Some holidays are not w

FEBRUARY

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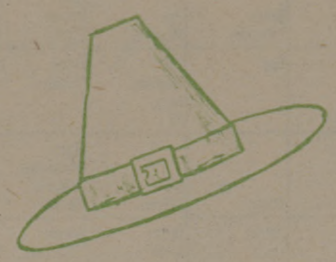

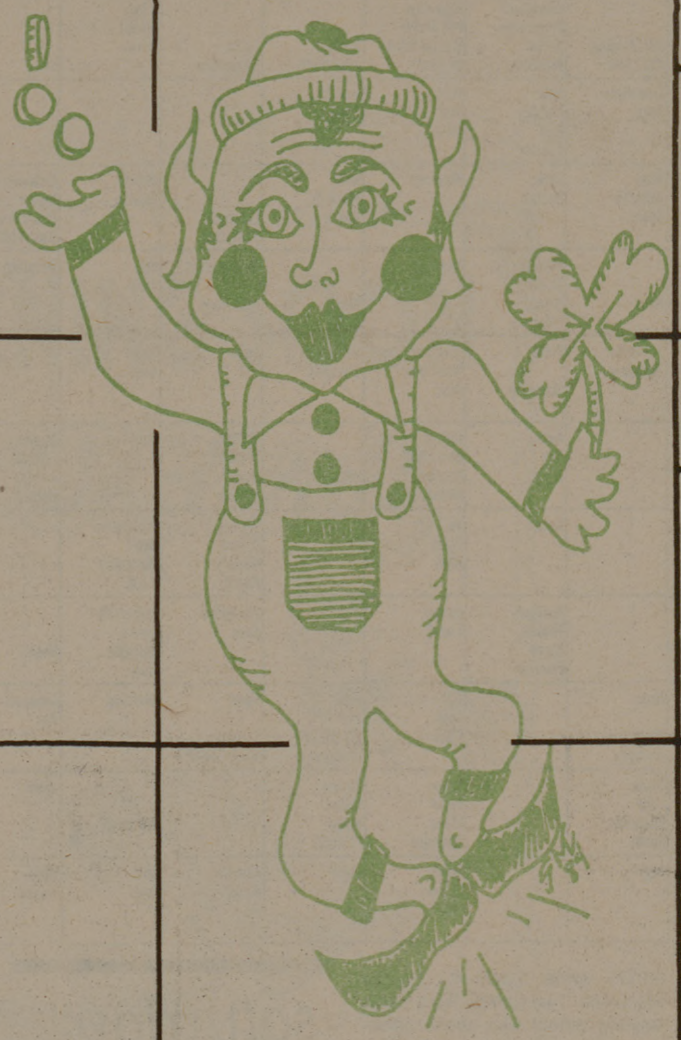

Unusual holid

By BONNIE LANGFORD
Staff Columnist

Everyone knows that Feb. 14 is Valentine's Day, but not everyone knows why.

Is it just tradition, the way things have always been?

Someone had to start these holidays, and while some holidays have complex reasons for being, others were started just because someone thought it would be a good idea.

Start with New Year's Day. This has been around since prehistoric times. In ancient society, it was celebrated because it was the day taboos were removed from the year's harvest — the food finally was fit to eat.

In ancient Rome, the first use of Jan. 1 as the new year was a political move. Before the Romans, March 25 had been the date of the new year. But the Romans started celebrating the new year the day after elections. The old year and old politians were abolished for the new year and new politians.

With the new year also comes the need to know the weather for the year, hence the celebration of Groundhog Day.

Farmers throughout the ages have regarded Feb. 2 (also known as Candlemas Day after the presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple) as one of the most important dates for predicting weather. Fair conditions on that day were supposed to bring at least 40 more days of cold, rigorous winter.

The American tradition of using the groundhog as a weather forecaster was started by the Germans who settled in Pennsylvania.

The groundhog was not their first choice, though. It was German tradition to use the badger. If the furry creature saw his shadow when he emerged from his winter sleeping quarters for the first time, he quickly ran back to bed to spend another six weeks hiding from cold weather.

The American version still is popular, and the groundhog has an accuracy probably as high as some paid weathercasters, 28 percent.

Valentine's Day is another favorite February holiday. It also first was celebrated by the early Romans. This holiday can be traced back to the ancient celebration of Lupercalia, a feast in honor of the pastoral god Lupercus.

During this feast, in honor of the goddess Juno Februata, an early version of the dating service was used. The names of eligible girls were put into a box and then drawn by the boys. The matched couple stayed together for the year.

Later, Christian priests, in order to Christianize this heathen practice, named the day in honor of St. Valentine, a priest during the 200s.

The priests started adding the names of saints to the girls names. The young people were supposed to emulate certain characteristics of the saints during this courtship.

The month of March often is remembered for the celebration of St. Patrick's Day. This March 17 celebration first was observed in America in 1737 in Boston.

St. Patrick was the patron saint of Ireland. He was a priest, and later a bishop who founded churches and schools, and the Church of Ireland.

The Irish saint probably is best known for driving the snakes out of Ireland. Legend has it that when the last snake refused to leave, St. Patrick made a box for the snake and told the serpent to get in.

The snake refused, telling him that the box was too small. St. Patrick said that it was the right size for the snake. As the reptile crawled in to prove the saint wrong, St. Patrick shut the lid and threw the box into the ocean.

In Ireland, the saint was remembered for years with a three-day period of devotion. This religious observance has grown into parties, parades and the "wearing of the green." The biggest celebration of this day is in New York City, where a parade is held and participants march past St. Patrick's Cathedral.

April Fool's Day, on April 1, is one of those obscure holidays that's origin is unknown. It is speculated to be an ancient new year celebration, but whatever its origins, it is popular today as a day of pranks. April Fool's