

# Valentine's Day

*The remarkable tale of saints and wolves*

Hearts and flowers, violins, candy and cupid. These are the images of Valentine's Day, the most romantic day of the year. Unfortunately, the history of the holiday is sorely lacking in the hearts and flowers department.

Actually, no one really knows the origin of the holiday. That's right, there is no definitive answer to the question, "How did Valentine's Day begin?" However, there's been an awful lot of speculation over the centuries.

To begin with, the ancient Romans, always big on pagan rituals, celebrated the Feast of Lupercalia on Feb. 15. Lupercus was the god who kept the wolves at bay. Wolves (barring those who raised Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome) were considered nasty creatures back then. During this festival, the names of young men and women were drawn by lots as game partners for the coming year. In addition, there were the standard animal sacrifices and little boys running naked through the woods.

Now, sometime in the middle 200's (that's 200 A.D.), there were a couple of clergymen named Valentine, who may have actually been one person. Legend has it that the Roman Emperor, Claudius, issued a decree forbidding marriage, because he believed that marriage kept men at home while the single life encouraged them to remain in the military fight-

ing for Rome. Valentine ignored this decree and married couples secretly under the church's sanction. When the emperor discovered the increasing number of couch potatoes in Rome and who was responsible, he threw the unfortunate clergyman in prison.

**DURING HIS** long stay, Valentine miraculously restored the sight of the jailer's blind daughter and she fell in love with him. Nonetheless, the clergyman was executed, clubbed to death and beheaded, outside the walls of Rome in 270 A.D. On the morning of his execution, Valentine sent a note assuring the jailer's daughter of his love and signing it "Your Valentine." While this would explain the origin of the custom, the factual nature of this story is a bit dubious, especially as Valentine was known to be a very religious man, little concerned with affairs of the heart. Overall, it is more likely that Valentine was perpetuating Christianity during a time of persecution. After his canonization, a feast day was established in his honor on Feb. 14, the date of his death.

At this juncture, one might ask how St. Valentine came to be the patron saint of lovers. After the Romans invaded Britain, and upon their withdrawal in 407 A.D., their religious customs and festivals remained. However, the early Christian fathers were intent on obliterating references to paganism and replacing the

names of those festivals with the names of Saints. It was only natural to name this rite of spring after St. Valentine, who had been martyred on the eve of the Feast of Lupercalia and the date of the holiday was changed to Feb. 14.

**TYING THESE** loose ends together is the fact that, during the Middle Ages, it was commonly believed that the beginning of the mating season for birds occurs on Feb. 14. How they arrived at that precise date remains a mystery. But the coupling of birds was always grist for the poets and the songwriters, who gradually created a romantic myth around the holiday. The pagan ritual was replaced by the random romantic pairing of young men and women, much to the joy of the little boys who no longer needed to run naked through the woods. These couples remained paired for the year, often leading to matrimony. Eventually, however, the Christian clergy objected to the custom and substituted the names of saints to be selected and emulated by the young people. Although eventually reinstated, the tradition died out by the mid-1660s because people tired of having their partner selected for them at random.

However, the spirit of Valentine's Day remained strong. Although initially, couples would exchange elaborate gifts along with a verse, the custom shifted to presenting only a card containing a poem

or sentimental thought.

This anonymous verse, the first recorded Valentine, was written sometime after the 14th century.

"Thow it be alle other wyn  
Godys blessing have he and myn,

My none gentyl Volontyn  
[Valentine],

Good Tomas the frere."

**FOR THOSE OF** you who do not speak 15th century English, the first known recipient of a valentine was not a blushing maiden or a fair huntsman. It was one Friar Thomas. Of course, it is not known how Friar Thomas came to be a valentine, but he must have been one heck of a guy.

Regardless of how or why St. Valentine's Day began, it has become a booming business for Hallmark cards and the post office. As for the truth of the origin of the holiday, take your pick of which explanation seems the most plausible. It doesn't really matter, because Valentine's Day has become a time of freely-expressed affection. And, in a world fraught with violence and danger, how remarkable the continued existence of holiday whose only reason for being is to give and receive love. We should cherish this excuse to put aside our differences. In fact, we might think about establishing Valentine's Day more often. How about once a month? Or even once a day? This Feb. 14 remember the jailkeeper's daughter, and give it all you've got. Love never runs out!