

Readers Write - Organizers Thank Fair Supporters

To the Editor:

This year, the 2012 Whistle Stop Christmas Fair raised \$1,100 for the Arthritis Society - more than twice the amount hoped for by fair organizers Laura and Grace Volpe, who are former Stouffville residents.

Last year, the event raised \$500 through donations to benefit arthritis research and programs. Many volunteer hours and teamwork went into this event, which has been held at the Markham GO Station in December over the past four years.

Our thanks go out to everyone who helped to make this fair, which features art, crafts and unique food, the best ever. Thank you to The Garden Basket in Markham, which sponsored the cafe, and to Nicole Chapman of The Arthritis Society who spoke to visitors throughout the day, giving information about arthritis and the society's work.

A special thank you to our talented and enthusiastic vendors and to our elves - students from St. Elizabeth Catholic High School in Thornhill. Other volunteers

included Patrick Kennedy and Bradley Keen, who manned the barbecue and Brandon Wild and Bob Vopni who provided the music. Thank you also to Councillor Carolina Moretti and her executive assistant Gillian Shaw.

We couldn't have done it without you!

We look forward to another successful event in December 2013.

Hannelore Volpe
Stouffville

McWhinnie's World



Groundhog Day Casts A Long Shadow

By Jill McWhinnie

Although the weather prognostications of groundhogs have generally proven no more accurate than those of certain television meteorologists who purport to predict the weather, each year on Feb. 2 we eagerly await the verdicts of celebrity groundhogs Punxsutawney Phil and Warton Willie as to when winter will end.

Groundhog festivals in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, Warton, Ontario and other communities based on the pivotal announcement of whether or not the resident rodent has seen its shadow, bring in tourist dollars, make for a fun winter weekend, and remind us of the connection between living creatures and the cycle of the seasons.

How did the temporary emergence from hibernation of the groundhog, aka woodchuck or whistle pig, gain such an esteemed place in the yearly calendar?

Our modern celebration of Groundhog Day appears to have its beginnings in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where the local newspaper editor, a member of The Punxsutawney Groundhog Club, a group of groundhog hunters, announced on Feb. 2, 1887 that a local groundhog possessed powers of predicting weather. From this modest beginning grew the annual festival that was featured in the Bill Murray movie, *Groundhog Day*.

However, the origins of the festival go back even earlier, to the German settlers in Pennsylvania, who had brought with them the tradition of weather forecasting on Feb. 2, Candlemas Day, a Christian festival which commemorates the presentation of Jesus at the holy temple in Jerusalem, forty days after his birth. According to ancient weather lore, "If Candlemas Day is bright and clear/There'll be two winters in the year."

In the European agrarian societies of the day, it was important for farmers to know when to begin preparations for spring planting. They believed that if the badger, a hibernating animal, emerged and saw its shadow on Candlemas Day, there would be more snow and cold, whereas if the shadow was not seen, preparations for spring planting could soon begin. When they arrived in the United States, European settlers transferred the role of the badger in predicting the weather to the groundhog.

The ancient Celtic fire festival of Imbolc, which took place on Feb. 1, marked the beginning of spring, as it occurred at the midpoint between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. The word *Imbolc* derives from the Old Irish *imbolg* meaning "in the belly," a time when ewes began to lactate, as they would soon give birth to spring lambs.

The lighting of candles and fires symbolized the return and renewing power of the sun. Imbolc was also a time for weather divination, as people watched to see when hibernating serpents and badgers emerged from their lairs.

So despite all the frivolity of Groundhog Day festivities, of town elders in top hats giving us the weather word from Punxsutawney Phil and Warton Willie, it's still a day worth celebrating, if only to remind ourselves of how closely connected we once were to the observation of nature and the seasons.

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