

## VALENTINES DAY IN THE 1860s by Leslie Korenko

*The first mention of Valentine appeared in The Islander in 1861 – “St. Valentines Day passed off very briskly. We learn that 50 Valentines passed through the Post Office on that day. We went down after one but were doomed to disappointment and were very much surprised to hear that we wrote this Valentine and we wrote that. We must have had our hands full to have written 40 or 50 Valentines besides attending our Editorial duties. We can assure our readers that Editors have enough to account for besides manufacturing Valentines.” F. Kelley and E. Huntington were the editors of this issue of the Islander.*

*The Post Office, established in 1854, was located in the Store on the Corner, also known as The Lodge.*



### THE HISTORY OF VALENTINES

*The island Store was always willing to provide the community with the latest items and when valentines became popular, Kelley filled the need. “As St. Valentines Day is near at hand and as most of the young people of the Island are interested, or hope to be, in that Day, it may not be uninteresting to them to know how the custom of sending love letters &c on that day came about.*

A valentine according to Watton is ‘a sweetheart or choice made on St. Valentine’s Day.’ According to Burton [it] is ‘A letter containing professions of love or affections, sent from one young person to another on St. Valentine’s Day.’ Valentines of the present day will scarcely answer to either of the above definitions of that word; the latter however, comes the nearest to it.

It was a very old notion alluded to by Shakespeare, that on this day, birds begin to select their mates for the coming season. From this fact probably arose the custom of sending on this day formerly, letters ‘containing professions of love and affection’ but latterly, some ridiculous ones of verse and colored wood cuts.

From what it was formerly, it is quite easy to see how by some roguish young fellow writing love letters to a half dozen or more young ladies the same day, the custom reached its present ridiculous condition. For who has not noticed now natural it is for young ladies now days to give the young men as good as they sent according to the best of their abilities. Such being their desire, in the same course of reasoning, it is easy to see how they may at times find themselves unable to accomplish that end in which case they would be obliged to call in the assistance of others. And as is well known by business men, no considerable demand can long exist without a supply.

So a demand for the assistance of others cannot long exist without a supply of the same. This demand has been supplied by numerous wholesale toy merchants, who by constantly studying the wants of their numerous patrons, are able to give you a Valentine or Valentines, either comic or sentimental, illustrated by colored wood cuts to suit any case which is likely to exist, and all that is left to be done is to go to the retailers and make a selection as well best suits your case.

This well known fact of business men has not escaped the observation of the Fat Man on the Corner, for seeing the wants of the Islanders in this article of traffic has, we understand,

procured a supply sufficient for any demand likely to be made upon him, which he keeps for inspection and sale at the old stand on the corner of West Lake and Division Streets.

Here then is a chance for all you bashful young men and ladies to express your 'Feelinks' by making a selection from this vast assortment of sentiment expressed by printer's ink and colored wood cuts..."

*The Fat Man on the Corner was actually Alfred S. Kelley  
He often poked fun at his own weight.*



*In 1864 we find out a bit more about St. Valentine himself - "A great and splendid variety!!! - The day of the honored saint is almost at hand. Hopeful day! Joys. What pleasures hail this advent. The bashful youth rejoices in the opportunity thus offered of telling his fair one how much he loves her for the trifling cost of 10¢. The old maid with well feigned modesty, singles out the greenest stripling of the neighborhood and unconsciously portrays, through this source, the wretchedness of celibacy and suggests that he had better propose and avoid the horrors of such a fate. In what way can a bashful youth or dilapidated old maid spend their money better than to make an investment in Valentines at the store of the Fat Man on the Corner?"*

*"This week like all others commenced with Sunday which, however, had the advantage of being St. Valentines Day. We were wholly and entirely ignored in the distribution of those choice luxuries and therefore cannot speak from experience. But from hearsay and what we have seen received by others, we should say the Valentines in circulation this year were decidedly of a mixed character. Some of them so tender and loving that the recipients felt like 'lifting themselves by their boot straps to eternal Glory,' and some so ludicrous as to produce hysterics, while some, we are sorry to say (in the language of the poet) 'Were black and some were blacker, and some were meaner'n plug tobacker.'"*

*Apparently, a great number of young folks took advantage of this special day as a "spirited exchange of valentines has been going on the past week and some of them have been very pretty. Quite an improvement over the great outlandish pictures which have heretofore been sold at the firm of A. S. Kelley. As there has been some inquiry as to how the custom originated, we propose to give the history so far as we can from the authority we have."*

*Humorous valentines were "so ludicrous as to produce hysterics" and others, like this one, were quite mean. We know what you are - Spiteful!*



*Others were quite pretty like this one “My Dearest Miss, I send thee a kiss.”*



### **WHO WAS ST. VALENTINE?**

*As was often the case, this brief article lead to a history lesson, from which we learn about St. Valentine.* “According to Ecclesiastical writers, St. Valentine lived in Rome A. D. 270. He was a man of exceeding great charity and love. He was early canonized for these virtues and there being a custom during the month of February in Rome to put ladies names in a box and the gentleman who drew the name of a fair one was to be her beau during the year, and partly because the birds were said to choose their mates the 14<sup>th</sup> of that month, that day was chosen in honor of him.

The 14<sup>th</sup> of February has been kept differently at different times and places. Sometimes two boxes would be used, one to put ladies names in, the other gentlemen’s names; the ladies drawing from the box with the gentleman’s names and vice versa. According to Sir Walter Scott, the 14<sup>th</sup> of February was celebrated in England by the gentlemen making calls upon the ladies,

and the one who called first on that day on any lady was to be her beau as much as if they were engaged during the year. In our younger days it was the fashion to write valentines and it was rutable to write as love-sick verses as it was possible to make. It was ungentlemanly or unladylike to take notice of such epistles even if you could find out the author. Every precaution was taken to prevent the one it was sent to knowing who it came from by sending to some distant post office and disguising the hand writing.

The first we ever saw of printed valentines was a few lines of poetry printed on neat note paper. The poetry was mostly a love-sick affair and many of them no better than most anyone could make and not take them long. The next edition were embellished and those got to be too common so now we have the sentiment beautifully printed on lace paper and lots of cupids, birds, and flowers over them, which are very beautiful. They most make us wish we were young so as to get one of these valentines.”

*A great and splendid variety of Valentines were available on the island. Popular valentines were printed on lace paper with cupids, birds, fruit and flowers.*



*From the book Kelleys Island 1862-1865 - The Civil War, the Island Soldiers & the Island Queen*