

Will Willie see his shadow on Feb. 2nd?

February 2nd is fast approaching and with it comes the saga of Wiarton Willie.

The story dates back to 1956 when a Wiarton resident named Mac McKenzie wanted to showcase his childhood home to his many friends. A Toronto Star reporter got wind of it and showed up. However, there was no festival; the reporter said he would need some sort of story to justify his expenses, so McKenzie grabbed his wife's fur hat, which had a large button on the front, went out to the parking lot, dug a burrow in the snow and pronounced a prognostication (which no one remembers). The picture of Mac and the hat ran in the February 3, 1956 edition of the Toronto Star. A year later, about 50 people arrived for the festival. Half were reporters from various media. Seizing on the opportunity, McKenzie invented a festival that has been added to over the years.

The original Wiarton Willie, who arrived on the scene in the 1980's, lived to the advanced age of 22, and was found dead only two days before Groundhog Day in 1999. Unable to find a replacement, organizers instead marked Groundhog Day by revealing Willie in a coffin. He had been dressed in a tuxedo, had coins over his eyes, and a carrot between his paws. A scandal ensued when it became known that the real Willie had in fact decomposed, and the body in the coffin was that of an older, stuffed groundhog. Over the years the groundhogs have been replaced and usually named Wee Willie, or Wee Willie 2 and so on. Are his so-called predictions correct? Most say no. But it's a fun time in Wiarton. Happy Groundhog Day February 2nd.

By Linda Gerow