

The Mysterious Pennsylvania German Groundhog Lodge

By Professor Richard Miller with collaboration from Dr. Gene Handwerk



In this scene, King Groundhog is munching on a head of cabbage while making his grand entrance at the Fersommling (Banquet) on February 2nd 1968.

Many people, especially those of the present generation, and those new to our Pennsylvania German communities throughout the Lehigh Valley, probably know very little about Pennsylvania German Groundhog Lodges and their avowed purposes. Day after the celebration of Candlemas, also known as Groundhog Day, they may see a photograph or two of grown men in long swallow-tail coats and top hats as they solemnly carry a stuffed groundhog into a dinner meeting place. They may read about a prophecy of the groundhog regarding the length or brevity of the winter season, as well as its severity. They may even think it is sheer stupidity to venerate a stuffed animal as the symbol of a lodge.

Can a groundhog predict the weather?

Using animals for weather prognostication purposes is a deeply rooted, worldly and socially accepted tradition, dating back to prehistoric and ancient civilizations. Roman legions, as they spread their influence into England and Northern Europe, brought the tradition with them.

In Germany, the small, clawing, burrowing badger has been the traditional weather prognosticator for centuries. Consequently, when our German forefathers settled here in

the Lehigh Valley in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the tradition eventually was passed on to their offspring, the first Pennsylvania Germans. However, since the immigrant Germans discovered the badger did not exist in the eastern hills and valleys of Pennsylvania, the indigenous woodchuck, another name for the groundhog was, adopted because of its similar physical characteristics of the badger.

Probably the earliest American reference to Groundhog Day, and groundhog weather prognostication traditions here in eastern Pennsylvania, can be found in a personal diary located in the Pennsylvania Dutch Center at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. James Morris, a Berks County storekeeper from Morgantown, recorded in his personal records, dated February 4, 1841, the following: "Last Tuesday, the 2nd, was Candlemas Day, the day on which according to the Germans, the groundhog peeps out of his winter quarters, and if he sees his shadow, he pops back for another nap for six more weeks, but if the day be cloudy, he remains out and the weather is to be moderate." At this point it is important for the reader to note, that Mr. Morris did not mention Groundhog Day, which today shares the same date in the calendar as Candlemas Day. This poses a question.

Why do these two events share the same holiday?

Candlemas is an ecclesiastical festival sanctioned by the Catholic Church, whereas the Groundhog celebration is considered to be a secular event. Surprisingly, there is a common bond between the two entities, and there is a logical justification for the two to share the same calendar date. However, time and space do not allow us to provide the answer for the provoking question in this essay. Suffice it to say, the reply would require another essay or perhaps a lecture.

Now permit us, momentarily, to forget the discussion about the groundhog and move forward 92 years beyond 1841. The time is 1933. The United States is in the midst of a devastating depression. Also, it is still suffering from the numerous negative influences of World War I. One of those negativities was the prejudicial or biased opinions that arose in American society with regard to the German culture and its language. This was also true for Pennsylvania German culture and its dialect. As a result of these biased ethnic opinions, the use of the German language was sharply curtailed during the war and its aftermath, with schools and churches leading the way. Citizens throughout the Lehigh Valley were not only

deeply concerned about the attacks on their German heritage, but also about the threat to the Pennsylvania German culture and its dialect. The stigma, or as others called it, "A token of infamy," had been hanging over our area's communities like a dark cloud for too long. Something had to be done to restore honor and ethnic pride for the Pennsylvania German culture and dialect. The time had come.



How do you save a dying language?

On March 13, 1933 it was with a great sense of perseverance, foresightedness and ethnic pride, which several prominent Pennsylvania German gentlemen from the farm, business and professional communities gathered at the home of William "Pumpernickel Bill" Troxell in Allentown. "Pumpernickel Bill" was a longtime Pennsylvania German journalist employed by the Allentown Morning Call where he wrote a weekly ethnic column that mirrored, in a humorous manner, the foibles, the shortcomings and eccentricities of society. With the help of the Rev. Thomas Brendel, Dr. Edgar Balliet and Harry Spanuth, the group began to search for some type of organization to help preserve their besieged ethnic heritage. Their discussions led them to the formation of a Groundhog Lodge with the groundhog becoming its symbolic, tongue in-cheek exalted leader.

The name of the lodge was to be GRUNDSAU LADSCH NUMMER AINS AN DER LECHAW (Groundhog Lodge #1 at the Lehigh River). Said lodge was to meet once a year on Groundhog Day, February 2nd and membership was to be limited to men only.

Furthermore, all activities at the meetings were to be conducted in the Pennsylvania German dialect.

Die Schprech Ordnung (Program format) for the annual affair was to be as follows: *2

Song – America

Pledge of Allegiance to U.S.A.

Silent Moment

Opening Prayer

Pledge of Allegiance to exalted ruler, the groundhog, acknowledging our faith and the veracity in his weather prognostication skills

Typical Pennsylvania German Dinner and small talk, accompanied by ethnic music songs with membership participation

Acknowledgement of guests

Lodge Business Affairs

Annual Weather Prognostication by the Groundhog

Ethnic Skit: mirrors and pokes fun at the flaws of humanity as it relates to our ethnic heritage and daily life

Closing Prayer and Dismissal

The poetic prayer, with the assembled lodge participating, asks the Lord to continue to bless and help us to protect our Pennsylvania German heritage and to sprinkle it with a measure of good health, humor and joy.

The first meeting of Lodge #1, at the Lehigh River convened in Northampton on February 2, 1934. 300 men were in attendance. Needless to say, word quickly spread about this first gathering. The founders of Lodge #1 had hit the jackpot. Tremendous interest had been aroused in the neighboring counties surrounding Lehigh and Northampton counties. Within a short time other lodges began to organize with a similar format to the one used in Lodge #1.

Grundsow Lodge Nummer Ains

It now has been 78 years since Lodge #1 has been organized. Since then, there have been 75 annual meetings. A hiatus of 3 years was declared during the 4 years of World War II. The success of the groundhog lodge can be attested to by the fact that 17 other lodges have seen

fit to follow in the path of Groundhog Lodge #1 during these past 78 years. It should be mentioned here that #3 at Temple University, which had been organized in 1938, became defunct in 1955. The remaining organizations, 17 in all, are still active.

Throughout the first 53 years of activities, each lodge conducted their cultural program plans and other activities independently from the other lodges. It was not until 1987, that any effort was made for some form of consolidation of the 17 lodges to provide more and better services for the preservation of the Pennsylvania culture and dialect. After several exploratory meetings among the various lodge members, it was agreed to establish a centralized organization called the Grossdaai Lodge (Grandfather Lodge), an affiliation of the lodges, to plan and expedite needed cultural services for their constituencies. It proved to be a wise and successful decision. Since its inception, the Grossdaai Lodge has developed a beautiful ethnic flag depicting its cultural contributions, not only to its constituencies, but also to its state and nation. It also has assisted the affiliated lodges establishing dialect and cultural instruction programs in their districts. Probably its most crowning achievements have been its assistance in developing the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center on the Kutztown University Campus, and providing assistance to the university's administration in establishing an accredited Pennsylvania German Dialect course to its curricular offerings.

Those several Pennsylvania German gentlemen, who had gathered on March 13, 1933 to protect, preserve and perpetuate their besieged ethnic heritage, must be looking down from their eternal resting place chuckling with satisfaction and thanking those of us who are still carrying forth the torch for their concerns

