February 14th, the Birth of Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day came to be the worldwide phenomenon celebrated by many today (and rejected by some, yes opposition to valentine's day does exist) because of several leaps of seemingly unrelated events from different centuries, with different historical figures, and by different recountings.

To summarize the whole history of Valentine's Day, it involves the martyrdom of at least one Saint Valentine, the attempt to replace ancient Rome's paganistic matchmaking ritual, and a poem written by an English poet, and then it took off from there. What's interesting is, that Valentine's Day's association with romantic love was not a thing until the English poet, with a very interesting take, in my opinion, made the connection between the two in one of his works.

The OG of the namesake of this day, as historians tried to figure out, is hard to pinpoint exactly. The most popular contender is the one Saint Valentine who was serving as a priest in the 3rd century in Rome. While the full record of him had been destroyed, we know some of his life stories. He was said to be performing marriage in secret for Roman soldiers who were not allowed to get married at that time–because the Emperor said so and he had the power to be obeyed without question. At one point Saint Valentine was brought in front of the Roman Emperor Claudius II himself, and had a conversation where the Emperor tried to convert the Saint to paganism, to which Valentine declined, leading to him being sentenced to execution for his "crimes" of conducting illegal marriage–and for disrespecting the Emperor too most likely, I'd assume the King wouldn't like being refused of his order after all.

During his stay in prison, however, this legendary chad performed a miracle instead, resulting in the immediate conversion to Christianity of an entire household. The jailer, named Asterius, had a blind daughter named Julia, and Valentine was said to have healed her eyes. The day before his execution, Valentine sent a letter to Julia that was signed with "From Your Valentine", which is admittedly very romantic of him if you ask me.

Saint Valentine was executed on–you guess it–February the 14th, *maybe* in the year 269 or 270 AD. He was then commemorated in the calendar of saints courtesy of Pope Gelasius I in 496. This is the point where February 14th was celebrated as St. Valentine's Day as a way to honor him.

Coincidentally and curiously, there was another figure who also went by the name of Valentine, a bishop of Terni in central Italy, who was also executed by the Emperor on, *wanna guess?*–dramatic pause–you're correct, February the 14th. On what year exactly is apparently a matter of debate, although it was believed to be within the same century as the other Valentine. Both Valentines were even buried in the same location known as Via Flaminia in Rome.

The next big event that historically got associated with Valentine's Day is the pagan festival of ancient Rome known as Lupercalia. At the end of the 5th century, the Christian Church intended to replace the pagan festival dedicated to a Roman god and 2 Roman founders celebrated on February the 15th–or on the 13th to 14th depending on which source you read–, by opting to celebrate St. Valentine's feast day on February 14th instead.

This Lupercalia festival was quite interesting, if not gross and a bit disturbing in my opinion. The festival required a Roman priest to sacrifice a goat and a dog, and then the men would proceed to hit women using the hides of the animals they just slew with the blood dripping from it. The women were rather welcoming about it too, given the belief that it would invite fertility *if you know what I mean*. The festival also included ancient Roman-style matchmaking, where the men would randomly pull out a woman's name from a jar which then led to the pairs *doing things*, where apparently most matches ended up in marriage eventually, which I guess was good for them *huh*.

The church at that time wanted to remove the ritual, hence why Pope Gelasius officially declared, basically saying, "Let's honor St. Valentine's martyrdom instead of doing this vulgar, very un-Christian event." So that was how St. Valentine's Day was officially made as a day to be celebrated in the Christian calendar.

You see, at this point, St. Valentine's Day was still a means to honor the death of a Christian martyr, while also conveniently replacing a pagan ritual at the same time, so it got nothing to do with romance or love or much less chocolate and flower buckets.

It only started to be associated with the *oh-such-beautiful-romance-this-is-I-cannot-be-without-you-my-darling* love when Geoffrey Chaucer, the English poet living during 1343-1400 in Britain wrote a poem that essentially strung together the celebration of St. Valentine's Day with the common belief–common in French and England that is–of birds' mating season starting around the same time.

It was written in his poem titled "Parliament of Fowls", written to honor the anniversary of the engagement between King Richard II of England–who was fifteen at the time–and Anne of Bohemia–also fifteen, *surprise surprise*. The matter of the Royal Family™ could get wild like that, that was not even close to the wildest thing to have occurred within the walls of royalty's mighty castles, I can assure you. Anyway. We were talking about the earliest documented source of how St. Valentine's Day came to be associated with romance, *focus*, in which the specific line is as follows:

"For this was on seynt Valentynes day
Whan every foul cometh there to chese his make…"

For your easier understanding, in modern English it read like this:

"For this was on Saint Valentine's Day

When every bird comes there to choose his match…"

Interestingly, despite writing the poem with the subject of the King's betrothal, and it may have sparked a new way of appreciating the day through the lens of romance, some people stated that the poem was actually an allegory filled with irony and satire of how courtly love is inauthentic. Chaucer himself was married to a woman that conveniently helped his social status and privilege, so I'd imagine *he knew* one thing or four about ingenuine love.

His social commentary on the royal court didn't matter, however. It was the first time–one that was documented anyway–that someone put two and two together basically, of the feast day from the Christian calendar to refer to the idea of the romantical bond. And the trend only continued on gaining more popularity, as Charles the Duke of Orleans–who wrote the oldest existing valentine to his wife while being held captive in the Tower of London in 1415–, Margery Brewes, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Edmund Spenser, and John Lydgate who was hired by King Henry V, to name a few, all wrote valentine's greetings or poems with romance inked within the lines.

It was around the 17th century that celebrating Valentine's Day the way that we do today began to get popular, starting in Great Britain, followed by the rest of Europe, then keep spreading everywhere. People started to exchange small tokens as gifts or valentine letters between friends and lovers, and it would eventually make way for the birth of new valentine's goods in the market as well. *Welcome to capitalism, Saint Valentine.*

February since then would always be remembered as the month of love–all pinks and dripping chocolate and buckets of flowers and love poems and buck naked cherub shooting arrows left and right. One can't resist the power of Cupid, or so they say. Especially Cupids during February who I imagine would probably be pissed that they have to work overtime now with the new arrangement. Press C to pay respect to the cherubim.

References

Gershon, Livia. 2019. "Who Was the Real St. Valentine? - HISTORY." History.com.

   https://www.history.com/news/real-st-valentine-medieval.

History.com Editors. 2022. "Valentine's Day 2022: Origins, Background & Traditions | HISTORY

   - HISTORY." History.com.

   https://www.history.com/topics/valentines-day/history-of-valentines-day-2.

Hoccleve, Thomas. n.d. "Valentine's Day." Wikipedia. Accessed February 14, 2022.

   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentine%27s_Day.

Seipel, Arnie. 2011. "The Dark Origins Of Valentine's Day." NPR.

https://www.npr.org/2011/02/14/133693152/the-dark-origins-of-valentines-day.

Woolf, Virginia. 2014. "Geoffrey Chaucer - Canterbury Tale, Books & Poems." Biography.

https://www.biography.com/writer/geoffrey-chaucer.