress Andie McDowell beside me tomorrow morning, as in the 1993 movie.
 Besides, it'd be mighty crowded with The Sidekick there as well....



Ted Brown

Over the years, Groundhog Day has been a significant date in my family. As farmers, we'd always be interested in the little furry rodent's prognostication for the coming spring.

Let's face it, if one is a farmer, one always worries about the forecast, and invariably stops to listen— even if it's coming from a freakin' groundhog.

Groundhog Day has its origins in a German tradition, Candlemas Day, a Christian holiday on February 2, the dark month, in which the clergy blessed candles, and distributed them to the people.

If the sun came out on Candlemas, it was said the hedgehog would see its shadow and six more weeks of winter would follow. When German settlers came to Pennsylvania they continued their tradition, using groundhogs instead of hedgehogs to predict the weather.

Giving the Americans their dues, they invented good old Punxsutawney Phil 70 years before the folks in Warton, Ontario had Willie.

Apparently, the first official Groundhog Day was celebrated February 2, 1886 in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, with a proclamation in *The Punxsutawney Spirit* by the newspaper's editor, Clymer Freas.

Freas used his editorial soapbox to name Punxsutawney Phil as the official weather prognosticating groundhog.

Years later, not to be outdone, Warton resident Mac McKenzie hosted a private Groundhog Day gathering in 1956— sounds to me like it was simply an excuse to quaff a few at the local watering hole.

But a *Toronto Star* reporter heard of the gathering and traveled to Warton looking for the Groundhog Day event.

No one in town had a clue about

the party, but the reporter eventually found McKenzie and his buddies partying and was invited to join the celebration.

The next day, the reporter figured he needed some kind of story and image to justify his trip to Warton. It's told that McKenzie grabbed his wife's fur hat, went out to the parking lot, dug a hole in the snow and pronounced a forecast which no one remembers. The photo of McKenzie and the fur hat ran in the February 3, 1956 edition of *The Toronto Star*.

The next year, about 50 people landed in Warton for the prognostication— many were reporters from various media.

Seeing the opportunity as an annual celebration, McKenzie organized the festival, which has been celebrated ever since.

Some years, I'm not all that sure that Willie or Phil are that accurate.

Let's face it— they pop out of their dens, utter some profound prognostication, then retreat to the warmth of that burrow, down below the frost line.

On top of that, these groundhogs (apparently, so I'm told) only speak in 'groundhog-ese'.

Tell me, off the top of your head, how many people do you know who are fluent in that language?

Yup, I may have my doubts, but at the same time, I've gotta accept that they are probably as accurate as the local weather forecaster. And they certainly do have their ear to the ground.

Best of all, it's a volunteer gig, unlike weather folks on TV, who are paid good money and use high tech hardware to forecast the weather.

And they still get it wrong.

Carpooling promoted next week

Halton residents are encouraged to get into the fast lane next week with regard to help the environment.

As part of Carpool Week (February 6-10), area motorists are being asked to join the Smart Commute Halton initiative, which in partnership with Metrolink has 15 Halton businesses on board— encouraging their employees to carpool each day.

"Whether you're driving all the way to work or just to the GO station, chances are there's someone else with a similar commute. Smart Commute Halton makes it easy to get in touch with people at your workplace or in your community so that people can easily

start a carpool," said Halton Regional Chair Gary Carr.

Last year, the 15 Smart Commute Halton member businesses eliminated 172,064 kilometres of road travel— which works out to four times around the world. This eliminated 31,987 kilograms of greenhouse gas emissions and saved almost \$92,000 in commuter costs.

CarpoolZone.ca is a free online carpool matching system from Smart Commute. It helps drivers find others in their community who are interested in carpooling.

For information on Smart Commute Halton, visit www.smartcommutehalton.ca.

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