CLASSROOM SPELLING BEE WINNERS. Nineteen students from 4th-8th grades qualified to compete in the Bement Grade School Spelling Bee last Tuesday, January 31. Pictured are grade level winners (front row) 4th grade Laurel Conlin, Audrey Larson, Emmeline Flach, and Madeline Payne; 5th grade Luna Lambert, Cecelia Cain, Corey Musick, and Wyatt Swinger. (Back row) 7th grade Chloe Burton, Peyton Alblinger, Emmalyn Ewers, and Clark Ryder; 8th grade Anna Block, Cooper Winkelmann, and Andrew Bregin; 6th grade Emerson Larson, Michael Vandivier, Emma Hostetler, and Adalynn Summar. Each grade winner advances to the Piatt County Spelling Bee to be held on Thursday, Feb. 16 at the Atwood-Hammond Grade School.

Columns

Celebrate Valentine's Day with a red velvet cake

Memories and Musings

By Cheri Sims

This is the time of year that I like to reminisce about my grade school years. If we were back in the 1950s we would be making Valentine cards and boxes for the class Valentine party and helping the teacher to craft a Valentine theme black board or making cutouts for the cork board at the back of the class room. My schools in Taylorville celebrated in this manner from Kindergarten through sixth grade and believe me when the February of my seventh grade year of Junior High rolled around I missed all the fun activities of grade school Valentine's Day.

I can still smell the white paste we used to create the cutouts we had made from red and white construction paper. The smell of the white paste and the mimeograph paper are etched into my brain; that is if one can "etch" a smell. We would each get a mimeo paper with various heart shapes drawn on it and use the shapes as a template for our card and box designs; that is if we were not very good at drawing heart shapes. I was not a good artist nor was I very good using the scissors so sometimes my heart shapes looked like they had fluted edges.

Most of the Valentine boxes were crafted with red construction paper but one year my Dad suggested I use tin foil to cover my shoe box. Wrapping the tin foil around the box was not an easy task but after a couple tries I succeeded and the box was really pretty. I pasted a red heart on the top next to the cut out hole and framed it with white cotton balls. I won the prize for the prettiest box that year. Some of the boxes were very unique with white lace paper doilies and one boy even glued a bicycle bell to his box but mine was the shiniest of them all.

In the first and second grade we all made our own cards out of red hearts the teacher had already cut out. We cut and pasted different shapes on the cards or wrote something on them with crayon. Everyone in the class had to make thirty cards, no student was left out but in the higher grades we did not have to make cards for everyone in the class. Hence the reason for the Valentine box, that way we did not know how many cards each student received. By third grade most of the kids were buying pre made boxes of cards and it was really fun to see all the different designs. I was particularly fond of getting cards with cats and dogs on them. One of the boys in my fifth grade class was quite and artist and his cards were all different and unique. He drew images of animals and flowers on each card and I recall saving my card of a pretty fluffy cat for many years. I always wondered if he became an artist he was so talented.

We always had a grade school Valentine's party and the room mothers would bring in cupcakes and boxes of chocolate milk for all the students. I have a very vivid recollection of the year we moved all the desks in the room in a big circle and played pitch the heart in the waste can. Everyone in the class had been instructed to make a heart shape out of card board without the knowledge of what we would be doing with this one cardboard heart. At the party we all stood in a circle around the waste can and pitched the heart toward the can. We each got three chances at pitching the heart and whoever got their heart in the can received a bag of heart shaped candy. It was a fun game and even the boys got into the spirit of the party.

Valentine's Day was special at home also; Mom always made "Betty Crocker's" red velvet cake and a batch of heart shaped cut out cookies. She made the cake because Daddy's Mom always made a red velvet cake when he was a kid and cookies because her family had the tradition of all the five sisters getting together and baking cookies the night before Valentine's Day. Granny did not have a heart shaped cookie cutter so it took her and all five sisters to cut the cookies out by hand. Can you imagine all those girls sitting around the kitchen table watching Granny roll out dough and then the girls carefully tracing hearts on the dough. It must have taken hours to make the whole batch but that was family dedication. When Mom and Daddy were married Mom's eldest sister gave her an assortment of cookie cutters for a wedding gift. Thus began our family tradition of making cutout cookies. My Mom's cutout cookies were better than mine; Mom used butter and Hubby preferred margarine but even though I did not care for my cookies as much as I liked Mom's cookies we still carried on the family tradition. Hubby's Mom had never made heart cutout cookies so this was also a special treat for him and he actually seemed to enjoy helping and of course eating them. I sure miss those happy times.

Make something special and have a HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY !

Betty Crocker Red Velvet Cake

Cake

2 1/2 cups Gold Medal™ all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups sugar
2 tablespoons unsweetened baking cocoa
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 1/2cups vegetable oil
1 cup buttermilk
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 bottle (1 oz) red food color
2 eggs

Frosting

1/2 cup Gold Medal™ all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups milk
1 1/2 cups sugar
1 1/2 cups butter, softened
1 tablespoon vanilla

Heat oven to 350°F. Grease bottoms and sides of 3 (8- or 9-inch) round pans with shortening; lightly flour.

In large bowl, beat all cake ingredients with electric mixer on low speed 30 seconds, scraping bowl constantly. Beat 2 minutes on medium speed, scraping bowl occasionally. Pour into pans.

Bake 25 to 35 minutes or until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool 10 minutes; remove from pans to cooling rack. Cool completely, about 1 hour.

In medium saucepan, mix 1/2 cup flour and 1 1/2 cups milk with whisk until smooth. Cook over medium heat until mixture is very thick, stirring constantly. Remove from heat; cool 10 minutes. In large bowl, beat 1 1/2 cups sugar and the butter with electric mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy. Gradually add flour mixture by tablespoonfuls; beat on high speed until smooth. Beat in vanilla. Fill and frost cake, using 1 cup frosting between layers. Store covered in refrigerator. (https://www.bettycrocker.com/recipes/classic-red-velvet-cake/)

Look for these bright stars this month

In the night sky

By David Leake

Friday evening a waning gibbous Moon rises just left of the bluish star Spica, the second brightest star along the "ecliptic." The ecliptic marks the plane of our solar system and all the planets appear to follow this path as they orbit the Sun. The Moon also follows this ecliptic path but the Moon's orbit is five degrees off. This is why we don't have eclipses each month.

Several bright stars can be found near this celestial pathway. We mentioned Spica, a bluish star. Next Tuesday the waning crescent Moon is just to the right of the reddish star Antares, but you'll have to get up in the morning to see that meeting.

The third star and the brightest of the three is the red eye of our starry bull, Aldebaran. It can be found above and to the right of Orion in the early evening sky.

The Moon makes a complete path around our sky in about a month's time. In fact, "month" comes from "moonth!" It's a good way to learn a few stars, by using the Moon as your guide.

As far as our bright star list goes, Aldebaran comes in as number 14, Antares is number 15 and Spica is right behind at number 16.

David Leake is retired Planetarium Director of Staerkel Planetarium at Parkland College and co-founder of the Champaign-Urbana Astronomical Society, Inc.

Finally finding appreciation for this year's UI team

Hook, Line and Sinker

By Tony Hooker

I'm hard to love, hard to love, oh, I don't make it easy

And, I couldn't do it if I stood where you stood

I'm hard to love, hard to love, and you say that you need me — Lee Brice

*For m*ost of this college basketball season, I've felt like this when it comes to the Fighting Illini Basketball team. They just don't seem to have that loveable personality that have defined our better teams.

In the 80s, the Flying Illini and their highlight reel dunks captured the entire nation. In 2004-5, Dee and Deron led the team to the national championship game, where Sean May and his "bull in a China shop" post play kept the beloved from hoisting the trophy. Lately, Ayo, Trent and Kofi had personality in spades.

For some reason, I just haven't been able to get behind them, which is weird, because I am normally all in from jump street, regardless of the prospects for success for the Orange and Blue.

As always, I've overthought this. If I have one superpower (other than wearing my meals on my shirt) it's the ability to agonize for hours over trivial things that should have no relevance. In doing so, I think I've come up with a few reasons why.

First, we've been hearing that this team's potential is off the charts since the pre-season, and so far, actual performance hasn't matched that expectation. So when they don't reach some artificial benchmark that we've set for them, we're left disappointed.

Second, I've come to believe that as a fan, I've not had a chance to "get to know" the team like past squads. It might be the wave of the future with NIL and the transfer portal, but it's different now.

We saw many of members of last year's team play for at least three years, and there are so many new players on the team this season that we've not had a chance to develop that affection for them as people, warts and all.

As an example, we were able to forgive Da'Monte Williams' lack of scoring prowess because we knew he was going to be an absolute DAWG on the defensive end, and because he famously went nose-to-nose with the eminently unlikeable Iowa Hawkeye Connor McCaffery. We've not yet been able to find things to love about this year's iteration. Until now.

You see, it was about halfway through last week's win over Nebraska that it hit me.

I've been wanting to look at this team as though it were Secretariat, running away from the competition because of it's surpassing athletic beauty and perfection, when in fact, it's more like a Pug, beloved because of its imperfections.

Are we going to make three or four passes a game that just leave you shaking your head? Yes. Are there going to be times when we lay more bricks than Local #8? Absolutely. But, like the faithful Pug, we're going to keep shuffling and snuffling along, winning more games than we lose, and there's beauty in that. So I'm going to be content to sit back and enjoy the ride, and not let losses like yesterday's Iowa game get me down. The team is a lot like yours truly, flawed, but intent on getting better, and I can't wait to see how it all comes out, both for them and for me.