



February 15 - 21, 1981

Valentine's Day

*From Ancient Roman Toga to the Preppy Look,
The Feeling's Still the Same*

CLEVELAND, OHIO — Is romance dead?

Far from it. It's alive and well and living in the hearts of everyone who loves and needs to be loved, if Valentine's Day is any indication. In fact, the occasion ranks second only to Christmas as a card-sending holiday.

During this national love-in on February 14, most people would be hard-pressed to explain the origins responsible for their heart-to-heart exchange of cards, candy and flowers.

According to Dr. Lee W. Gibbs, acting chairman of the department of religious studies at Cleveland State University, St. Valentine is commemorated primarily in North America and Britain.

"There were at least eight men with the name Valentine, seven of whose religious feast days fall on February 14," said Gibbs. "One of the most credible legends dates back to around 269 A.D., when Valentine, a priest in Rome, defied Emperor Claudius II's belief that single men made better soldiers. The priest, thinking this attitude was unfair, joined several couples in matrimony." Valentine was swiftly sent to prison, where he eventually died. Friends buried his body in a churchyard.

Despite the number of Valentine legends, common themes linking them all involve compassion, martyrdom or the passing of love notes between the bars of prison windows.

In 469 A.D., Pope Gelasius Named February 14 as St. Valentine's Day. This new Christian holiday gradually became a time for exchanging love messages, with St. Valentine emerging as the patron saint of courtship and lovers, explained Gibbs.

People in England were probably sending Valentine greetings as early as the 1400's. By around 1800 the first commercial Valentine cards appeared, featuring fine paper, ribbon and lace, and love symbols, such as doves, cupids, flowers and bleeding hearts.

Traditional artwork and sentiments on Valentine cards still remain ever-popular, although contemporary adaptations are increasing in acceptance.

Studio and humorous cards, also known as "slams," are ideal for exchanging Valentine messages without undue sentimentality, according to James Semon, assistant vice president of marketing at Cleveland-based American Greetings Corp.

"Slam cards are slightly derogatory in a humorous, chiding fashion," said Semon. "Artwork is also more far-out." A typical verse might read:

A Valentine for my husband...
Lots of women marry a guy...and
then try to change him, but not me,
honey: I love you just the way you are...
but don't get any worse!
Happy Valentine's Day, honey!

"The first slams were quite horrible," said Carl Goeller, editorial director at American Greetings. "They were directed at wives who didn't take care of their husbands, obesity and other human weaknesses to be exploited."

During World War II, slams became even more intense, with a "get even" tone reflecting the strong patriotism and clear-cut good versus bad nature of the times. This cynical trend continued throughout the McCarthy era of the early 1950's.

Ironically, during the Viet Nam years, cynical cards had their lowest ebb, according to Goeller. Instead, cards with romantic photographic art and introspective, conversational messages were enthusiastically received. "The increasingly educated Viet Nam generation placed an emphasis on love, not war. Once peace was restored, so was humor."

If Valentine's Day is any barometer of shifting social values, the decade of the '80's looks like a return to old-fashioned romance and tradition. The more conservative mood of the country is reflected, for example, in the resurgence of the preppy look in dressing, high school proms and other "square" customs.

What accounts for this shift to the traditional? "Perhaps the country is settling down and changing from a 'me' to an 'us' generation," Goeller observed. "Kids today are more realistic and are focusing their attention on recreational pursuits and day-to-day existence rather than causes. There's also an increase in the number of people in the 20 to 35 year-old bracket."

Goeller noted that today's conservative mood is in some ways a return to the Andy Hardy era, when movies were filled with happy days and happy endings. "President Ronald Reagan, for instance, brought a lot of happy endings to movies. Valentine's Day is seen as a way to re-enter the traditional social mainstream."

Alberta Braun, an American Greetings editor, added that among adults, Valentine's Day has become more sentimental and has broadened in scope to encompass friends, near and far, in addition to lovers and spouses.

"People find it easier to express themselves with cards and Valentine's Day provides the ideal opportunity to break down the barriers of not showing emotions," she explained. "The holiday is also a symbol of stability and hope in the face of social change."

Semon noted other contemporary trends regarding Valentine's Day. Men are now increasingly willing to "open up" with their feelings, due, in part, to a relaxing of rigid role playing. In addition, cards featuring such popular characters as Ziggy and Holly Hobbie are increasing in popularity because people can relate to them. Ziggy, a comic strip hero, is the "everyperson" for men and women.

No matter how much Valentine's Day is studied, however, Goeller and Braun emphasized that Valentine's Day is simply a plain, old-fashioned holiday that will never go out of style, since it's so associated with romance and love. A person is never too jaded to respond to these basic human feelings and needs, both agreed.

