

# V Valentines' S Sweet E Errors

By Julie Pruitt



Looking across the ages of valentines' history, it's almost safe to say that the cave drawings at Lascaux were not the first love-induced efforts of sending a valentine.

As laughable as a stone valentine may seem, it's equally laughable to imagine the virtuous St. Valentine promoting the frivolous frolics that have been associated with Valentine's Day for centuries. Perish the thought! Actually, St. Valentine's bones are probably turning in their display case at the Church of St. Praxedes in Rome, Italy, where they are kept.

Valentine, who was seemingly immune to the worldly temptations of romance, unfortunately, was martyred one day before the Roman spring festival called Lupercalia. After Rome overtook Britain and pagan customs became standard ways of life, zealous Christians tried to eliminate the heathenish festivities. Instead of completely severing the barbarous masses from their pagan celebrations, these early Christians replaced pagan party-days with "holy days" or holidays, as the word is now known. Usually, the new holy day was dedicated to the saint whose martyrdom had occurred on or near the pagan day that was being replaced. And Valentine's death had preceded Lupercalia by one day.

Lupercalia was a celebration of the return of spring, when birds warbled sweet love songs to find a mate and young men sought the affections of young women. Suddenly, St. Valentine had the dubious honor of being the patron saint of lovers worldwide. Since the union of Lupercalia and St. Valentine, many love-induced customs have developed.

Prior to the Victorian era in the British Isles, young men often celebrated Valentine's Day by drawing lots to choose young women – hardly a custom that the liberated female of today would consent to. Most women go out and lampoon the main of *their* choice.

The earliest known valentine (in which St. Valentine was evoked) was a written exaltation of a "good Tomas the frere" (friar). The details of this unusual first valentine are obscure, but St. Valentine's holiness seemed to have prevailed in this missive rather than the lusts of Lupercalia.

However, the origination of the romantic verses that we now attribute to valentines



The real Saint Valentine was a confirmed celibate. He probably would shudder at the thought of being the patron saint of lovers around the world. Besides being martyred for his beliefs, he actually preached against the lusts of the flesh.

is attributed to Charles, Duke of Orleans. He wrote love poems relating to St. Valentine when imprisoned in the Tower of London following the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Nothing like a little jail time to light the fires of passion.

During the 16th and 17th century, valentines became a permanent custom and quite popular. Choosing a lady as one's Valentine was considered as serious as an engagement. Expensive presents, rather than cards, were the normal valentine at that time. High postage and slow delivery discouraged valentine sending before the 18th century (much like today).

In Wales, the custom of a young man carving a wooden spoon for his betrothed, then placing a ribbon through the end of the handle so that she could wear it around her neck was a popular custom – not quite as easy as running by the supermarket and picking up a card and candy.

Other unusual tokens of love included stay busks (corset stiffeners) that sailors carved from wood or bone to give to their sweethearts; round pieces of fine cloth with

embroidered messages of love from ladies to their gents (the intricate fabric was used as a watch cover); love poem volumes with gilded pages; and handmade true-love knots.

The early transcribed valentines were not printed cards at all, but were usually handwritten on regular writing paper. The Germans called them "Freundschaftskarten." The actual Valentine "card" made its appearance following the popular reception of other greeting cards.

Today, Valentine's Day is still going strong. Lovers continue the ancient tradition of sending expressions of love in various ways. Although the carved wooden spoon and stay busks seem to have become obsolete, cards, candy, flowers, gifts and even self-made gifts from the heart are still being sent.

Despite the fact that poor St. Valentine has probably been misrepresented through the years, Valentine's Day is still a romantic holiday that woovers of all ages still l-o-o-v-e to celebrate.

