

History of Valentine's Day

by Yvette Podber

There are many varying opinions as to the origins of Valentine's Day. One goes back to a pagan festival celebrated in mid February, known as Lupercalia.

Lupercalia was one of the most ancient Roman festivals. It was celebrated every year in honor of Lupercus, the god of fertility. The festival was viewed as a purification and fertility rite. It was held every year, in mid February, in the Lupercal. The cave of Lupercal on the Palatine (one of the seven Roman hills), is where according to the Roman mythology the founders of Ancient Rome, Romulus and Remus, were said to have been nurtured by the she-wolf (lupus).

The Lupercal contained an altar and a grove sacred to the god Lupercus. The ritual began with the sacrifice of goats and a dog in the Lupercal by priests called Luperci, who smeared the foreheads of two noble young men with the blood of the sacrificed animals and then wiped it off. At this point, the youths were required to laugh. Then the Luperci, clothed in loincloths, ran about the area, lashing everyone they met with strips of skin from the sacrificed goats. Young wives were particularly eager to receive these blows, because it was believed that the ritual promoted fertility and easy childbirth. These ceremonies were accompanied by much revelry and drinking.

Why February 14th and why Saint Valentine's?

In the 5th century, the pastors of the early Christian Church in Rome endeavored to do away with the pagan element of the Lupercalia feast and Pope Gelasius declared February 14th as Saint Valentine's Day. Why Saint Valentine? There were several St. Valentine's canonized by the church. Legend has it that one St. Valentine, a defiant Roman Priest, lived during the 3rd century AD under Emperor Claudius the II.

Claudius the II was an ambitious ruler. His army required a vast military of men to abandon their families for a long period of time. This often resulted in an army that was halfhearted and homesick. Claudius was so determined to stop love from sapping the will of his armies that he banned marriages all together.

Father Valentine thought the ban was unjust and he defied the emperor by continuing to marry young lovers in secret. The emperor eventually caught on to the priest's actions and arrested him and sentenced him to death, execution to be carried out on February 14th.

It is believed that the young couples he secretly wed visited his cell, passing him flowers and notes through the bars as symbols of their gratitude. The story continues that the condemned Father Valentine fell in love with his jailor's daughter who was allowed to visit him. They would sit and talk for hours.

On February 14th, the day he was executed, it is said that he passed the young girl a note. It was signed "**from your Valentine**".