



Wilt thou be mine? Dear love, reply,
Sweetly consent, or else deny;
Whisper softly, none shall know,
Wilt thou be mine, love?? Ay or no.

Charles, Duke of Orleans
While imprisoned in the Tower of London

Today's casual trading of valentines on February 14 is only a faint echo of the serious wooing of the centuries past.

Practiced today, mainly in Great Britain and America, many of the customs date back to pagan times. Many participants do not realize the significance of the Saint's day they are celebrating.

St. Valentine, a Roman priest, had little interest in love's pleasures or Cupid's bows. According to Alban Butler, in *Lives of the Saints*, Valentine was "***a holy priest in Rome who, with St. Marius and his family, assisted the martyrs during the persecution of Christians under Claudius II. He was apprehended, and sent by the Emperor to the Prefect of Rome who, on finding all his promises to make him renounce his faith in effectual, commanded him to be beaten with clubs, and afterwards to be beheaded, which was executed on the 14th of February, about the year 270. Pope Julius I is said to have built a church near Ponte Mole to the priest's memory, which for a long time gave name to the gate now called Porta del Popolo, formerly Porta Valentini. The greatest part of his relics are now in the church of St. Praxedes.***"

When the Romans invaded Britain, they brought with them their religious customs and celebrations. Among these was the Lupercalia, the Feast of Purification, celebrated in February, the name of the month derived from the word februo, meaning to purify; the very day of the celebration was called Februarca.

The Lupercalia was a spring festival consisting of peculiar fertility rites and was concerned mostly with young people.

The festival's name was taken from "Luperci," the ancient order of priests dedicated to Pan, the god of the country, and particularly of shepherds. The priests took their name from the Latin word "Lupus," meaning wolf.

Following is the ceremony as described by Basil Kennett in the *Antiquities of Rome*. I have reproduced it exactly as he wrote it:

“In the first Place, there was a Sacrifice killed of Goats and a Dog. Then two Children, Noblemen’s Sons, being brought thither, some of the Luperci stained their Foreheads with the bloody Knife, while others wiped it off with Locks of Wool dipped in Milk: the Boys must always laugh after their Foreheads have been wiped; This done, having cut the Goat-skins into Thongs, they ran around the Streets all naked but their Middle and lashed all that they met in their Procession. The young Women never took any Care to avoid the Strokes, but rather offered themselves of their own Accord, fancying them to be great Helpers of Conception and Delivery. They ran naked, because Pan is always painted so. They sacrificed a Goat, because the same Deity was supposed to have Goat’s Feet; which gave Occasion to his common Epithet of Capripes (Latin for Goat). As for the Dog we meet with in the Sacrifice, it was added as a necessary Companion of a Shepherd, and because of the natural Antipathy between them and wolves.

Some have fancied with Plutarch, that these Lupercalia were instituted in Honour of the Wolf that preserved Romulus and Remus. Others carry their Original much higher, and tell us, that they were brought into Italy by Evander, before the Time of Aeneas.”

The term Lycaea was used by later Greek writers to denote the Roman Lupercalia, both words being ultimately derived from the word for “wolf” in their respective languages. Lyceum, meaning a Temple of Love, has the same derivation.

The origin of the use of the word “wolf” in connection with love is lost in obscurity, but it is probable that there is a connection between the Greek word “lykos,” meaning wolf, and the word “lechery,” also with the verbs “lecher,” (French) and “liken,” (German). It is interesting to remember that the famous story of Romulus and Remus is not fictitious, for Faustulus, the shepherd who found the two baby boys at the bottom of a tree by the banks of the river Tiber, brought them to his home, where his wife Laurentia cared for them, nursed them and brought them up with his own children. Laurentia had formerly been a “fallen woman” – a woman of the streets, called in Latin, Lupa, meaning a she-wolf.

To this day, we still refer to a man who has a way with the ladies as a “wolf,” and when an attractive girl walks by, she’s greeted with “wolf whistles.”

In later years, Christian leaders were busy substituting pagan superstitions and dates with those of Christian belief. Often, saints’ names were used to replace the old festival’s. Since St. Valentine was martyred on February 14, his name has been associated with the spring festival, which took place on the fixed date of February 15. The early Christian fathers decided that he should “perpetuate forever the memory of this festival of the return of spring when “a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love and when the birds begin mating.”

The earliest written references we have about St. Valentine’s Day concerns the mating of birds. It was a common belief in medieval times that birds mated in mid February (which, going by the “old style” calendar would be a little later than now). It was also natural to assume, therefore, that the same applied to lovers.

Many verses were written of St. Valentine’s connection with birds as in the 45th and 45th stanzas of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Parlement of Bryddes*, or the *Assembly of Fowls*.

For this was on Saint Valentine's Day
When every fowl cometh to choose his make, (mate)
Of every kind that men think may;
And that so huge a noise can they make,
That earth and air and tree and every lake
So full was, that underneath was there space
For me to stand, so full was all the place.

Later, during the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, poets and song writers wrote lavishly on St. Valentine's connection with birds and lovers, and it is here that we begin to see the custom of choosing one's valentine. This 1440 poem written by John Lydgate, the Monk of Bury, is in praise of Queen Catherine, consort to Henry V, and shows clearly the thought put into each choice:

Seynte Valentine, of custome yeere by yeere
Men have an usaunce (custom) in this regioun
To loke (look) and serche Cupides Kalendere,
And chose theyre choyse, by grete affecciou;
Such as ben prike with Cupides mocioun,
Takyng theyre choyse as theyre sort doth falle:
But I love oon which excellith alle.

Choosing one's valentine, at this time, was the same as being betrothed, and St. Valentine's Day soon became the day on which to become engaged. Valentine also soon became another word for sweetheart.

One custom associated with St. Valentine's Day, that possibly dated from the Lupercalia, was the drawing of names for your valentine. The person whose name you drew was your valentine for the whole year, which often resulted in betrothal. The custom seems to have worn thin, however, by the mid 1600s, but seems to have remained a custom until Cromwell's time when the Puritans abolished all holidays named after saints.

Following the Restoration in the 1600s, St. Valentine's Day was revived with all its old customs and tradition, and here we see the emergence of the first written valentine.

Gifts, also, were now frequently, if not mandatorily, given by both men and women. The 17th century brought in the practice of only the gentlemen offering presents.

Married and single alike could be valentines, as shown in Samuel Pepys' diary. Samuel Pepys, a government official known mostly for his well-kept diary, does much to show us the celebration of St. Valentine's Day over a span of quite a few years. On February 14, 1667, however, we see the first written reference to the ancestor of today's valentine:

"This morning come up to my wife's bedside – I being up and dressing myself – little Will Mercer to be her Valentine; and brought her name writ upon blue paper in gold letters, done by himself, very pretty, and we were both well pleased with it. But I am also my wife's Valentine, and it will cost me £5; but that I must have laid out if we had not been Valentines."

Two days later, he writes of a new fad:

“...But I do first observe the fashion of drawing mottos as well as names; so that Pierce, who drew my wife, did also draw a motto, and this girl drew another for me. What mine was I have forgot; but my wife’s was, ‘Most courteous and most fair,’ which as it may be used, or an anagram made upon each name might be very pretty.”

Thus, the birth of the valentine as we know it today.

The 19th century authority, Simrock, in his *Handbouch der Deutsche Mythologie*, states that England, northern France and the Netherlands were the main participants in Valentine customs. This seems to be substantiated by the fact that scarce reference is made of St. Valentine’s Day by other countries, although Italy celebrated a spring festival on the 14th of February in the Middle Ages. This, however, is not so today, and no hint of St. Valentine’s Day celebrations in Italy have been recorded for centuries.

In the mid 1700s, Valentine’s Day customs were banned in Germany and the custom of substituting saints’ names was introduced. That is, instead of drawing a sweetheart’s name, a saint’s name was allotted instead. The young person was then to emulate that saint for the next year. In addition, it was the custom to use beautifully illustrated baptismal certificates. Marriage certificates, too, were embellished, sometimes with a couple before the altar and a tender, handwritten message. These are quite possibly the forerunners of the traditional, lacy valentines.

The Germans were also fond of devotional cards, which were obtained in blank form to be made up as needed. These cards were often decorated with pictures of Holy Mary and invariably the Sacred Heart. Thus, the heart came to be the standard St. Valentine’s Day symbol.

Also prevalent were greeting cards. Friends coming to visit would leave their greeting card if the person they were seeking was not at home. Initially very simple with a border and blank space for the name, they evolved into elaborately decorated cards with specially inscribed messages.

Lover’s messages were at first written on pieces of paper of normal size. However, with the embellishing of the greeting card in the mid 1800s and the start of the new commercial enterprise of publishing greeting cards, these too soon appeared on elaborately decorated cards.

Because the postal service was very expensive and a luxury usually only affordable by the rich, the card was lovingly handmade and dropped off at the young girl’s door. If a gift was given, this was hung from the doorknob and the “valentine” was slipped under the door.

By the beginning of the 1800s, the postal service was often used because the price was now a penny. This opened up the possibility for virtually everyone to use the post office for the delivery of valentines. With this new convenience, however, emerged the gag valentine. Many fathers, enraged at having to pay postage for abusive valentines sent to their daughters, demanded refunds. The post office was soon swamped with such requests.

However, for young and old, St. Valentine’s Day was still looked forward to with excitement. Young women hoped for a valentine from heretofore-silent admirers, and the bashful young squires now had an opportunity to avow their devotion without having to meet the ladies face to face.

For those not eloquent enough with the pen, valentine writers were available for a penny, with the superior ones going for sixpence. Each booklet contained appropriate verses and stanzas for every occasion, and the correct replies. Here we begin to see the emergence of the standard valentine, purchased complete and ready to mail.

Beginning about this time and continuing into the following eras, valentines became more elaborate and intricate to the point where some were now considered actual works of art. Collectors of a few decades ago could find examples of their interests at a relatively modest price. Now, however, due to rising interest and the decreased availability, some valentines are quite expensive and considered by some to be an actual investment hobby, like stamp or coin collecting.

Though not the serious courtship of yesterday, today's trading of valentines is still enjoyed by lovers young and old. But, you never know. Maybe someday it will be as in the days of old when:

The day Saint Valentine,
When maids are brisk, and at the break of day
Start up and turn their pillows, curious all
To know what happy swain the fates provide
A mate for life. Then follows quick discharge
Of true love knots and sonnets nicely penned.

Frank Staff
The Valentine and Its Origins

Debra Shiveley Welch
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