

"The Venerable Groundhog"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The groundhog has been a feature of country living for centuries. The hardy rodents are generally harmless unless you mind them perforating your fields, burrowing under building foundations or adding new holes to your golf course. Local farmers and homeowners have spent millions for bullets, lethal traps and poison gas bombs to rid their properties of the tunneling creatures. Efforts to exterminate them were somewhat aided by the coming of the automobile which led one wag to ask, "Why did the chicken cross the road? He wanted to prove to the groundhog that it really could be done."

On at least one day per year, however, the groundhog gets some respect. Groundhog Day, or Candlemas as it was known in the nineteenth century, predates American history. The holiday was part of the cultural heritage of the German and English settlers who came to Maryland. The English version relied on a groundhog while the Germans used a badger.

A century ago, the local newspapers carried a brief mention of Groundhog Day such as this example from the February 25, 1899 issue of Democratic Advocate in which the groundhog was under attack:

"Some of the cranks who do not believe in the ground hog as a weather prognosticator, admit that he did not see his shadow on the second, but point to the several successive snows since to show that the ground hog is not reliable. These people do not know much about the aretomys monnax. They do not mind snow. If they did they would stay in their holes until late in April, as April snows are not infrequent. This is an age of progress, but the progress that is proving to discredit the ground hog is doing violence to a weather prophet whose race has been honored for centuries. The man who disbelieves in the ground hog would discredit the hog melt, and observers of the melt for many years know that it pretty clearly indicates generally the kind of winter we are to have."

The following year the editor of the rival Westminster American Sentinel newspaper reported in the February 3, 1900 issue of the paper:

"Yesterday was groundhog or Candlemas day. It was almost cloudless, and according to the believers in the ground hog theory six weeks of inclement weather are to follow. But all such predictions are valueless [sic]. The weather prophets, almost without exception, assured the public that this was to be an exceptionally mild winter, yet during the last week in December the temperature was below the freezing point constantly for twelve days and part of the time the mercury marked the zero temperature and high winds for several days in succession. Ice has formed 6 to 8 inches thick."

An article about the discovery of an illegal stash of "corn hooch" near Eldersburg during Prohibition appeared in the May 30, 1924 issue of the Democratic Advocate newspaper. The incident led Ira N. Barnes to write a satirical story about what happened when the liquor was poured down a groundhog's hole:

"Not very many days ago, Harry Kohler [sic], a well-known farmer of Freedom district, while doing some chores upon his farm, accidentally discovered a considerable amount of corn hooch securely inclosed within glass jar containers and concealed upon his premises. Mr. Kohler being a consistent member of the church as well as a strictly conscientious prohibitionist, was so severely shocked and horrified at the

discovery of such unmitigated impudence, that for a few moments he was, so to speak, mentally paralyzed. But looking around, he observed, near-by, a very large ground-hog excavation; quickly regaining his normal equipoise he strenuously seized the accursed destroyer of health, homes, happiness and harmony and forthwith dumped the contents of the jars, one by one, into the secluded retreat of this elusive animal.

The next night following this eventful discovery, a lone wanderer traveling down Morgan Run Valley was greatly surprised to observe by the light of the moon about a dozen ground-hogs engaged in a disgraceful tango, bunny-hug and turkey trot to the accompaniment of jazz music, furnished by a frog orchestra from an adjacent morass. A large number of sober animals ranged around viewing the performance were so completely scandalized at the affair that they were compelled to bow their heads in shame, excepting a few old skunks, who had been thoughtful enough to bring along their shock-absorbers. The potent influence of this elicit hooch upon the denizens of the forest speaks very strongly for the ability of our scoff law distillers, and, doubtless, will be instrumental, in the near future, of bringing them a much larger and more remunerative trade."

The groundhog was not the only February weather prophet. The January 27, 1922 issue of the Union Bridge Pilot newspaper mentioned St. Matthias Day:

"The reign of the ground hog will begin next Thursday and last for six weeks. It of course remains to be seen what the weather prophet will bring. Another bit of old weather lore comes February 24, St. Matthias day. According to the old saying: "If he finds ice he'll break it. If he finds none, he'll make it." Despite the efforts of many, the groundhog remains a familiar feature of Carroll's landscape and a perennial weather prognosticator.