

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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1992 could be a year for love in leaps and bounds
By Joe Getty

My story today is about a Leap Year tradition of old and of new. It is a tradition with roots from ancient times but which has persisted to modern day.

This ancient custom provides that single women can propose to unmarried men beginning on Feb. 29 and continuing throughout Leap Year. In fact, laws were enacted during the Middle Ages that granted the right to women to propose during Leap Year.

The tradition also provided penalties for men who declined a woman's leap year proposal. In England, a single man who refused a marriage proposal was to grant a kiss and a silk dress or a pair of gloves to the woman who proposed.

References to these traditions appear in the late 19th century newspapers of Carroll County. The *American Sentinel*, published in Westminster, frequently noted during the 1880s and '90s that Leap Year provided a special opportunity to the single women of the county. It defined Leap Year in its edition of Jan. 14, 1888: "Leap Year does not begin until the 29th of February and consists of 10 months."

The local newspapers also refer to "Leap Year parties" as a tradition that occurred every four years. These parties were organized by women and the theme included a role-reversal for the evening.

An example follows as reported in the *American Sentinel* of Jan. 7, 1888: "Leap Year Party. The first leap-year party of the season was held at the residence of Mr. A. H. Huber, East Main street, on Monday evening, Jan. 2, in honor of Winter D. Huber. The ladies escorted the gentlemen to the party in regular leap-year style...At 10 o'clock refreshments were served in abundance, and a very pleasant evening was spent."

One hundred years ago, the tradition of Leap Year parties was especially popular. The newspapers of 1892 contain several articles from communities throughout Carroll County describing these social events.

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The *American Sentinel* of Jan. 16, 1892, describes a Westminster party: "A Leap-Year Dance. A number of the young ladies of Westminster gave a leap-year dance at the City Hotel, on Saturday evening last. It was a novel and pleasant affair, the entire arrangement having been in charge of the ladies, who acted as escorts to the gentlemen, asked them to dance, and furnished the refreshments. Notwithstanding the reversal of the usual order in the relations of the ladies and gentlemen on dancing occasions, both adapted themselves to the charge without apparent difficulty, and, as was remarked by one young gentleman, while it was odd it was thoroughly enjoyable."

While we think of Leap Year as occurring on Feb. 29, these Leap Year parties were held throughout the year. One celebration was held in conjunction with Fourth of July festivities and reported in the *American Sentinel* of July 9, 1892: "A most successful leap year dance was given at Winchester Place, in honor of the National Anniversary, on Monday evening last. The grounds were beautifully illuminated with Japanese lanterns and presented a very attractive appearance. Preceding the opening of the dance a fine display of fire-works was given. Misses Mary B. Shellman, Maggie Baumgartner, Lottie Moore and Lizzie Irwin constituted the committee of arrangements."

My story now jumps into recent history, actually as part of my personal history. During the Leap Year of 1980, I was working in Washington D.C., for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. While at work on Feb. 29, I received a Western Union Telegram that read: "HAPPY LEAP YEAR DAY. WILL YOU MARRY ME. I LOVE YOU ALWAYS." Being the historian that I am, I could not refuse. And that's the rest of the story.