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Speak Up: It's Leap Year!

Lynn E. Niedermeier
Western Kentucky University, lynn.niedermeier@wku.edu

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One of the most significant occurrences of the bissextile day, better known as February 29, was in the year 2000. Our computers had successfully made the transition from 1999, but experts still feared the effect of this extra day on the world's digital infrastructure.

Tradition, however, tells us that leap year has created even greater fears in the unmarried male. As Western's earliest student magazine, *The Elevator*, reminded readers in 1916, February 29 marked a year in which "hopeful ladies are supposed to take bold steps," defy the rules of courtship, and propose marriage to the object of their affection.

Some say that this custom originated in fifth-century Ireland, where St. Patrick allowed women to take the initiative every four years after St. Brigid complained to him that they were having to wait too long for husbands. Others credit a Scottish law enacted in 1288 under the unmarried Queen Margaret, which allowed a maiden "liberty to bespeak ye man she likes" during leap year. The knave who refused to marry her and could not prove his engagement to another was assessed a fine.

If anyone pointed out to Western's women students that St. Brigid was still a child when St. Patrick died—or that Queen Margaret was only eight when she died—or that legal historians have searched the books in vain for the much-cited Scottish law—they simply ignored these churlish attempts to limit their social calendars. *The Elevator* warned of actual reports confirming that "some maiden has taken unto herself a husband," but leap year proposals to a young man on the Hill more commonly took the form of an invitation to a tea, dance or party. With the ladies in charge, he could expect to have his dance card filled, counseled one young woman in 1932, only if he wore his best suit, plenty of sweet-smelling hair tonic, and a smile.

Western's first campus-wide leap year dance, sponsored by the *Talisman* yearbook staff and the senior class, occurred in March, 1936. The organizers gave women the traditional privilege of choosing their partners for the first half of the dance, but restored rights to the men in the second half. Men who returned to the campus in large numbers after World War II encountered even more ardent leap year rituals. At the 1948 dance, a sophomore football player defeated nine other candidates for the title of Leap Year Sweetheart and at the 1952 festivities the Most Eligible Bachelor, accompanied by two male attendants, received his crown.

In 1937, cartoonist Al Capp added a distinctly American flavor to the leap year tradition. On November 15, readers of the comic strip "L'il Abner" learned of the predicament of Sadie Hawkins, severely challenged in the matter of physical beauty and, accordingly, unable to attract a husband. The next day her father lined up the local bachelors, then sent them running with a shot from his pistol. Another shot sent Sadie in pursuit of the slowest among them, who, when caught, was obliged to take her hand in marriage.

Sadie Hawkins Day quickly spread from the fictional town of Dogpatch to college campuses across the country. In 1940, Western students dressed as hillbilly characters from “L’il Abner” enlivened Homecoming festivities with a chase down the football field (now the site of the Ivan Wilson Center). The 1956 event also began on the football field, with permission granted the women “to chase your dreamboat into Potter Hall should he seek a haven there.” The junior class sponsored the Sadie Hawkins Dance, which featured prizes for the best costumes and instant wedding ceremonies performed by “Marryin’ Sam.” Though Sadie Hawkins Day became an annual affair, unmarried males still faced double jeopardy every fourth year. Female students whose dreamboats outran them at the “Leap Year-Sadie Hawkins Dance” in February, 1964 could try again at the November dance after purchasing tickets at any women’s residence hall.

Before we assume that more liberal attitudes toward female initiative have now made the leap year tradition unnecessary at Western, we must consider that it has long been regarded as a harmless fiction. Why would a clever woman wait until leap year anyway, observed the *College Heights Herald* in March, 1940, when she could “steer a proposal” out of her victim, almost without his knowing? For even longer, however, women have pointed to the greater fiction in the tradition, namely that they spend every waking hour plotting to trap a husband. If that were the case, asked one, why do they turn down so many of those proposals they supposedly “steer” out of bewildered men?

Perhaps it was actually a man, wishing to avoid the complexities of courtship and the risk of rejection, who asked St. Patrick to let the women bespeak themselves. As an anxious poet wrote in 1908 of his love interest at Potter College for Young Ladies, Western’s predecessor on the Hill:

I have just one chance, this much is clear,
Whisper to her it is now leap year.

Sources:

College Heights Herald

The Elevator, Western Kentucky University Archives

The Green and Gold (Potter College), Western Kentucky University Archives

Park City Daily News (Bowling Green, Ky.)