

by Robert D. San Souci

Long-stemmed roses, chocolates in heart-shaped boxes, words of love and devotion — it must be Valentine's Day.

Valentine's Day, February 14, is a date devoted to courtship in the United States and western Europe. Customs such as sending valentine cards with pink hearts, ribbons, and lace have roots in a Roman festival called Lupercalia, held in the middle of February. During one part of the celebration, each young man drew a young woman's name from an urn or bowl. The woman whose name he picked became the man's companion at celebrations for the coming year. Sometimes the two became sweethearts and got married.

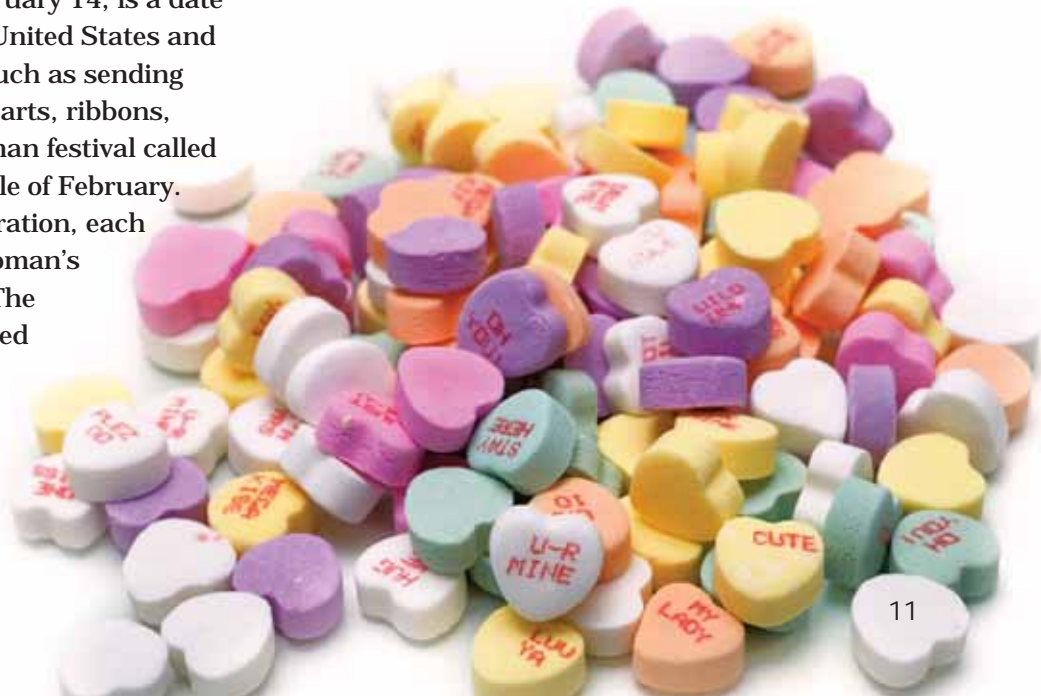
As Rome became a Christian nation, the holiday was moved back from February 15 to the 14th in honor of St. Valentine, a priest who lived in the third century A.D. Legend has it that he was put to death on February 14 by Roman authorities because he disobeyed the emperor's order forbidding soldiers to marry. St. Valentine performed many marriages and became known as the patron saint of lovers.

To make the day more of a religious festival, for a time young people drew saints' names from a jar, and the chosen saint became the person's role model for the year. But people soon went back to the old custom of choosing a sweetheart's name instead. The little name slips were now called valentines.

The tradition of Valentine's Day spread throughout Europe. In the Middle Ages, when few people could read or write, people recited or sang their valentine wishes to their chosen one. The first written valentines date to around 1400. The oldest one known (now in the British Museum) is a valentine poem written in 1415 by Charles, Duke of Orleans, a Frenchman imprisoned in the Tower of London after a battle.

In Britain, the idea of choosing valentines was linked to the closeness of caged lovebirds — the reason for pictures of lovebirds on valentines.

(Continued on page 12)



Ancient ideas about predicting the future also got mixed in with the romantic notions of Valentine's Day. In England, for example, a young woman who pinned bay leaves to her pillow on Valentine's Eve believed that if she dreamed of her sweetheart, she would soon marry him.

In Sicily, a young girl would stand at the window for half an hour before

sunrise. If she saw no one, she believed that she would not marry for a year. If a man passed, she believed that she would marry him or someone who looked like him. In Germany, a girl might plant several onions in pots and label each with the name of an eligible bachelor. She believed that she would marry the man named on the first onion to sprout.

In colonial America, men often sent valentines as proposals of marriage, and a "yes" might well have been a valentine sent in return.

Many of these early valentines involved puzzles. In an acrostic poem, you read down the first letter of each line to spell a sweetheart's name. One such poem read:

May you answer, "Yes," my heart

And no longer keep us apart

Remember I love you, dear Valentine

You must be mine as I am thine.

Until the 1800s, valentines were made by hand. Then Esther Howland, an enterprising Massachusetts woman, began to mass-produce valentines on an assembly line.

Today, factories turn them out in large quantities, but the symbols remain the same:

A heart stands for love; a fan means "open up your heart"; a ribbon suggests that the sender has "tied up" a sweetheart's affections; and lace reveals that the sender's heart is "caught in a net."

Over all floats the winged Roman god Cupid, who shoots invisible arrows into the hearts of people to make them fall in love.

Valentine parties also became popular in the 1800s. Children often would play kissing games such as "Drop the Handkerchief" or "Post Office." Adults might attend a dance dressed as famous sweethearts such as Romeo and Juliet or the King and Queen of Hearts. Valentine parties are still held today, with exchanges of cards and small tokens of affection. These traditions help remind us that love, courtship, and marriage are an important part of our lives.

Robert D. San Souci has written more than 90 books for children.



Today, many people celebrate St. Valentine's Day by exchanging cards and gifts.