

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Valentine Delivery

Saint Valentine is the name of as many as fourteen different martyred saints of ancient Rome. Not a very safe name to have back then. It is derived from *valens* (like Ritchie Valens, who – along with Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper – died in February). The name Valentine (or Valentinus) was popular in Late Antiquity (between the 2nd and 8th centuries) and signified “worthy, strong and powerful”. Such was the rock classic “La Bamba” by Ritchie Valens, with the driving Tremé beat of the incomparable New Orleans session drummer, Earl Palmer.

Valentine’s Day celebrates that day when our love is “worthy, strong and powerful” and our hearts have that “driving beat” for someone special. The Saint Valentine we honor on February 14, first depicted in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* in 1493, was a Roman priest arrested during the reign of Emperor Claudius II, having been caught marrying young Christian couples in love. Condemned to death, he was beaten up badly with clubs, stoned and then – still alive – beheaded outside the Flaminian Gate. The date given for his martyrdom was some time between 269 and 273 AD.

Valentine’s execution coincided with the festival of *Lupercalia*, which was partly in honor of *Lupa*, the she-wolf that suckled the infant orphans Romulus and Remus, Rome’s founders. The festival was celebrated near the cave of *Lupercal* on the Palatine Hill (the central hill where Rome was traditionally founded), to expiate and purify new life in the Spring. The feast was also dedicated to Juno, the goddess of women and of fertility. *Lupercalia* was observed on February 13th through 15th to avert evil spirits and purify the city. *Lupercalia* subsumed *Februa* (also known as *Februatio*), an earlier-origin spring cleansing ritual held on the same date, which gives the month of February its name. According to Ovid, *Februa* is a Latin word referring to purification (particularly with washing or water) derives from an earlier Etruscan word referring to purging.

Plutarch described *Lupercalia*:

"*Lupercalia*, of which many write that it was anciently celebrated by shepherds, and has also some connection with the Arcadian *Lycaea*. At this time many of the noble youths and of the magistrates run up and down through the city naked, for sport and laughter striking those they meet with shaggy thongs. And many women of rank also purposely get in their way, and like children at school present their hands to be struck, believing that the pregnant will thus be helped in delivery, and the barren to pregnancy."

The earlier Arcadian festival involved the worship of the *Lycaean Pan*, the Greek equivalent of the horned Roman god *Faunus*. These "shaggy thongs" were cut from the skins of the sacrificial victims, which were called *februa*. The naked celebrants dressed themselves in the skins of the sacrificed goats and ran round the walls of the old Palatine city. The young women would line up along the route to receive lashes from these whips. As Plutarch mentioned, this was supposed to ensure fertility, prevent sterility in women and ease the pains of childbirth. Some scholars associate the Latin word for fever (*febris*) with this idea of purification or purging, due to the sweating often observed in association with fevers.

The historian Justin writes of an image of "the *Lycaean* god, whom the Greeks call *Pan* and the Romans *Lupercus*," naked but for his goatskin girdle, which stood in the *Lupercal*. There, on the Ides of February (in February the Ides occur on the 13th), two goats and a dog were sacrificed, and salt mealcakes prepared by the Vestal Virgins were burnt. Goats were sacrificed because *Lupercus* was a god of shepherds, and the dog was a protector of the flock.

On the eve of the festival of *Lupercalia* the names of young Roman girls were written on slips of paper and placed into jars. The young man would draw a girl's name by chance and partner up for the duration of the festival. Sometimes these pairings lasted the whole year, and often, the young participants would fall in love and later marry.

After Pope Gelasius I set aside St. Valentine's feast day in 496, the martyred saint gradually became adopted as the patron saint of lovers. In time, his canonical realm extended to include epilepsy, fainting, plague and greeting card manufacturers (which brings us to the first written Valentine card).

The "poetical or amorous address" (or first Valentine card) is traditionally attributed to Charles, duc d'Orléans (1394 – 1465) in 1415 while imprisoned in the Tower of London after the Battle of Agincourt. Prisons, it seems, played a large part in the history of Valentine's Day. While locked up for a quarter of a century (things like

that happen in a Hundred Years' War), Charles, passed his time by writing romantic verses for his wife back in France, Bonne d'Armagnac. Many of the Duke's poems still exist and can be viewed among the royal papers in the British Museum. One of his missives even refers to her as "*ma très douce Valentinée*" (my very sweet Valentine). When Charles returned at last to France, his wife had died, but he began anew. He married again to Marie of Clèves, and their son succeeded Charles as Duke of Orléans in 1465. He later became King of France as Louis XII.

Paper Valentines came along in the 1500s, being exchanged in Europe in place of Valentine gifts and oral or musical valentine greetings. They were very popular in England. Practical "how to" books of sentimental poems were later offered to help lovers express their emotions. One published in 1797 was called "The Young Man's Valentine Writer". From this it was an easy step to ready-printed Valentine cards with verse or general declarations of love. Mass production of Valentine cards truly increased around the beginning of the 20th century. As for the 21st century, the Internet made it possible to send out e-Valentine cards (15 million in 2010), which - together with printed cards and those exchanged - would add up to over one billion valentines sent each February.

Back in New Orleans in 1855, the *Daily Delta* advertised where lovers could obtain "Valentines! Valentines!!":

"Valentines from the well-known manufacturer, F. W. Strong, New York, comprising the most Superb Assortment ever offered to Dealers, at New York Cash prices. Samples are now ready to be seen at the Printers' Warehouse, No. 105 Poydras street."

The newspaper also extolled the joys of an 1855 Crescent City Valentine's Day:

"Welcome most joyous of festal morns, when fair maidens and gallant youths, decked in their sunniest smiles, come forth to seek their loves. Cupid, who since the birth of man, has never idly rested on his bow one single hour, is ever on this day most active and sends forth his arrows in all quarters. Valentines are Cupid's arrows, and when placed near the bosom of a gentle maid, enter right soon into her fond heart. Send valentines, then, gay youths, to all dear maidens, and rest assured that all the sad havoc they may cause in their hearts, will be nothing in comparison to the mischief ladies' bright eyes effect each day on us, who foolishly do bride ourselves on being of the sterner sex."

One bit of lovemaking got out of hand on Valentine's Eve in 1855 (or, more accurately, nine months before). About 9 o'clock that night a watchman on Julia Street found a child "wrapped up in an old woolen

shawl", not more than two or three days old, set down upon the doorsteps of "house No. 226, between Carondelet and Baronne streets". "It was crying right lustily, and seemed to be very hungry." The little foundling was brought to the First District Station house, where Captain Moynan made "some very commendable efforts in the baby-talking line, to put it to sleep." Interestingly, had the baby been a boy, "St. Valentine should have been the name". But "out of respect for the locality in which it was found," the *Daily Delta* insisted, "the baby must, of course, be called Julia de Baronne Carondelet".

Sometimes Valentines were delivered in the form of musical compositions. According to Eliza Ripley in her "Social Life in Old New Orleans", A composer named Lehman's work, "La Valentine Polka" which Ripley termed "another charming, catchy dance piece" was dedicated to Miss Anais Boudousquie. Ripley continued, "The fashion of dedicating bits of music to some well-known person – need not be a musician, either, but a body of some note – has passed away with the one-button glove and the green *barège* veil of sixty years ago."

Barège (named after a town in southern France) is a sheer fabric constructed in a leno weave of silk warp and cotton or worsted filling, often used to make veils and dresses. A leno, or gauze weave, is a weave structure in which paired warp yarns are intertwined in a series of figure eights where filling yarn is passed through to produce a firm, open mesh.

One New Orleans "Valentine" was actually born in Reserve, Louisiana, and came to the Crescent City in his youth. Kid Thomas Valentine, described by the *New York Times* as "the last of the 'roughhouse' trumpet players and longtime leader of the Preservation Hall jazz band", died in 1987 at age 91. Always playing in a hot, often percussive style, Valentine toured for the Hall in Europe and Russia.

Better a New Orleans Valentine than a Chicago one. Al Capone's gang planned to wipe out Bugs Moran and his North Side Irish gang. Valentine's Day 1929, Moran was on his way to the garage at 2122 North Clark Street where the killing took place, but turned back when he saw someone dressed as a policeman (the disguise of the killers) and escaped. Seven were killed in the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre.

A more devout Irishman was responsible for Saint Valentine's present location. The mortal remains of Saint Valentine have been resting in a Dublin church since 1836. The year before, noted Irish Carmelite Preacher Father John Spratt had been in Rome. While in the Holy City he was asked to preach at the famous Jesuit Church, the *Gesu*. His reputation preceded him and the people of Rome flocked to hear his inspiring words. So impressed was Pope Gregory XVI that he presented Father Spratt with the remains of Saint Valentine as a

reward for his good works. The Church on Whitefriar Street in Dublin was delighted to receive them, but after a time they were forgotten. A casket containing the martyr's remains was lost in a cupboard of the church until its rediscovery in the 1950s. Today the shrine of Saint Valentine in the Carmelite Church on Whitefriar Street is a popular place of pilgrimage for young lovers and old romantics alike.

In New Orleans, occasionally Mardi Gras and Valentine's Day occur on the same day. In 1956 and 1961, February 14th was also Fat Tuesday, but this won't happen again until 2040. As for 1855, Mardi Gras Day was on the 21st of February with Valentine's Day also on a Tuesday (exactly one week before). The calendar for 2012, with Carnival on the 21st, is exactly the same!

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