

Valentine's Day Origins

St. Valentine's Day: 5th Century Rome

"...The Catholic Church's attempt to paper over a popular pagan fertility rite with the clubbing death and decapitation of one of its own martyrs is the origin of this lovers' holiday.

As early as the fourth century B.C., the Romans engaged in an annual young man's rite of passage to the god Lupercus. The names of teenage women were placed in a box and drawn at random by adolescent men; thus, a man was assigned a woman companion, for their mutual entertainment and pleasure (often sexual), for the duration of a year, after which another lottery was staged. Determined to put an end to this eight-hundred-year-old practice, the early church fathers sought a "lovers" saint to replace the deity Lupercus. They found a likely candidate in Valentine, a bishop who had been martyred some two hundred years earlier.

In Rome in A.D. 270, Valentine had enraged the mad emperor the mad emperor Claudius II, who had issued an edict forbidding marriage. Claudius felt that married men made poor soldiers, because they were loath to leave their families for battle. The empire needed soldiers, so Claudius, never one to fear unpopularity, abolished marriage.

Valentine, bishop of Interamna, invited young lovers to come to him in secret, where he joined them in the sacrament of matrimony. Claudius learned of this "friend of lovers," and had the bishop brought to the palace. The emperor, impressed with the young priest's dignity and conviction, attempted to convert him to the Roman gods, to save him from otherwise certain execution. Valentine refused to renounce Christianity and imprudently attempted to convert the emperor. On February 24, 270, Valentine was clubbed, stoned, then beheaded.

History also claims that while Valentine was in prison awaiting execution, he fell in love with the blind daughter of the jailer, Asterius. Through his unswerving faith, he miraculously restored her sight. He signed a farewell message to her "From Your Valentine," a phrase that would live long after its author died.

From the Church's standpoint, Valentine seemed to be the ideal candidate to usurp the popularity of Lupercus. So in A.D. 496, a stern Pope Gelasius outlawed the mid-February Lupercian festival. But he was clever enough to retain the lottery, aware of Romans' love for games of chance. Now into the box that had once held the names of available and willing single women were placed the names of saints. Both men and women extracted slips of paper, and in the ensuing year they were expected to emulate the life of the saint whose name they had drawn. Admittedly, it was a different game, with different incentives; to expect a woman and draw a saint must have disappointed many a Roman male. The spiritual overseer of the entire affair was its patron saint, Valentine. With reluctance, and the passage of time, more and more Romans relinquished their pagan festival and replaced it with the Church's holy day.

Valentine Cards

Traditionally, mid-February was a Roman time to meet and court prospective mates. The Lupercian lottery (under penalty of mortal sin), Roman young men did institute the custom of offering women they admired and wished to court handwritten greetings of affection on February 14. The cards acquired St. Valentine's name:

As Christianity spread, so did the Valentine's Day card. The earliest extant card was sent in 1415 by Charles, duke of Orleans, to his wife while he was a prisoner in the Tower of London. It is now in the British Museum.

In the sixteenth century, St. Francis de Sales, bishop of Geneva, attempted to expunge the custom of cards and reinstate the lottery of saints' names. He felt that Christians had become wayward and needed models to emulate. However, this lottery was less successful and shorter-lived than Pope Gelasius's. And rather than disappearing, cards proliferated and became more decorative. Cupid, the naked cherub armed with arrows dipped in love potion, became a popular valentine image. He was associated with the holiday because in Roman mythology he is the son of Venus, goddess of love and beauty.

By the seventeenth century, handmade cards were oversized and elaborate, while store-bought ones were smaller and costly. In 1797, a British publisher issued "The Young Man's Valentine Writer," which contained scores of suggested sentimental verses for the young lover unable to compose his own. Printers had already begun producing a limited number of cards with verses and sketches, called "mechanical valentines," and a reduction in postal rates in the next century ushered in the less personal but easier practice of mailing valentines. That, in turn, made it possible for the first time to exchange cards anonymously, which is taken as the reason for the sudden appearance of racy verse in an era otherwise prudishly Victorian. The burgeoning number of obscene valentines caused several countries to ban the practice of exchanging cards. In Chicago, for instance, late in the nineteenth century, the post office rejected some twenty-five thousand cards on the ground that they were not fit to be carried through the U.S. mail.

The first American publisher of valentines was printer and artist Esther Howland. Her elaborate lace cards of the 1870's cost from five to ten dollars, with some selling for as much as thirty-five dollars. Since that time, the valentine card business has flourished. With the exception of Christmas, Americans exchange more cards on Valentine's Day than at any other time of the year...."

The above stories are quoted from "Panati's Extraordinary Origins of Everyday things, Charles Panati, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, NY 1987 pp 50-52

THE TRUE HISTORY OF VALENTINES DAY by Mani Niall

5th Century, Rome

Mid February was traditionally the time of the Lupercian festival, an ode to the God of fertility and a celebration of sensual pleasure, a time to meet and court a prospective mate. In AD 496, Pope Gelasius outlawed the pagan festival. But he was clever to replace it with a similar celebration, although one deemed morally suitable. He needed a "lovers" saint to replace the pagan deity Lupercus.

The martyred Bishop Valentine was chosen as the patron saint of the new festival.

Saint Valentine had been beheaded for helping young lovers marry against the wishes of the mad emperor Claudius. Before execution, Valentine himself had fallen in love with his jailer's daughter. He signed his final note to her, "From Your Valentine", a phrase that has lasted through the centuries.

Pope Gelasius didn't get everything he wanted. The pagan festival died out, it is true, but he had further hoped people would emulate the lives of saints. Instead they latched onto the more romantic aspect of Saint Valentine's religious life. While not immediately as popular as the more passionate pagan festival, eventually the concept of celebrating true love became known as Valentine's Day.

Valentine's Day
Just how did it come about?

Dateline: 02/05/98

Once upon a time... In ancient Rome, February 14th was a holiday to honor Juno. Juno was the Queen of the Roman Gods and Goddesses. The Romans also knew her as the Goddess of women and marriage. The following day, February 15th, began the 'Feast of Lupercalia' (festival of the wolf) which was one of the most important in Imperial Rome.

For eight hundred years prior to the establishment of Valentine's Day, the Romans had practiced a pagan celebration in mid-February commemorating young men's rite of passage to the god Lupercus. The celebration featured a lottery in which young men would draw the names of teenage girls from a vase. During the festival, the pairs of children danced and played together. The girl assigned to each young man in that manner would be his sexual companion during the remaining year. Often, they would fall in love and would later marry.

In an effort to do away with the pagan festival, Pope Gelasius ordered a slight change in the lottery. Instead of the names of young women, the box would contain the names of saints. Both men and women were allowed to draw from the box, and the game was to emulate the ways of the saint they drew during the rest of the year. Needless to say, many of the young Roman men were not too pleased with the rule changes.

Although the lottery for women had been banned by the church, the mid-February holiday in commemoration of St. Valentine was still used by Roman men to seek the affection of women. It became a tradition for the men to give the ones they admired handwritten messages of affection, containing Valentine's name. This may have been the festival that was later named after the former saint -- Valentine's Day. It all started many centuries ago, during those times when being a Christian was against the law. One of the legends says that a Roman Emperor Claudius the Second had forbidden his men to marry. He wanted them to be heartless and fearless soldiers, free of wives and girlfriends. Claudius apparently decreed that no marriages should be celebrated and that all engagements be broken off immediately. But one of the Christian priests didn't obey the Emperor's edict. Like Father Lorenzo in Romeo and Juliet, this priest (whose name was Father Valentine) secretly performed marriages in and around the city of Rome. Found out not too long later, Valentine was imprisoned where he languished and died. Legend has it devoted friends buried him in the church of St. Praxedes on the fourteenth of February, 270 AD.

Father Valentine was a kind and wise person who had a lot of friends. They begged the Emperor to free him and sent letters and flowers to jailed Valentine. Many experts think that these were the first letters and flowers sent on Valentine's Day.

Another story says that Valentine was an early Christian in the time when Rome was unfriendly to this upstart religion. For helping some Christian martyrs he was seized, dragged before the prefect of Rome and cast into jail. There he was said to have fallen in love with, and cured the keeper's daughter, Julia, of blindness. When news of this miracle spread, Rome's leaders gave orders that Valentine should be beheaded. The morning of the execution, he is said to have sent Julia a farewell message signed, "From your Valentine."

History tells us the first modern valentines date from the early years of the fifteenth century. The Young French Duc d'Orleans was captured at the battle of Agincourt and kept a prisoner in the Tower of London for a number of years. The duke wrote a series of poems to his wife from captivity. About sixty of them remain. They can be seen among the royal papers in the British Museum. <Picture>

Flowers as valentines appear nearly two hundred years later. A daughter of Henry IV of France gave a party in honor of St. Valentine. Each lady received a bouquet of flowers from the man chosen as her valentine.

During the Middle Ages, Europeans believed that birds chose their mates each year on February 14. In the 17th century, it's believed that lovers began exchanging mementos on Saint Valentine's Day, perhaps heeding the words of Shakespeare's "Hamlet": "Sweets to the sweet."

During the medieval days of chivalry, the names of English maidens and bachelors were put into the box and drawn out in pairs. Each couple exchanged gifts. The girl became the man's valentine for that year. On his sleeve he wore her name and it was his bounded duty to attend and protect her. Hence the expression, 'He wore his heart on his sleeve.'

Cupid, another symbol of the holiday, became associated with it because he was the son of Venus, the Roman god of love and beauty. Cupid often appears on Valentine cards.

<Picture> Although today's society is very different from what it was during Valentine's days, the tradition is alive. The old-fashioned love still has a place in our very advanced and a bit crazy century. Deep down in our hearts we are still hoping to find the kind of love that Shakespeare wrote about.....

However the custom of Valentine's Day started, it remains an enduring tradition for us in the Western world to this day. So have a happy Valentine's Day!

Cards

Many historians believe the custom of sending poetic verse on this day originated with the capture of Charles, Duke of Orleans, during the Battle of Agincourt. From his prison cell in the Tower of London, Charles sent his wife a rhyming love letter.

Valentine cards became popular in Great Britain in the nineteenth century. Noted artist Kate Greenaway created cards which featured joyful children and beautiful gardens. Esther Howland was one of the first Valentine card manufacturers in the United States. Inspired by a British card, she began production in 1847. Her cards featured lace and paper flowers and leaves. Other card manufacturers emphasized Cupid, the pudgy, winged son of Venus, the goddess of love. In Roman lore, Cupid is known as Eros, the son of Aphrodite.

Verses and Valentine greetings were popular as far back as the Middle Ages, when lovers said or sang their valentines. Written valentines began to appear after 1400. The oldest "valentine" in existence was made in the 1400's and is in the British Museum. Paper valentines were exchanged in Europe where they were given in place of valentine gifts. Paper valentines were especially popular in England. Early valentines were made by hand and were made with colored paper, watercolors, and colored inks

<Picture>In the early 1800's, valentines began to be assembled in factories. Early manufactured valentines were black and white pictures that were painted by workers in a factory. Fancy valentines were made with real lace and ribbons, with paper lace introduced in the mid 1800's. By the end of the 1800's valentines were being made entirely by machine

<Picture>In the early 1900's a card company named Norcross began to manufacture valentines. Each year Hallmark displays its collection of rare and antique valentines at card shops around the country. Museums and Libraries also offer antique valentine exhibitions around St. Valentine's Day

Romans celebrated on February 15th the feast of Lupercalia. This spring holiday was held in honor of the god Lupercus, protector of the herd and crops. The people entreated to Lupercus to protect their flocks and keep animals and people healthy and fertile through singing and dancing. On the eve of this festival, young women would put their names in a ceramic jar and every young man would pick a name. They would be partners in the festivities and dances, oft times they would not need to participate in this particular event the next year.

Christian legends believe that Valentine's Day is the Feast of St. Valentine, who was beheaded on February 14th under the orders of Roman Emperor Claudius II. The Emperor believed that if his men remained single his army would be larger. He wouldn't lose men to wanting to stay home with the family. Valentine was arrested and beheaded because he would secretly marry people forbidden to wed. He became known as the patron saint of lovers. Believing that Valentine's Day exists to celebrate the memory of a saint who valued love and romance, many exchange love notes or Valentines. Others believe that Valentine was later confused with the Norman French word 'galantin' meaning "lover of women". Through the passage of time, the two have merged with the result of St. Valentine being remembered as the patron saint of lovers

Like St. Nicholas, St. Valentine is shrouded in history and mythology. Who he was, and why we celebrate a day named after him, depends on where you look and who you talk to.

What we're pretty sure of is that Valentine was a Roman Christian who was martyred sometime during the reign of Emperor Claudius II in the 3rd Century. Why was Valentine killed? Well, it seems Claudius was having trouble drafting enough soldiers to serve in his army, and he thought the reason was that Roman men didn't want to leave their wives and sweethearts. Claudius decided to outlaw marriage--thinking that would solve the problem--but Valentine had other plans and continued marrying couples in secret. Claudius was so upset when he found out that he had Valentine thrown in jail (or beheaded, depending on who you believe, but in any case, the good cleric died). A variation on the tradition has it that Valentine fell in love while in prison and sent his girlfriend love letters, which, if true, would have been the first Valentine's Day cards.

That accounts for the mushy romantic part of the tradition--soldiers going off to war, sweethearts left at home, and a kind-hearted reverend marrying them before they parted. But there's a little more to the story.

About the same time Valentine was having his troubles with Claudius, Rome was having trouble with wolves--packs of them, roaming the countryside and threatening shepherds and their flocks. To protect themselves from the wolves, the Romans held a feast on February 15th honoring the god Lupercus. During this feast, and as a tribute to Juno (the goddess of women and marriage), girls' names were drawn from a box and they were paired with young men.

As Christianity became more popular and influential, old pagan practices were replaced with Christian ones. The feast for Lupercus was renamed Valentine's Day, and instead of girls' names being drawn from a box, the names of saints were drawn, and boys and girls were expected to draw inspiration from the saints in the coming year.

Eventually the older tradition of pairing off girls and boys returned, and it has persisted to this day, with now familiar images and traditions collecting by accretion through the ages. We probably can't imagine Valentine's Day without Cupid, arrows, hearts and cards, and we probably wouldn't have any of them without a 3rd Century martyr who lost his life marrying young lovers.