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# Leap Year: Chance, Chase, or Curse?

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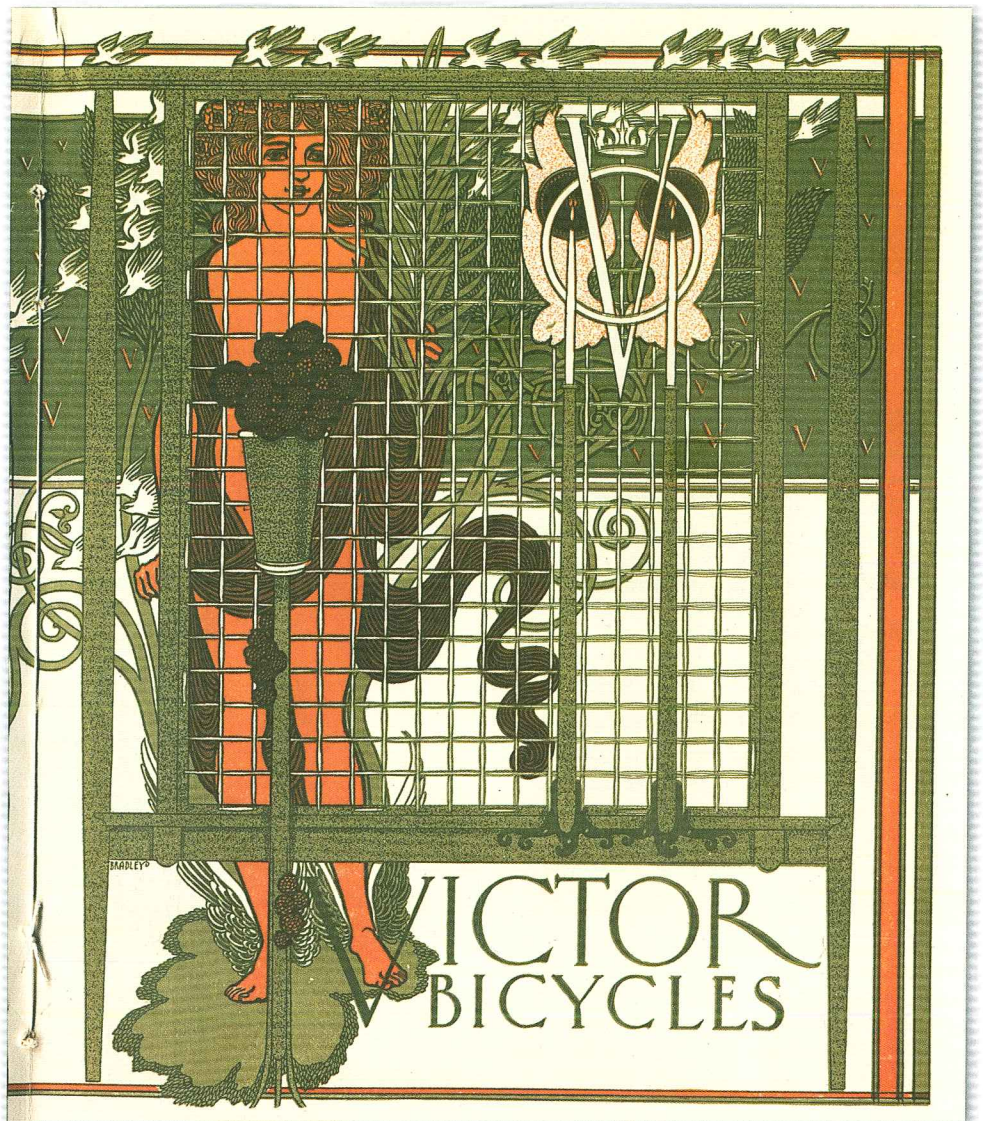
## Bicycle Trade Catalogs

BY TALIA S. COUTIN

Before the 'Bicycle Boom' the bicycle was a luxury item with limited reach but, by 1896, America was home to an estimated four million "wheelmen" and "wheelwomen." How and why did bicycles take the country by storm? The 'Golden Age of the Bicycle' coincided with the 'Golden Age of Advertising Art.' Austin Charles Bates, a pioneering adman of the time, estimated that bicycle firms spent more than one billion dollars in 1897. "And yet it paid," he wrote. "Everyone was bicycle crazy..."

Images of wheelmen and wheelwomen appeared everywhere in print, including on products that had nothing to do with bicycling. They graced posters and postcards, magazine covers and cigarette labels, sheet music and card decks – advertising bicycling, if not a particular bicycle brand.

Through trade catalogs, companies tried to distinguish their brands with clever copy and alluring graphic designs. Companies spoke directly to consumers, offering them commercial art they could keep. Examining the material, visual, and textual aspects of catalogs from two of America's leading bicycle manufacturers, the Overman Wheel Company and the Pope Manufacturing Company, reveals how advertising strategies developed between 1881 and 1899 to whet the consumer appetite for bicycles.



*A beautiful nymph with spaghetti hair gazes behind a screen in a wildly verdant setting that has nothing to do with bicycles. The competing linear and the curvilinear elements define the unique Art Nouveau style of graphic artist Will H. Bradley, who also designed posters for the Overman Wheel Co. Bradley, lithograph, catalog for Victor Bicycles, Overman Wheel Co., Cambridge: University Press, 1899.*

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# Leap Year: Chance, Chase, or Curse?

BY SUE LYNN MCDANIEL

Valentine's Day is typically thought of as the occasion for young males to propose their intentions to young females, but the Leap Year custom allowed women to propose marriage to the man of their choice. This gender reversal was often unwelcome to women overly familiar with the terms "spinsters" or "old maids." Portrayals of unmarried females as undesirable dominated the literature, cartoons, and postcards from 1888 to 1916. "Vinegar valentines" or "comic valentines" were guilty of negative depictions of old maids. Leap Year's influence can be found in correspondence, newspapers, sheet music, dance cards and invitations, but nowhere was it as prominent as during the Golden Age of Postcards.

Ebenezer Cobham Brewer of Cambridge was chiefly responsible for perpetuating the Leap Year myth in his *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, Giving the Derivation, Source, or Origin of Common Phrases, Allusions and Words that have a Tale to Tell*. Since 1870, Brewer's story that "ladies propose, and if not accepted, claim a silk gown" continued the legend that, in the fifth century, St. Bridget of Ireland approached St. Patrick about the mutiny at the nunnery over which she presided where the females were claiming the right of "popping the question." After discussion the duo agreed on every leap year as it was already the odd year, having one extra day.

*Encyclopedia Britannica* (13<sup>th</sup> edition) and other sources state that, in 1288, unmarried Queen Margaret of Scotland made the custom into law: "Ordonit that during ye reign of hir maist blisset Majestie Margaret, ilk maiden ladee of baith high and lowe estait shall hae libertie to bespoken ye man she likes – albeit he refuses to talk he shall be muicted in ye sum ane pundis orless." In modern English, a man who refused a woman's proposal during leap year was fined £1 or less, as his estate may be; except and always if he can make it appear that he is betrothed to another, he then shall be free. The encyclopedia adds that "a similar [law was written] in France a few years later, and in Italy in the fifteenth century." One condition, seldom quoted, placed on the female was that she had to wear a red petticoat, with one to two inches visible under her dress. Over time an additional penalty required the offender to give a silk gown or pair of gloves and a kiss to the lady. In 2000, the National Archives of Scotland, Scottish Archive Network and Scottish Records Association researched the tradition. Their investigation found no such decree and problems with the text.

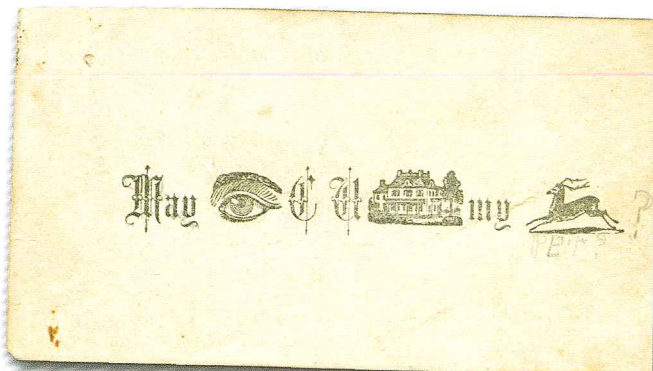


Figure 1. *May I see you home my dear?* - a rebus acquaintance card. (All illustrations courtesy of Library Special Collections, Western Kentucky University.)

But for most ephemera enthusiasts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the lack of documentation makes little difference. Like so many parts of pop culture, it is the mystery that makes the widespread references to a Leap Year proposal's validity intriguing.

In the 1870s and 1880s when etiquette books forbade men from approaching single women without a formal introduction, American calling card manufacturers created a novelty variety as a tool for less formal males to approach less formal females. Known as an "acquaintance card," an "escort card," or an "invitation card," this illustrated card's message was brief (figure 1). Even more rare were the "Leap Year Compliments" cards created for women to use in making their marriage proposals. Bachelors without the

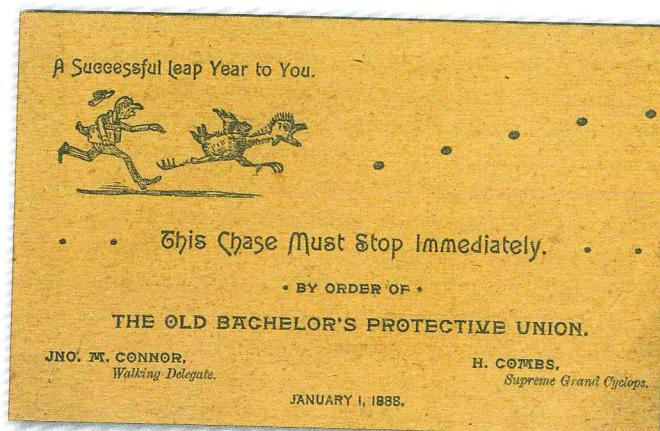


Figure 2. Phineas Hampton "Hamp" Combs had started courting his future bride in 1884. They would marry in 1892.



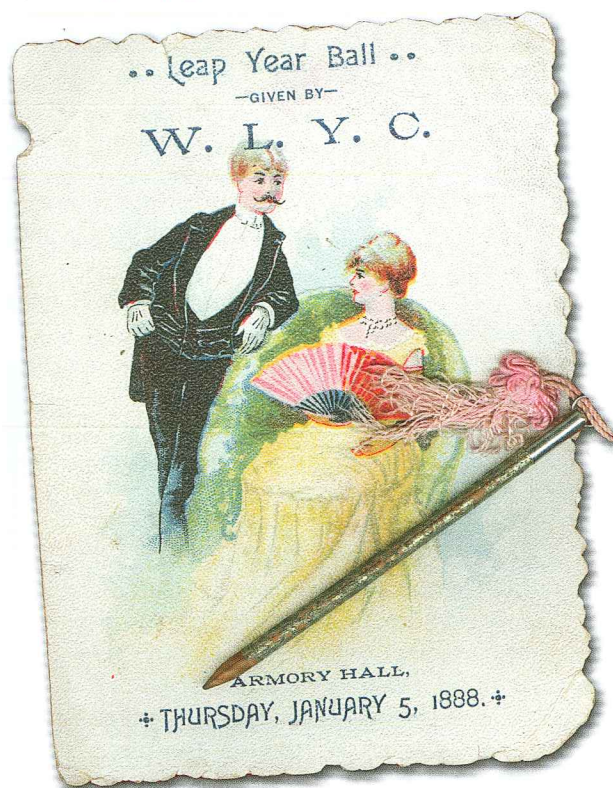


Figure 3. Dance card from one of three known 1888 Leap Year events held in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

means to purchase such cards wrote invitations on slips of paper that were often preserved by maidens as proof of the females' popularity.

By 1904, as more Americans came to accept the evolving roles of women in society, advice columnist Dorothy Dix considered single females ill-equipped to propose marriage and wrote a lengthy article entitled "The Leap Year Proposal." Dix cautioned against proposing in writing because men could say "NO" more easily by pen than in person, making postcards a poor choice for any woman seriously committed to seizing the opportunity. Dix wrote: "The Leap Year girl, however, who proposes to propose must use great tact and discretion, and above all she must study the character of the man whose hand and heart she desires to win, and she must be wary about choosing the psychological place and moment." Dix concluded that Leap Year women should never "propose marriage to a man unless she can take care of him in the same style in which his father has been accustomed to support him."

The citizens of Bowling Green, Kentucky anticipated and discussed Leap Year 1888. Twenty-two year old Lelia Gossom wrote in her diary on January 6, 1887 that she was "almost an old maid but comfort myself with the thought that next year is a Leap year." In 1888, Bowling Green bachelors joined forces and created a card reading: "A Successful Leap Year to You. This chase must stop immediately by order of the Old Bachelor's Protective Union" (figure 2). Leap

Year parties were held locally on January 5<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> and December 27<sup>th</sup> (figure 3). Of the latter occasion, the newspaper wrote: "Many were the lessons taught the boys by the fair ones in Gallantry, attentiveness and easy grace."

In 1898, authors Adelia & Lina Beard defined the gender roles at Leap Year parties in *How to Amuse Yourself and Others: American Girls Handy Book*: "the girls take upon themselves all the duties and courtesies properly belonging to the boys."

An unmarried secretary of a Bowling Green, Kentucky, Sunday School class published a poem in tribute to the other class officers, but good naturedly included a joke directed at herself:

Here's to our Secretary, good people it is I,  
Who note[s] with horror the year 1908 is going by,  
For young ladies, old maids and all, do you hear?  
This is the passing away of another Leap Year.

From coast to coast, American newspapers wrote about Leap Year. The *Los Angeles Times* quoted nine newspapers' comments relevant to Leap Year on February 5, 1896. The *New York Times* reported of a Plainfield, New Jersey, Justice of the Peace who issued a proclamation in 1904 that from "on or after Sunday, February 14, he

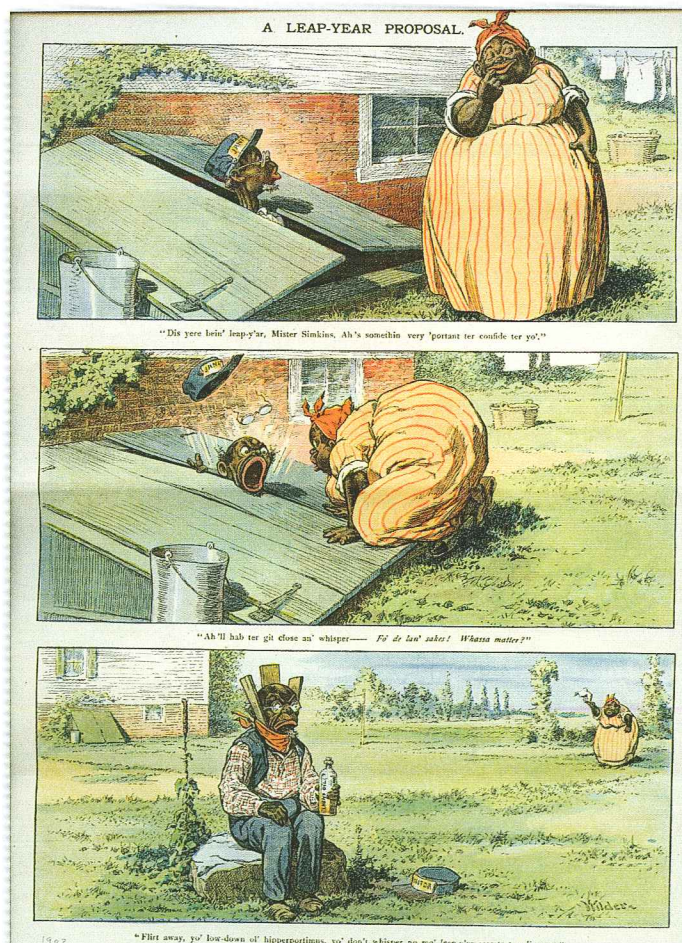


Figure 4. "A Leap Year Proposal," Puck [American humor magazine], [February?] 1902. Bowling Green, Kentucky.





Figure 5. Note the distinctive McLoughlin Brothers of New York trademark in the lower corner.

will marry free of charge all couples coming to him within the next fourteen days in cases where the bride has taken advantage of her prerogative and made the proposition, and he will not only marry free of charge, but will pay the marriage license." At the reception of a 1904 Leap Year wedding, at least twenty young women and at least ten young men accepted marriage proposals: "Folks may talk about their leap-year parties, but there was never a leap-year party that caused such an outburst of 'Will-you-be-mine?'" as that brought on by the Columbo wedding."

Thus far only one comic strip has come to light with a leap year depiction. Published by *Puck* magazine in 1902, it also is a rare example of the use of African Americans. True to the period, it unfortunately depicts the ethnic population with the stereotypes of that generation (figure 4). A contrast in perspectives of single females, Elizie Crisler Segar's "fearless symbol of spinsterhood," Olive Oyl, undisputedly helped break ground in the comics: for the first time there was a woman who was seen as an independent person, tied to neither parents nor husband, and making her way in the world of work, charm, ingenuity, and more than a little nerve.

Music reflects the thinking of the period. The popularity of Leap Year is evident in the variety of sheet music titles published, including "Leap Year Has Come and Passed" (1876), "Coronation; or, Leap Year Waltzes" (1878), "Bachelor's Dream" (1879), "A Leap Year Vision" (1884), "Ah! This is Leap Year" (1884), "Greeting to Leap Year; Galop" (1884), "Leap Year Waltz" (1884), "Leap Year



Figure 6. This valentine copyrighted 1902 (when the recipient, an "old maid school teacher" was 31) was a clue that her diary would tell an unexpected story of courtship.

Mazurka" (1884), "The Trials of Leap Year" (1884), and "Monkey Doodle Dandy" (1908). The first title ends with: "Oh dear Leap Year Fiction, fable that just one leads to fickle frail and foolish deeds." The latter song includes the lyrics: "It was Leap Year in Monkey Land . . . There lived the King of monkey class, Bachelor so very shy, Until a maiden came, anxious to change her name..."

Valentines frequently commented on the inability of interested females to find a suitable mate. When McLoughlin Brothers, New York, released "To My Valentine, your fate is settled...to be an Old Maid you are destined for sure," it expressed what so many women past the age of 25 feared (figure 5). "Forlorn hope," illustrated by a single female unable to shoot an arrow into the target of a male's heart, told its recipient "the best that you will ever do, is - MISS." Copyrighted in the first leap year of the twentieth century, a valentine entitled "To My Valentine, The Flirt" (figure 6) was prophetic of its recipient's fate as was a social event that included "An Auction of Old Maids" (figure 7). The local newspapers, photographs and the local Baptist all-male Bethel College publications documented the popularity Miss Fannie Bryan described in her diary, but she confessed to her diary that she simply could not choose between her suitors.

In 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1916, at least 54 publishing houses flooded the market with Leap Year postcards. Taylor Platt & Company of New York created four sets of Leap Year cards. In 1908 and 1912, D. P. Crane's cards, vertical in orientation, each included a red heart in



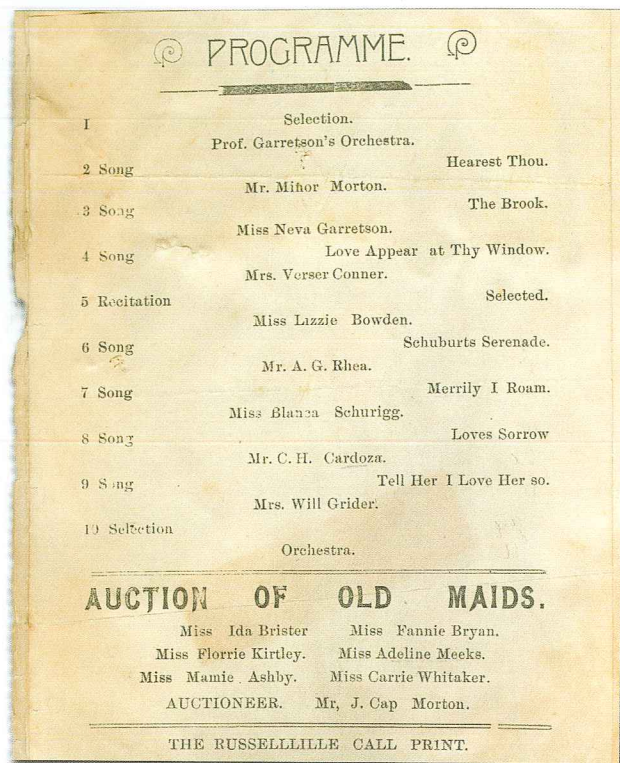


Figure 7. Unable to choose, Miss Fannie Bryan (1870-1965) lived with her parents and then alone. She taught first grade to three generations of children but leaving the teaching profession in order to marry was never discussed in her diary.

the background, the words "Leap-Year" at the top, and a fitting caption for the illustration. The popularity of the 1908 black & white photographic cards from the Acmeograph Company of Chicago, Illinois, led to a 1912 colored photograph series; each including a red heart with the words Leap-Year with the year in the upper right corner and their photographs' copyright by I. Grollman. Samson Company – whose cards featured girls in large hats – display two hearts pierced by an arrow and are vertical in orientation. P. Sander Company of New York published a "kids" series and a series of August Hutaf illustrations of beautiful women in 1908. Gibson Art Company copyrighted a series in 1911 with decorative borders and verses, but no illustrations. The E. Nash Company created the very popular 1908 Lemon series set that features ethnic stereotypes of hillbillies, the Irish, Germans and Jews (figure 8); and the 1912 Now or Never series with swastikas which at that time were associated with good luck.

Donald McGill, Fred Cavally, Clarence Victor Dwiggins (Dwig), and August Hutaf are but a few of the more than 17 talented illustrators of Leap Year postcards. Lance Thackeray created at least three series of cards for Raphael Tuck and Sons. Paul C. Koeber published one of the largest 1908 series, many signed by August Hutaf, and all with the company's distinctive PCK peacock logo on their backs (figure 9). Artist George Reiter Brill's "Leap Year Thoughts" series were etched from drawings and copyrighted in 1911. Although never illustrating a set of Leap Year cards, Bernhardt Wall linked women's suffrage and leap year with his famous card reading: "I would sooner be a leapyearettie than a howling suffragette."

Collectable sets often included many of the themes most prevalent in the cards. Although some depicted the males as pleased with the opportunity to be chosen by a female, overwhelmingly the cards illustrate either beautiful debutants or stereotypically withered, ugly, old maids in hot pursuit or laying traps for unsuspecting males. Quite often the males are tiny in stature compared to the women in pursuit. Amazingly few postcards indicate "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." Often the cards depict bashful men who need a woman to take the dominant role in the relationship, or as the cards state "wear the pants." In the worst cases, the males being lured into captivity are not desirable; examples include drunkards, railroad hobos, burglars, poor men and males lacking masculinity. Very few postcards depict willing bachelors or women empowered to choose between several suitable mates (figure 10).

Women offered bags of money, their hearts, and secure futures, while bachelors ban together with signs such as "bachelors protective union," "deaf, dumb and blind," and "I'm engaged." While women gathered guns, traps and other weapons or bait, some men sought out hiding places (in caves, in trees or as scarecrows), but the majority



Figure 8. Well-known illustrator and publisher of high quality holiday cards, E. Nash produced this popular Lemon series – any man would do.





Figure 9. Possibly an unsigned illustration by August Hutaf, this Paul C. Koebler publication sums up women's frustrations with the word "Brute!"

simply ran for their lives. Occasional postcards depict two women pulling on one man, warning "the Leap-year Girls have got their eyes on you." Overwhelmingly the question is "May I pop the?"

One of the more unusual postcards shows the "cause and effect of the leap year engagement ring." Using four images, beginning with the engagement ring on the left, the ring transforms into a horrified man with a large open mouth of protest. Beneath the illustrations are the words, "RING," "WRUNG," "STING," and "STUNG." A second card called "Evolution of a Leap Year Bell" is much more benign.

Some of the more popular sets are the 1908 "N 16" series by A. Q. Southwick, New York, many of which read "No Wedding Bells for Me!"; the "After Leap Year Series" by John O. Winsch Company, each with a small square illustrating cupid being booted away; cards illustrated by A. Hustaf, in which handsome men in top hats are pursued by well-dressed attractive women, published by P. Sander or Paul C. Koerber; Dwigg's "It's Leap Year" red-bordered cards with comic depictions of the chase; the Leap Year Acrostic series signed by Bishop; the "Leap Year Etiquette"

series by C. L. Ryan which clearly place women in men's roles and chastise them with the language of etiquette books; and the E. Nash Leap Year "Lemon" series.

Postcards, newspapers, and the bachelors' calling card demanded, "this chase must stop immediately," showing the humor and dark side of the Leap Year custom. Dorothy Dix returned to the topic in 1928, saying that although women had gained the right "to vote, to own property, to attend institutions of higher learning, to follow any business of professional career . . . The only masculine right that is denied them is the right to choose their mates."

No evidence exists to suggest that the Leap Year custom has in any way empowered women in their quest for societal equity, but Leap Year cards, parties, weddings, and valentines have been a source of entertainment for individuals intrigued by marital choice, and continue to pique our interest today.

### Sue Lynn Stone McDaniel

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She is the author of several articles on turn-of-the-20th century courtship and mourning etiquette and practice in Kentucky. Consulting for the Adsmore House museum, a Knoxville, Tennessee, television series on "Mountain Mourning," and the Museum of East Tennessee History gave her the opportunity to broaden her teaching. She is a regular lecturer for the Kentucky Humanities Council Speakers Bureau. The breadth of her research incorporates university history, a World War II fighter pilot, and children's author Annie Fellows Johnston and her Little Colonel Series.



Figure 10. Leap Year cards that show men willing to accept proposals are fairly rare.