Valentine's Day History

It is not exactly known why the 14th of February is Valentine's Day or if St. Valentine really had any relation to this day. The history of Valentine's Day is impossible to obtain from any archive. We have only legends as our source for the history of Valentine's Day.

Current Valentine's Day traditions are thought to be derived from a combination of ancient Roman and Christian tradition.

The Roman purification and fertility festival of Lupercalia was held on February 15th. The ritual included the sacrifice of goats and a dog. Young men clothed in loincloths, ran about the area, lashing everyone they met with strips of skin from the sacrificed goats. Young wives were 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.

Pope Gelaius did not approve of this pagen celebration and in 496 AD turned Lupercalia into a Christian feast day and set its observance a day earlier, on February 14. He proclaimed February 14 to be the feast day in honor of Saint Valentine.

According to legend, in the 3rd century the Emperor Claudius did not want any of his soldiers falling in love and marrying. He felt that married men were more attached to their families, and would not make good soldiers. He believed that marriage made the men weak. So he declared marriage illegal and anyone performing ceremonies would be killed. Valentine was a bishop who defied the Emperor's ban and performed marriage ceremonies in secret. Claudius found out about his activities and had him arrested.

While in prison, Valentine was approached by the jailer and asked to restore sight to his blind daughter. According to lore, she was cured by Valentine and they fell in love.
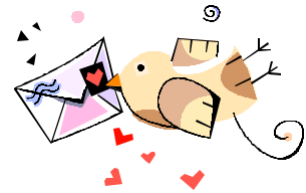
Emperor Claudius met with Valentine in jail. He tried to convince him to worship the Roman Gods, in order to save his life, but was unsuccessful. Valentine refused to recognize Roman Gods and did not agree with the emperor's ban on marriages. He even attempted to convert Claudius to Christianity. Valentine's dignity and conviction angered Claudius and he sentenced him to death. It is said that on the morning of his execution,

Valentine sent a farewell message to the jailer's daughter signed, "From your Valentine."

Valentine was martyred for refusing to renounce his religion. He is believed to have been executed on February 14, 270 AD. February 14th became a day for all lovers and Valentine became its Patron Saint. It began to be annually observed by young Romans who offered handwritten greetings of affection, known as Valentines.

The association of Valentine's Day with romance and courtship continued through the Middle Ages. The holiday evolved over the centuries and by the 18th century, gift-giving and exchanging hand-made cards on Valentine's Day had become common in England.

Esther Howland created the first commercially produced Valentine's Day cards in the 1840's. Since the 19th century, handwritten notes have given way to mass-produced greeting cards. According to the U.S. Greeting Card Association, approximately 190 million valentines are sent each year in the US.