



Giovanni Salimena Emerald

Bloody Valentine's Day

Party likes it's 297 A.D.: The day's history isn't as romantic as one might guess, but has its racy side

By Yael Menahem
Oregon Daily Emerald

"Would you be my Valentine?" Where does that phrase come from?

The story behind St. Valentine, for whom the day is named, is not as romantic as many would imagine the holiday's history to be.

St. Valentine was a priest during the third century in Rome, when it was ruled by Emperor Claudius II. Claudius, who wanted to keep his men focused on their fighting, outlawed marriage for single men who were potential soldiers. He believed that single men would make better soldiers than those with a wife or a family.

Our hero Valentine felt that Claudius' rule was unjust, and he continued to marry young couples in secret. When Claudius discovered that Valentine broke the law, the emperor ordered that the priest be put to death.

Not romantic enough yet? Well here comes a bit of romance.

One legend has it that while sitting in prison awaiting his execution, Valentine fell in love with the jailer's daughter. Speculation is that she visited him in jail, and before he died, he wrote her a love letter that was signed, "From Your Valentine."

That pretty much sealed the deal.

Beyond that tale, a heroic act believed to have been performed by Valentine was him saving many Catholics from execution under Claudius' rule. The Catholic Church named Valentine a saint after his death in 297 A.D.

The month of February was chosen to celebrate this modern-day love feast because of Lupercalia, a Roman fertility festival. In the spirit of modern Valentine's Day, young boys would pull names of girls out of a box, and they would escort them to the pre-spring festivities, says Daniel Wojcik, associate professor of English.

Lupercalia signified the "renewal of the forces of nature," Wojcik says. It "assured the growth of crops and the fertility of women."

Yet, there was a gap between the time of St. Valentine's death and the resurgence of Valentine's Day in the 19th century. Valentine's reputation as a sympathetic, heroic and romantic figure appealed to many people around Europe in the early 1800s.

By the mid-1800s, it was common for friends and lovers to exchange small tokens of affections or handwritten notes. By the end of the 19th century, printed cards

began to replace written letters as a result of better printing technology.

Cheaper postal rates also contributed to an increase in the popularity of sending Valentine's Day greetings. It's believed that Americans started exchanging handmade valentine cards in the early 1700s.

"It was as big as Christmas," Wojcik says.

Some people love Valentine's Day, some hate it, but most people buy into its commercial appeal. Today, the Greeting Card Association estimates that around 1 billion love-oriented cards are sent worldwide each year.

"It's the best day of the year for [selling] flowers and chocolate, but it's still meaningful for people," Wojcik explains. "People aren't going to be brainwashed by market forces. This is a way for people who don't always have the opportunity to express emotions to do it."

So that's the story of Valentine's Day.

The once-racy Lupercalia celebrations that were known for "renewal, rebirth, erotic and sexual themes," as Wojcik describes the festival, have turned into a day to tell family, friends and especially partners that you care.

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