

Valentine's Day Cometh

Contributed by Kayla Robertson
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The scramble to find your loved one the perfect gift begins now. Store displays have already switched from red and green to pink and red and men and women alike are searching to find something unique that says "Will you be mine?" Americans spend over \$12 billion annually on cards, chocolates, flowers, and other gifts in hopes of showing their affection on February 14. But is the pricey holiday a product of corporate greed or is there a history to the day of romance?

February 14 was declared Valentine's Day by Pope Gelasius in 498 A.D. There is no question that the holiday has a history; it's been around for a long time. The question is why the holiday is celebrated the way it is and perhaps why it was declared a holiday in the first place. There are several theories about why Valentine's Day has become a day for romance.

On February 15, pagans observe Lupercalia. This holiday is to celebrate fertility. In Roman culture, the women of a city would put their names in a large urn. The men would then draw names, thus creating a couple for the rest of the year. These partnerships often ended in marriage. One theory suggests that Valentine's Day was an attempt by the Catholic Church to replace Lupercalia. With this theory in mind, it is easy to see why we celebrate the holiday with sexy gifts.

Another attempt to explain the racy connotation of Valentine's Day also stems from the Middle Ages. It was believed that spring (the season of fertility) began in the middle of February. Also, in France and England, people believed that the birds' mating season began on February 14.

On the Catholic side of things, it is speculated that Saint Valentine either died or was buried on February 14, which is why we celebrate him that day. The question of who St. Valentine was, however, is a bit harder to answer. The Church recognizes three men by the name of Valentine as saints.

There are different legends about Saint Valentine (not necessarily endorsed by the Catholic Church). One legend says that Saint Valentine married men and women under a king who banned marriages. Another legend says Saint Valentine was imprisoned and fell in love with the jailer's daughter, leaving her a note signed "your valentine", thus sending the first valentine. Valentine may also have been a man who helped Christians escape punishment from the Romans.

Whoever the holiday was meant to celebrate, it has become an excuse to buy risqué gifts or "get the kids out of the house for the night". On the opposite side of the spectrum, grandmothers often send their grandchildren cards and elementary schools often have parties complete with enough Valentine's Day cards and treats for each student. With these entirely different ways of celebrating the holiday, how is it possible that Valentine's Day was declared to celebrate one man?

Many people speculate that Valentine's Day is celebrated not because of one saint or event, but that it is a combination of reasons and therefore it can take on various meanings. To grandma, it is a reason to sign a letter "xoxo" to her grandchildren, the way she always does to show them she loves them. However, to a young man in love, it's a reason to "pop the question".

Over time, all holidays change. Christmas was not originally celebrated with huge store displays, parades, and a crazy shopping rush. However, things change and now many people associate Christmas with the togetherness of family, the exchanging of gifts, and the general "buzz" in the air rather than with the birth of Jesus.

Even with all of the reasons to celebrate the ides of February as either a day of love or fertility, it is impossible to deny that American corporations have bulked the holiday into a heart-filled extravaganza in order to fatten their wallets. Americans spend more and more on Valentine's Day each year. Hallmark, American Greetings, and Russell Stover (just to name a few) sponsor the holiday with great vigor. On the History Channel's website, you can find a history of Valentine's Day, with a big thank you to American Greetings.

If you're still looking for the perfect gift, there are always the easy fall-back plans (flowers, dinner, candy, jewelry) but several unique gifts are also easy to find. Macy's Department Store carries chocolate body paint and romantic adult games. Borders' bookstores push their Kama Sutra collection and Things Remembered has a varied collection of personalized gifts.