

Gumdrops, the Maine, and Aretha's impostor: Today, Feb. 15

Posted by [Alan Van Wormer](#) On 02/15/2018

February 15 is National Gumdrop day.

Gumdrops, those colorful chewy fruit candies, are a favorite of many. They come in many varieties and can be sweet or spicy. You can eat them by the handful or use them to decorate cakes and cookies and just about anything else you can eat.

Credit for the modern gumdrop goes to chemist and candy manufacturer Percy S. Truesdell. According to articles after his death in 1948, while at the University of Ohio, Truesdell altered the consistency of hard candy by experimenting with the amount of starch used. His result became the gumdrop as we know it today. He later worked for the Snyder-Chafee Company until 1915. In 1916, Truesdell founded and incorporated the P.S. Truesdell Candy Manufacturing Company. At his death, he became known as the Gumdrop King.

Today in history: February 15, 1898, Remember The Maine!

In late January of 1898 the USS Maine steamed into Havana Harbor in Cuba on a mission to protect US interests during the Cuban revolt against Spain. 3 weeks later she suddenly exploded without warning and sank quickly. A board of inquiry investigated and the cause remained unclear, but popular opinion in the US was enraged, the flames fanned by inflammatory articles printed in the "yellow press" by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, blamed Spain.

The phrase, "Remember the Maine! To hell with Spain!", became a rallying cry for action. The Spanish American war began later that year. While the sinking of Maine was not a direct cause for action, it served as a catalyst, accelerating the approach to a diplomatic impasse between the U.S. and Spain.

The cause of Maine's sinking remains questioned. In 1898, an investigation of the explosion was carried out by a naval board appointed under the McKinley Administration. The consensus of the board was that Maine was destroyed by an external explosion from a mine. However, the validity of this investigation has been challenged.

George W. Melville, a chief engineer in the Navy, proposed that a more likely cause for the sinking was from a magazine explosion within the vessel. The Navy's leading ordnance expert, Philip R. Alger, took this theory further by suggesting that the magazines were ignited by a spontaneous fire in a coal bunker. The coal used in Maine was bituminous coal, which is known for releasing firedamp, a gas that is prone to spontaneous explosions.

There is stronger evidence that the explosion of Maine was caused by an internal coal fire which ignited the magazines. This was a likely cause of the explosion, rather than the initial hypothesis of a mine. The ship lay at the bottom of the harbor until 1911. A cofferdam was then built around the wreck. The hull was patched up until the ship was afloat, then towed to sea and sunk. The Maine now lies on the sea-bed 3,600 feet below the surface.

Weird History: Aretha's Impersonator

On this day, Feb. 15, in 1969, a hairdresser from Virginia named Vickie Jones was nearly arrested for impersonating Aretha Franklin during a concert in Florida. Jones was a starving singer, having sung in gospel choirs since she was a child, and managed to land a few small nightclub gigs. It wasn't going well, and she was broke. A concert promoter from New York named Lavelle Hardy lured her to Fort Myers with the promise of a six night gig that would pay her \$1,000. What he didn't tell her was that he had booked the concerts as if she were Aretha Franklin, and when she arrived, penniless, he threatened to "throw her in the bay" in if she didn't perform. She did, and audiences swore that it was Aretha herself.

The Franklin camp exposed the hoax and threatened legal action if the tour continued. Ocala county prosecutors agreed, and ordered organizers to cut off all promotion of the "Aretha Franklin Tour", and to refund all monies paid by patrons to see the bogus Franklin show.

Prosecutors brought Jones in for questioning and determined she had been fooled by Hardy. At her hearing, prosecutors asked Jones to sing in the courtroom. She nervously hesitated, but when she did sing, she sounded so much like Aretha Franklin the judge spared her because the people in the court audience hadn't been able to tell the difference.

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