

Folklife Today Podcast  
Season 5, Episode 2  
February 2023 – Groundhog Day

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. I'm here with Steve Winick, a folklife specialist at the Center, and the creator of the Folklife Today blog.

Stephen Winick: Hi Folks!

John Fenn: And with Michelle Stefano, a folklife specialist and a key member of our blog team!

Michelle Stefano: Hello everyone! We're here to talk about a very special subject, and...well, Steve, let's see if people can guess what the topic is.

Steve: All right! Your clue is this song by Ernie Alston, recorded back in 1940.

[1:00]

[Music: Ernie Alston Plays "Groundhog"]

[2:24]

John Fenn: That's right, it's almost February, and we are here to talk about groundhogs, because Groundhog Day is coming up!

Michelle Stefano: I think most of us know the tradition: on February 2, our old friend the groundhog will emerge from hibernation, come out of his den, and predict whether winter will deliver more cold weather this year. If the groundhog sees his shadow, the story goes, he will return to hibernation and cold weather will persist another few weeks. If not, warm weather is around the corner.

John Fenn: This Groundhog Day tradition is celebrated in many places in the United States and Canada, with an emphasis on tongue-in-cheek humor

and ceremonious proclamations. But it's best known among people whose ancestors spoke German, especially the Pennsylvania Dutch. So it's no surprise that the most useful book in the folklore world on this holiday is "Groundhog Day" by Don Yoder.

Michelle Stefano: Right! Don Yoder was one of the most influential folklorists in America in his quiet way. He was a founder of the Pennsylvania Dutch Folklife Festival, which was a model for the festival run by our colleagues at the Smithsonian—they consulted him on their very first festival. And similarly, he was on our very first board of Trustees here at the American Folklife Center, and contributed greatly to our work. Sadly, Don Yoder passed away in 2015, or we would surely be interviewing him today. Instead, we will have to make do with Steve here, who was Don's student in graduate school.

John Fenn: So, Steve, what did Don Yoder say were the early roots of Groundhog Day?

Stephen Winick: Interestingly, since the tradition is strongest among German Americans, you'd think he'd go to early Germanic culture. But what he found was that the earliest roots of Groundhog Day lie in Celtic culture. Now, if you read our blog, you'll know what we've done multiple posts for Halloween and Mayday over the years, and as it turns out Groundhog Day is related to those two holidays. In astronomical terms, these holidays were the cross-quarter days, those days that fall midway between a solstice and an equinox. These festivals were apparently celebrated throughout Europe by the various tribes we now refer to as Celts. And Don believes that they influenced the sense of time of all Europe and of the European colonies in America. So I'll quote my mentor a little bit here:

*The seasonal turning points in the Celtic year were immensely important communal festivals in prehistoric, pre-Christian times. Of these festivals, the dates have continued to be important down to the present time. [...] The Celtic names for the four festivals were Samhain, Imbolc, Beltaine, and Lughnasa.*

*And Don continues,  
For the ancient Europeans, these days were so crucial and so embedded in their cultural sense of time that when the Western European peoples were Christianized, the new Church, unable to root them out, "baptized" them*

*into Christian holidays. May 1 became May Day, originally associated with the Virgin Mary and later a secular spring festival, with maypole, May queen, and other folkloric customs. August 1 became in Britain Lammas, or “Loaf-Mass Day,” when the farmers’ wives brought the first loaves of bread baked from the new harvest of grain to the church to be blessed. Since November 1 in the Celtic year was a day devoted to the dead, the Church made it into All Saints’ Day. But the people continued to celebrate the eve of the old holiday as Halloween, with its many harmless folkloric customs that have come all the way down to our day. February 1, extended into February 2, became Candlemas, and eventually Groundhog Day.*

John Fenn: And What Don said there is borne out by Celtic literature, isn’t it?

Michelle Stefano: Yes, for example, there’s a Saga in which a warrior is wooing a lady, and she says that her suitor must be such a skilled warrior that he is safe at all times, able to “go out in safety from Samhain to Imbolc, from Imbolc to Beltaine, and again from Beltaine to Lughnasa.” So it seems those holidays were central to how she was measuring time. Unfortunately, we don’t know very much about how ancient Celts celebrated Imbolc, but its importance as the first day of spring persisted to living memory. The Encyclopedia of Irish Spirituality tells us

*The day remains an agricultural festival. Farmers expect good weather for planting on Imbolc and fishermen traditionally overhauled their boats on this day. In traditional practice, there is divination to foretell the weather and family fortunes in the coming year.*

John Fenn: So there again is the reference to foretelling the weather. And it’s important to mention that Imbolc now goes by many names. In the Christian calendar, it became feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and in the Irish church in particular it is celebrated as St. Brigid’s Day. It is traditionally a day when people brought their candles to church to be blessed, so in English vernacular tradition, it is Candlemas, and in French and Spanish it’s known as Chandeleur and Candelaria. But the tradition of predicting the weather persisted through many of the holiday’s variations.

Michelle: Steve wrote his doctoral dissertation on proverbs, and I'll bet he has some proverbs for this!

Stephen Winick: Sure, I'll give you two:

If Maries purifieng daie,  
Be cleare and bright with sunnie raie,  
The frost and cold shal be much more,  
After the feast than was before.  
(Reginald Scot, 1584)

If Candlemas day be fair and bright  
Winter will have another flight  
If on Candlemas day it be showre and rain  
Winter is gone and will not come again.  
(John Ray, 1678)

So from those we see that the idea of a sunny day on Candlemas, or Mary's Purifying Day, resulting in more winter, goes back centuries in England too.

Michelle Stefano: But no groundhog in England! So, Steve, what about the Groundhog?

Stephen Winick: Ooh, great question! So "Groundhog" is the common vernacular name of the ground squirrel formally known as *Marmota monax*. It also goes by other names; so vernacular words like "marmot," "land beaver," "whistler," and even "whistle-pig" all refer to the humble groundhog. Of course, there's also the word "Woodchuck," which is just another name for the groundhog too! Here's a Woodchuck song from the King Family, recorded in 1941. This was a string band in the California FSA camps during the Dust Bowl, and they actually appear in the movie "The Grapes of Wrath." They'll announce the song themselves:

[08:58]

[Music: The King Family Perform "Fod."]

[10:30]

Michelle Stefano: So that was a song with the weird name “Fod,” in which a woodchuck and a skunk get into a fight. Which is a lot of fun, but Steve, it doesn’t explain how the woodchuck, or Groundhog, got connected to this ancient holiday?

Stephen Winick: Okay, that’s true—I was just looking for an excuse to play that song. But luckily Don Yoder explains that too. It seems this part of the tradition also comes from Europe. Specifically, it comes from parts of Europe that were Celtic in ancient times, but were later inhabited by Germanic speakers. Germans believed the weather was predicted by a badger rather than a groundhog, but the traditions are otherwise almost identical. He explains:

The Dachs, or badger, is the Candlemas weather prophet throughout much of German-speaking Europe.... Dachstag, or Badger Day, is a German folk expression for Candlemas. The belief was [...] if the badger encountered sunshine on Candlemas and therefore saw his shadow, he crawled back into his hole to stay for four more weeks, which would be a continuation of winter weather.

Don Points out that the groundhog is similar to the badger in being a small, hibernating, forest-dwelling mammal known for being very shy, and it was only natural for German-speaking immigrants in America to substitute the groundhog for the badger.

John Fenn: And about when did the Groundhog Day tradition emerge?

Stephen Winick: Well, The first mention Yoder has found of groundhogs predicting the weather on February 2 is in a diary entry for February 2, 1840, written by a Welsh-American storekeeper named Morris, who lived in Pennsylvania. He wrote:

Today the Germans say the groundhog comes out of his winter quarters and if he sees his shadow he returns in and remains there 40 days.

Michelle Stefano: So, Morris describes this as a general belief of Germans. It doesn’t seem to be limited to a single family or town, and he doesn’t seem to think it is a brand-new belief.

Stephen Winick: Right, and since the belief and practice almost certainly came from Europe, and since the bulk of Pennsylvania Dutch immigration occurred between 1727 and 1775, it's likely Groundhog Day was born in that period.

John Fenn: I also understand that the groundhog has become important to the Pennsylvania Dutch in other ways.

Michelle Stefano: Yes, there are "Groundhog Lodges," a loose organization of social clubs focused on the maintenance of Pennsylvania Dutch language and culture. The lodges, which hold meetings called "versammlinge," at which participants speak only Pennsylvania Dutch, have existed since the 1930s. You can read more about those in the blog too.

John Fenn: Great. So let's talk about how people celebrate Groundhog Day. The best known Groundhog Day ceremony occurs each year in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. This annual festival is surprisingly old; it goes back to 1887, when members of the local Elks Lodge first went to nearby Gobbler's Knob to consult a groundhog about the weather. The observance developed into an annual tongue-in-cheek ceremony at which the groundhog, which was given the name "Punxsutawney Phil" in the 1960s, communicates his prediction to the "Inner Circle," a group of men wearing formal suits and top hats. The Punxsutawney event is only one of many Groundhog Day ceremonies held all across the United States and Canada, but it's certainly the most popular, especially since it became the basis of the philosophical comedy movie "Groundhog Day," which the Library of Congress inducted into the National Film Registry in 2015.

Michelle Stefano: I love that movie! Now If you live near us in Washington, D.C., you may be happy to know that we have our own local Groundhog Day observance at the Dupont Circle Fountain. Modeled on the Punxsutawney event, ours features "Potomac Phil," a stuffed groundhog who magically communicates his predictions to an Inner Circle of people in top hats. Unlike his Punxsutawney relative, Potomac Phil makes predictions about both the physical and the political climate. In 2022, for example, he predicted six more weeks of winter and continued political gridlock. We'll let you judge how accurate he was! Potomac Phil will be predicting again this year, so you can visit Dupont Circle early in the morning on Groundhog Day for that.

Stephen Winick: And here's a weird one: If you're feeling very committed, you can cook and eat a groundhog; recipes were printed in many early American cookbooks. Even Irma Rombauer's classic *Joy of Cooking* contained instructions for cooking "woodchuck" (which is just another name for "groundhog") through the 1970s. Mind you, I'm not recommending eating a groundhog, just pointing out it's possible, and I would urge you to check all local hunting laws before you try this. Actually, the first song we played, just called "Groundhog," was about that. It's a pretty common song, so we've brought along a banjo version too, by Shortbuckle Roarke. Let's hear it!

[15:25]

[Music: George "Shortbuckle" Roarke performs "Groundhog."]

[17:42]

John Fenn: That was the Groundhog song, about a tasty marmot! And it just goes to show that another way to celebrate—and one we particularly recommend—is to sing or listen to groundhog songs. Yoder's book contains parodies of carols such as "Grundsow Ivver Alles," sung to the well-known German anthem; "Today the Groundhog Comes," sung to "John Brown's Body;" and "Punxsutawney Phil Looked Out," sung to the tune of "Good King Wenceslas." The Library of Congress even has a whole book of Groundhog Day carols.

Stephen Winick: True, John. Now, these song parodies constitute a vibrant tradition in their own right, but the American Folklife Center's archive can offer some older and less self-conscious groundhog songs. We've already heard "Fod" and "Groundhog," now let's hear a blues song called "Prowling Groundhog." In various versions, this has been part of the blues repertoire since the 1930s, but the version AFC has online in our collections was recorded in the 1970s from Sam Chatmon.

Michelle Stefano: we're going to let Sam Chatmon play us out, but that means we should say our thank yous now. So, thanks to John Gold our engineer, thanks to all the musicians and collectors whose work we included.

Stephen Winick: I'll say thanks to my wonderful teacher, the late Don Yoder.

John Fenn: And I'll thank Steve, and Michelle, and all our colleagues throughout the Library of Congress who help us deploy this podcast.

Michelle Stefano: Thanks to you too, John. Happy Groundhog Day, everyone! And now let's hear Sam Chatmon with "Prowling Groundhog."

[19:10]

[Music: Sam Chatmon Performs "Prowling Groundhog."]

[22:45]

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at [loc.gov](http://loc.gov)

[22:54]