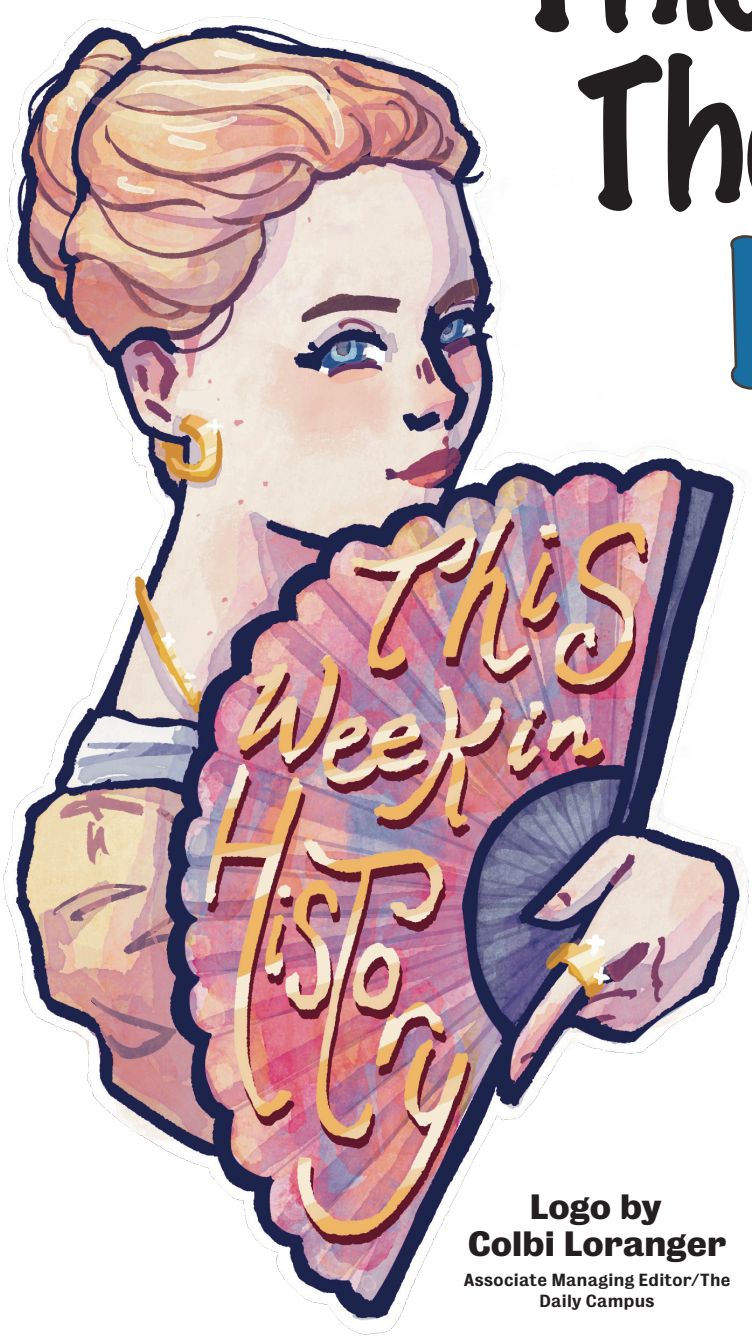
Daily **Life**

This Week in History: There's no place like Punxsutawney



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"Okay, campers, rise and shine! And don't forget your booties 'cause it's cold out there today."

That's right, folks, it's Groundhog Day today! And what better way to celebrate Punxsutawney Phil's moment than to quote one of my absolute favorite movies of all time? For today's issue of This Week in History, I wanted to discuss the origins of this classic American holiday and hope that doing so will help spring come early this year.

Surprisingly, Groundhog Day shares a similar background to holidays like Halloween and May Day, with their pre-Christian beginnings. It's one of four festivals in the Celtic year, composed of Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane and Lughnasa, which correspond to the changes of the season. Groundhog Day was based on Imbolc, with Feb. 2 being significant because it's one of the cross-quarter days that falls halfway between the solstice and the equinox. When Christianity began to spread, these holidays were already so important for marking the changing of seasons and the passage of time that they were adapted rather than banned.

Imbolc itself was a holiday associated with the end of winter and the return of light, reflecting its connection to the weather. When converted to the Christian Candlemas, which celebrates the presentation of Jesus Christ at the temple, the holiday retained its weather-related ties. The groundhog portion of this holiday, however, originates from a German tradition that found its way across the Atlantic.

Germanic speakers who settled in areas once inhabited by the ancient Celts adopted a tradition of having a badger predict the weather. Similarly, it had to do with whether or not the badger would see its shadow and hide back into its hole. It's likely that German immigrants would have brought these traditions with them, with the first recording of Groundhog Day being from a diary of a storekeeper from 1840 in Pennsylvania, according to a blog post from the Library of Congress.

"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," the diary entry said.

The mystique surrounding the Groundhog led to the creation of "Groundhog Lodges." These were Pennsylvania Dutch organizations focused on keeping the community's language and culture alive.

In 1887, the first official Groundhog Day celebration took place in Punxsutawney, Pa., where a group of men travelled to the hill Gobbler's Knob for their weather predictions, where the groundhog did indeed get scared of its own shadow.

Now, the holiday is much bigger than the celebration in Punxsutawney, with Groundhog Day festivals occurring across the country, partly because its popularity was boosted by the Bill Murray film of the same name. Personally, I have my fingers crossed that the groundhog will not be frightened tomorrow, and if anyone reading this is reliving this day over and over, I wish you the best of luck.



A photo of groundhog Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog Day. Groundhog Day originated from Celtic holiday Imbolc.
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