

Punxsutawney's History

The Beginning:

Punxsutawney's Groundhog legend pre-dates the area's first white settlers. The first inhabitants of the area, the Delaware Indians, shared in the Punxsutawney "Groundhog" roots with their own Indian version of "legend and lore."

Punxsutawney was originally a campsite halfway between the Allegheny and Susquehanna rivers. It is located on the earliest known trail to the East, the Shamokin path. The area was, at times, occupied by Shawnee or Delaware Indians and, sometimes, by Senecas or Iroquois.

According to the original "Creation" Story of the Delaware Indians, the "Lenni Lenape" (or original people), who were their forebears, began life as animals in "mother earth" and emerged centuries later to hunt and live as men. Thus it was that Oijik (Wejak), or Wojak, which was carried over to us as "Woodchuck", came to be recognized as the "grandfather" of the earliest known inhabitants of this area.

Although the area previously served as a "border" between Indian nations, the displaced Delawares settled in large numbers about 1723 because of the pressures from white men in the East and Iroquois intrigue. The main move toward the west followed between 1740 and 1760 as the result of further pressure.

It was during this period that an Indian sorcerer first appeared in various forms and attacked travelers from the East. He was hunted and killed in combat by a young chief. His body was burned to destroy the "evil medicine" but miraculously turned to searing sandflies, or "ponksad," which plagued the area and the Indians. From that time the Indians called the location, "Ponksaduteney," which meant the "town of the sandflies." The sandflies are now gone, but the "ghost of the spelling" is with us to stay.

First Authenticated note of Europeans:

It is said that in 1754 a council of the Delawares, Muncy, Shawnees, Naticokes, Tuscaroras, and Mingoes met at the Punxsutawney lodge to protest the sale of their lands by the "Six Nations" in Albany. At this council, Sheklemos, who was a Christian Delaware Chief, along with other peace-loving chiefs attempted to prevent war. They failed, however, and the tribes joined with the French in the French and Indian War.

On October 16, 1755, the Delawares initiated their first main resistance to the ever increasing white settlers with an attack and three day massacre at Penn's Creek (near Sunbury). They withdrew, but not before they captured two 12-year-old girls. They were travelling on the trail between Clearfield and Kittanning and moved first to a rest area at "Puncksotoney." The young girls later escaped to Fort Pitt in March, 1759. Shortly thereafter, the Delawares pulled out of the area, leaving a more peaceful and placid environment.

In 1772 the Rev. John Ettwein passed thru accompanied by Christian Indians. Remarks in his diary stated that the ground was occupied by a rather large Indian village. He wrote, "In the evening all joined me, but we could hold no services as the ponkies were excessively annoying in the swamp through which we are now passing their name is legion. Hence the Indians called it Ponskutenick, the town of the Ponkies."

By the late 1790's the first white settlers came to the area now known as Jefferson County. The first white settler in the Punxsutawney area was Jacob Hoover. They found the Indians hospitable. The Indians assisted these settlers in building, planting and harvesting. They shared their knowledge of the game animals, trails, and waterways. Apparently, the area got too crowded for the Indians by the early 1800's, for they moved on to new wilderness areas.

The Delawares left to the residents of Punxsutawney their legends and their grandfather, Wojak, the Groundhog. The early settlers, in turn, quickly adapted their European Candlemas legend to the Pennsylvania Groundhog.

While one American society with a strong belief in the Groundhog had vanished, another - with an equally legendary background had arrived... and the story remains intact today.

First settlers:

Jacob Hoover built what was probably the first grist mill and was the first to settle here and build the first log cabin in 1814. The Reverend David Barclay came to Punxsutawney in 1816 and was the founder of Punxsutawney. The original site of Punxsutawney contained 327 acres and was purchased by Reverend Barclay in 1819. The Reverend Barclay built a log cabin in 1818 on what is now the northwest corner of Front and Mahoning Streets. In 1832 he donated a plot of land to the settlement of a marketplace which is now known as Barclay Square. In these early days agriculture was the predominate activity.

Punxsutawney continued to grow to about 100 inhabitants and in 1849 was incorporated as a borough. Agriculture was the initial mainstay followed closely by lumbering. Between the years 1850 and 1883 agriculture and lumbering flourished and prospered. The nearby forests of oak, chestnut, beech, pine, and hickory were cut and the timber was rafted down Mahoning Creek to Pittsburgh. This period was followed by coal mining and railroad activity.

The Coal years:

Punxsutawney built up rapidly in the late 1800's with the coal industry "fueling" the economy. Many deep mines existed in the surrounding hills. It is said that at one time you could walk from here to Reynoldsville, about 15 miles to the north, entirely underground! Several towns in the area such as Adrian, Rossiter, Eleanora and Onandaga were "coal towns" that were created by and owned by the coal companies. Rossiter and Adrian still exist today, but Eleanora is entirely gone. When the Eleanora coal mine was closed the town was closed too! Nothing is left. In Rossiter and Adrian you can see the "company houses" that were erected by the coal companies to house the workers. When the Adrian mine was closed, the town was sold to the inhabitants.

Mining and railroads were the keys to the economy from the late 1800'S to the 1940's's although mining made a sharp decline in the number of employees between 1920 and 1930.

One of the coal products produced here was coke used in the Pittsburgh steel industry. Coke is made by partially burning crushed high grade coal in an airtight oven. The ovens are shaped like a beehive and are, therefore, known as "beehive ovens". The coal was dumped into the top of the oven from cars known as "dinkeys" which ran on tracks that travelled over the top of the ovens. The ovens were ignited and sealed up to make them airtight. The coal burned inside for three days giving off coal tar and gas which gave off a noxious odor. After three days the fire was quenched with water and the coke was loaded onto rail cars for a journey to the steel plant. 100 railcars of coke were produced daily in the area. The adjacent town of Walston once boasted the world's longest string of coke ovens which stretched over a mile in length filling the valley between Punxsy and Walston with smoke and wiping out the vegetation. At night there was a red glow in the sky from the 700 ovens which existed in this area. Remnants of this line and several other lines in the area can still be seen, though nature has done it's best to camouflage them.

Hospitals:

In 1889, the Rochester & Pittsburgh Coal and Iron Company erected the first hospital building in the town of Delancey (also known as "Adrian") at the Adrian Mines. The Adrian Hospital was founded by Adrian Iselin, of New York who donated \$5000 for the purpose. The purpose of this facility was to serve the needs of the men injured in the mines, but it soon became a general hospital. It not only served Adrian (Delancey) but served neighboring Punxsutawney as well. Due to the demand, the facility was soon found to be inadequate. A decision was made to move the facility to Punxsutawney at the corner of Jenks and Park Ave.. W.O Smith, who was local representative to the State Legislature, obtained an appropriation of \$100,000 and the new building was completed in 1898. Interestingly, in 1902 it cost \$5 per week to stay in a hospital ward. A private room cost between \$10 to \$25 per week. Also of interest, the year 1901 saw the annual expenditure for medical supplies at \$234.09 and salaries for nurses was \$3160.53 (but it doesn't say how many nurses were on staff that divided this sum) This building was used as the hospital until 1975 when a new building was completed out on Rt.36 north. The building was remodelled and is now occupied by Wellington Heights which is a personal care facility.

The Punxsutawney Hospital (also called the "Grube Hospital") was founded in 1900 by Dr. John E. Grube. It was first located in the Dinsmore Building on W. Mahoning St.. After 4 or 5 years, the State Board of Health ordered the evacuation of this site. At that point they purchased the home of J.B. Eberhart at 103 Gilpin St. and the new hospital was completed in 1908. The hospital grew busy and added another addition later which fronts on Pine St. The hospital was closed in 1932 when it merged with the Adrian Hospital. The home of J.B. Eberhart is still attached to the front of the building which is still being used for various offices. Until very recently, the wing that fronts on Pine St. was used as the Unemployment Office but it is now the Older American Social Center.

The Murray Sanitarium which opened in 1911 was located in a home at the corner of E. Mahoning and Dinsmore Ave., the former residence of W.A. Bowers. It was run by Dr. John H. Murray who was a physician for the R & P Coal Company. It was widely known because of its

treatment of diseases of the stomach and operated until 1938. The building is now an apartment house.

The Railroad:

The Buffalo, Rochester and Pittsburgh Railroad were the first to appear in Punxsutawney in 1883 with regular service instituted in September of that year. This provided passenger and freight transportation to the major cities of the time. In it's heyday, the railroad might see 78 trains pass through here in a day. More recently, the B&O Railroad owned the tracks thru town but was later sold to the Buffalo and Pittsburgh Railroad that runs the line today. At first, the rail yard was centered within the city limits of Punxsutawney, but it soon outgrew that location and it was moved to its present location in Rikers Yard which can be seen just north of Punxsutawney on Rt. 119.

On a separate system was the Pennsylvania & Northwestern Railroad which passed thru Punxsy's East End. The Pennsylvania Railroad was brought to Punxsy in 1886. There was a passenger station on the south side of E. Mahoning St. and a roundhouse down Clearfield St.. These tracks are no longer in existence, but the abandoned right of way may be converted to a hiking trail in the future.

The little known Buffalo and Susquehanna Railroad passed near here also. It was constructed in about 1904 and ended with a shipment of 1957 Chevys to the Chevy dealer in Plumville 15 miles south of here, the town at the end of the line.

In 1892, the Jefferson Traction Company started a trolley car system. The line travelled the main street from the west end of W. Mahoning St. to the Pennsylvania Railroad station on E. Mahoning St.. One line branched off in west end and travelled up Foundry St. to end in the town of Walston. Another line branched off at Findley St.. This line first stopped next to the Passenger Station of the B, R, &P Railroad and then went on to Big Run or branched to Anita. The line ended in Big Run, but in Big Run another trolley system came down from Dubois to the north. Eventually these lines were joined together.

Industries and the 20th Century:

In the 1900's Punxsutawney became the commercial shopping center for the many miners, the railroad men, and their families. There was industrial development starting in about 1880 and increasing to it's height in the 1920's. Natural gas came to Punxsutawney in 1884, the water works opened in 1887, electricity came in 1889. Factories moved in. There were iron foundries here. The Punxsutawney Iron Works covered an area, about an acre, that now comprises the Punxsy Plaza. There were breweries and a silk mill and a boiler maker . There was a meat packing plant producing "Groundhog Brand" meats. The were brick making industries also. There was a steel hoop mill, a glass plant and a planing mill as well.

In 1908 Punsutawney built it's first "sky scraper" with the 8 story "Spirit Building" which housed one of the two local newspapers of the time. It remains one of the tallest buildings in town. A golf course was constructed in the West End of town and still exists today.

The Industrial growth of Punxsutawney reached its zenith in the 1920's and Punxsutawney was a thriving small city. 1929 brought economic disaster to all of America and Punxsutawney suffered along with the rest of the country. Many established businesses closed or declined. During the recovery that followed Punxsutawney gained a carbon plant. The Industrial and Economic power of Punxsutawney never reached the level of the 1920's again.

The history of Punxsutawney has been marred by several floods, the worst of which occurred in 1936. There was upwards of 8 feet of water in some downtown buildings which caused many thousands of dollars worth of damage. The destruction of infrastructure was minimal, however. In 1949, the threat of flooding was minimized by the construction by the Army Corps of Engineers of a dike along the Mahoning Creek which runs through town.

The maximum population of Punxsutawney was around 12,000 during the earlier part of the 20th century. As of 1995, the population has dropped to around 6700 as the industries have moved on and coal has been replaced by cleaner fuels. Present day Punxsutawney is much quieter and cleaner than it was in the days of steam engines and coke ovens, but Punxsutawney is far from dead. There is a thriving machine shop industry here and a Jensen speaker plant. Another plant produces storm windows; another produces fiberglass tanks for the natural gas well drilling industry which is active in the area. Coal is still mined here, though not in the amounts earlier in history, as coal is used to generate electricity for home and industry.

Groundhog Day:

It all began on February 2nd, 1886 with a terse Paragraph in The Punxsutawney Spirit (the local newspaper): "Today is groundhog day and up to the time of going to press the beast has not seen its shadow." The legendary first trek to Gobbler's Knob was reportedly made the following year, and the rest is a colorful history.

It has been called "one of the greatest ongoing publicity campaigns in history" and certainly, the borough of Punxsutawney would remain unknown to the outside world if not for Punxsutawney Phil. Prior to 1887, groundhogs were more likely to be eaten than revered for their weather forecasting ability; but the groundhog has risen from a food item to the lofty title of "The Seer of Seers, Sage of Sages, Prognosticator of Prognosticators, and Weather Prophet Extraordinary."

It is said that in the the summer of 1887 a group of local hunters and gourmets held a groundhog hunt and picnic and celebrated the event by barbequing their game and washing it down with locally brewed beer. The city editor of the Punxsutawney Spirit newspaper was a man named Clymer Freas. Inspired by the hunt, the fellowship or the beer, he dubbed the picnickers the "Punxsutawney Groundhog Club". He recalled the Pennsylvania Dutch legend of the groundhog as a weather prophet and claimed for the Punxsutawney Groundhog all weather rights. He created a home for him on Gobbler's Knob and a fame that is now world wide.

W.O. Smith, a U.S. Congressman and owner of the Punxsutawney Spirit worked hard at keeping the legend alive. His successors followed suit .. until today when network television covers the event and broadcasts it live around the world.

For many years, the Groundhog Club was headed by the rotund country doctor named Frank Lorenzo. He was an orthopedic surgeon who developed a screw used to mend broken hips and joints eroded by arthritis. On Groundhog Day he entertained his friends who included politicians, railroad officials, doctors, lawyers, judges, and newspaper people throughout the state. Chartered trains brought his guests to Punxsutawney for the day's events. Lorenzo promoted and defended the Punxsutawney Groundhog to all comers in ringing tones that defied argument.

When he died in 1952, the mantle and his cane passed to his friend, Sam Light, who infused the legend with his own colorful personality. A coal operator and sportsman, Light created the costume, a tall silk hat and cutaway coat, that is most familiar to followers of the Punxsutawney Groundhog. How did he arrive at this particular outfit: "The top hat and cutaway are the traditional dress for dignitaries greeting Very Important Persons" Light explained, leaving no doubt that he considered the Punxsutawney Groundhog very VIP indeed.

Light, who raised champion English setter dogs for a hobby and is in the Field Trial Hall of Fame, retired as Groundhog Club president in 1976, saying, "I've had a lot of fun, but the Groundhog only confers longevity, not immortality, on its followers."

He was succeeded by Charles Erhard who, as owner of Punxsutawney's first radio station, had worked with Light for many years in promoting the groundhog on radio and television. Erhard served until 1982 when he retired to Florida.

He was succeeded by Jim Means, a prominent local contractor, who had been Phil's handler for many years. The current president is former groundhog-handler Bud Dunkel who runs a local roofing company.

When Punxsutawney built an ultra-modern civic center in 1974, it included an air-conditioned, glass enclosed Groundhog Zoo. Built into a section of the children's library, the zoo has a plastic glass window fronting the town square. The zoo is the home of a pair of groundhogs known as "Phil," a relative and namesake of the famous Seer and his mate "Phyllis."

All Punxsutawney residents bask in the glow of the honors and fame of Punxsutawney Phil. In fact, no matter what degree of fame a Punxsutawneyite achieves, the town's most famous resident will always be the groundhog. The official Groundhog weather proclamation is a wondrous thing, full of dramatic "Hear ye's" and "whereases" and bone-chilling descriptions of the snow and sleet and ice to follow. The Seer's prediction is duly recorded in the Congressional record and routinely gets front page coverage in the nation's newspapers and in English-language newspapers throughout the world.

The Movie:

The Groundhog Day festivities on Feb. 2, 1992 were joined by actor Bill Murray as he was studying up for his then upcoming movie, "Groundhog Day". He and Columbia Pictures set out to recreate the Punxsutawney Groundhog Day to the smallest detail. There were, however, changes made, but the result was good and Punxsutawney's famous Weather Groundhog became a movie star.

Columbia Pictures decided to film the movie in a location more accessible to a major metropolitan center. Punxsutawney lies 80 miles north of Pittsburgh, and the highways in the area are not the best, so Woodstock, Illinois was chosen as the site. Unfortunately, Woodstock's terrain is devoid of western Pennsylvania's scenic rolling hills. Never-the-less, Woodstock was "Punxsutawney-ized" for the production to begin. The actual Gobbler's Knob is a wooded hill with a wonderful view; the Gobbler's Knob in the movie is moved to the town square. The Punxsutawney Gobbler's Knob was recreated to scale and detail in Woodstock's town square based on notes and videotape the crew made on it's visit to Punxsutawney on Feb. 2nd.

The movie's script was altered to include the elaborate ceremony of the Inner Circle on Groundhog Day. The original groundhogs cast for the movie turned out to be too small. "He must have weighed 30 pounds!" Bill Murray remarked after having the opportunity to handle Phil following the Feb. 2nd ceremony. A suitable stand-in for Phil had to be located as a result.

Some of the store's names in Punxsutawney were used in the movie ...such as The Smart Shop and Stewart's Drug Store. The police cruisers of Punxsutawney were recreated for the movie also. They also used the groundhog head garbage cans and Groundhog Festival flags that line the streets of Punxsutawney. Many people travel to Punxsutawney to see the Punxsutawney that they saw in the movie. They wonder why it seems so different but yet looks so similar. It's the magic of Hollywood! They may be disappointed that it is not exactly the same as they thought it was going to be... but few leave without having an enjoyable visit.

History of Jefferson County:

Jefferson County was created by an act of the Legislature on March 26, 1804. The original boundaries included present day Forrest County and part of Elk County. Jefferson County was, of course, named after Thomas Jefferson, who was President of the United States at the time.

The first recorded settler to the county was Joseph Barnett. He settled in what is now known as Port Barnett near Brookville which is Jefferson County's seat. The County Seat was chosen for its then central location. The site chosen was at the confluence of Sandy Lick Creek and North Fork Creek where they meet to form Redbank Creek. Because of the numerous brooks and springs in the area, it was called Brookville. Today, Brookville is located in the northern part of the county since the north part of Jefferson County was split off to form Forest County.

Lumbering was the first industry in Jefferson County because of its woodlands rich in oak, hickory and other valued trees. In conjunction with the lumbering industry, tanneries were established. These tanneries received tons of hand removed bark from fallen timber to process hides into leather. Tanneries were located in Brookville, Reynoldsville, Dogtown (Warsaw township), Ohio Town (West Reynoldsville), Big Run, and Falls Creek in Jefferson County.

During the lumbering days, the waterways of Jefferson county were used extensively for the transportation of timber to the lumber mills. Many projects were initiated to straighten, deepen or dam up the waterways to improve flow to the great mills in Pittsburgh and other places. Red Bank Creek was used by Jefferson County's first settler, Joseph Barnett to raft logs down to the big mills. The Red Bank flows through New Bethlehem into the Allegheny River about 4 miles downstream from East Brady. In 1806 Barnett built a saw mill in Port Barnett. He invited some of the local Indians to help. He invited them to dinner and they accepted. When dinner was over they said, "Dinner - Indian sleep an hour - then strong." Barnett supposed he would not see them again that day as they disappeared into the woods. One hour later they came out and worked diligently the rest of the day. Iron was transported to Port Barnett via packhorse, wagons, and sleds. Some of it was then shipped on rafts down the Red Bank.

The first railroad in Jefferson County was the Allegheny Low Grade Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad. By 1874, passenger and freight service was available to Summerville, Brookville, Reynoldsville, and Falls Creek.

Trolleys were a major transportation mode around the turn of the century. The Jefferson Traction Company was formed from the merger in 1902 of the Punxsutawney Street Passenger Railway of 1892, the Reynoldsville Traction Company of 1899, and the Jefferson Street Railway Company of 1901. There were 39 miles of track and served the towns of Punxsutawney, Big Run, Reynoldsville, Sykesville, Walston, Adrian, Anita, Florence, Wishaw, Soldier, and Eleanor. The United Traction Company provided routes to Dubois and Falls Creek.

The first roadways in the area were trails blazed by the Indians. The first actual roadway through the area was constructed from Indiana PA to Port Barnett (near Brookville) in 1810. Later there was a road constructed to follow the path of the "Chinklacamoose Trail" which runs from Milesburg, PA to Brookville, and on to Tionesta. The first paved road was near Brookville. Two

miles of the Ridgeway Road road were paved with bricks in 1909. Concrete roads came in the 1920's.