

♥ A VALENTINE GREETING ♥

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

Whether you like to make your own or if you prefer the ‘store-bought’ variety, almost everyone is a fan of Valentine cards. How did this become the second largest card-giving holiday of the year? It all began with the story of the patron saint (or saints) named Valentine and the mystery involved that seemed to grow from there.

There seems to be at least three different saints named Valentine, all of whom were martyred. One legend says that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men. Valentine, realizing the injustice of this decree, defied Claudius and continued to marry couples in secret. When his actions were discovered, Claudius ordered his execution.

Others insist that St. Valentine of Interamna (Terni, Italy), a bishop, is the namesake of the holiday. He was also beheaded by Claudius II for refusing to renounce his faith and continuing to convert new followers.

Still others think that Valentine might have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons where they were often beaten and tortured. An imprisoned Valentine, according to legend, sent the first ‘valentine’ greeting himself, after he fell in love with a young girl, possibly his jailor’s daughter who visited him during his confinement. He supposedly wrote her a letter signed ‘From your Valentine’. Valentine greetings were popular in the Middle Ages, mostly in the form of poems or letters.

Although the stories are varied and unproven, they all seem to deal with a St. Valentine, executed on February 14th, who was a sympathetic, heroic and romantic figure who became one of the most popular saints in England and France.

The cherub Cupid, who launched his arrows of love at unsuspecting people, has roots in Greek mythology as the Greek god of love, Eros. He was a handsome immortal who played with the emotions of gods and men, using golden arrows to create love and leaden ones to bring the opposite result.

In the 1700s, cards were handmade and usually delivered secretly by slipping one under someone’s door. Printed verse guides, full of suggestions on how to win over your sweetheart could be bought to help those lovers in need. Some guides were written especially for women such as ‘The Lady’s Own Valentine Writer’ or for the gentlemen, ‘The Young Man’s Valentines for Those Poetically Challenged’. The cards were printed, engraved or made from woodcuts and colored by hand. They had traditional symbols of love - flowers, hearts, cupids, birds, etc. Ones that could be given to others such as friends, family members and children were beginning to be more popular.

In the middle of the 18th century, it was common for friends and lovers of all social classes to exchange small tokens of affection or handwritten notes. By 1800, printed cards began to replace written letters due to improvements in technology. The Valentine’s Day card gained popularity in Britain during the Victorian era when cheaper postage rates



contributed to an increase in sending greetings. European paper manufacturers discovered that they could produce ornate cut paper. This was then used to create layers and windows that revealed beautiful, printed images for the Valentine cards.

Esther Howland, whose father owned the largest stationery store in Worcester, Massachusetts, is called the ‘Mother of the American Valentine’ and is credited with creating the first mass market for printed valentines in the United States. In 1849, Esther began selling the first mass-produced valentines in America, her designs being inspired by one sent to her from England, and were assembled in her home by a group of local ladies that she hired. Her cards were very different from other cards already on the market at the time, featuring lacey cut-outs and intricate illustrations. Her operation later became known as the New England Valentine Company, remaining a home-based operation until the mid-1870s when production was moved to a factory. In 1881, the business was purchased by George Whitney who owned a competing company. He purchased his own printing presses and cheaper paper to reduce costs.

About this time the cards made available also included designs that were humorous, political, insulting or even racist. These were called ‘vinegar cards’. Because most valentines were delivered anonymously during this period, the new the type of valentine was not made to flatter but rather to insult and air grievances.

Valentines vary now, as then, in price and quality, ranging from cheaper paper cutouts to expensive lithographs on embossed paper. Although the sale of cards is much less with the advent of e-cards, St. Valentine should be glad that his name is associated with promoting love and caring.

A quote from Fred Rogers (1928-2003 famous for his children’s show) is a good reminder for all on this Valentine’s Day: “Deep within us - no matter who we are - there lives a feeling of wanting to be lovable, of wanting to be the kind of person that others like to be with. And the greatest thing we can do is to let people know that they are loved and capable of loving.”