



UNITED STATES

Sweetest Day began as candy for strangers

In 1921, Cleveland candy makers gave away close to 20,000 boxes to people in need. That became Sweetest Day. Who began it is still argued.

WHERE Cleveland, Ohio

WHO Twelve Cleveland candy makers, and a legend about one man

WHEN 1921 to 2026

3 min read

The story

On the third Saturday of October, some people in the United States give a gift. It may be a box of candy, a card or a small treat. The day is called Sweetest Day. In 2026, it falls on October 17.

Most people do not know where it began. It began in Cleveland, Ohio. At first, it was not a day for couples at all.

Candy for people who got none

In October 1921, twelve Cleveland candy makers formed a group to plan one big gift day. They named it “Sweetest Day in the Year.” A candy maker named C. C. Hartzell led it.

Their plan was simple. They would give candy to people who rarely got any. Boys who sold newspapers on cold street corners. Children in orphanages. Old people. Families with very little money.

The city’s newspaper, The Plain Dealer, wrote about it on October 8, 1921. The makers handed out close to 20,000 boxes of candy. That is a lot of boxes.

Movie stars joined in. Theda Bara and Ann Pennington were famous actresses then. They helped hand out the candy. One report says Pennington gave boxes to about 2,200 newspaper boys.

In 1922, the paper ran a full page on how the day began. The candy makers also called for a national Candy Day on October 8. It did not catch on everywhere. The day stayed strongest near Cleveland.

The legend of Herbert Kingston

You may have read a different story. It says a candy company worker named Herbert Birch Kingston started the day. He felt sorry for people others forgot. He took candy and small gifts to orphans and to sick or elderly people at home. Friends and neighbours helped.

It is a lovely tale. But there is a problem. Some reporters think it is not true. Some tellings say 1922, not 1921. The old newspaper record points to the candy makers instead.

Bill Lubinger, a Plain Dealer writer, looked into it in 2005. He did not find a lone hero. He wrote that a group planned the day.

Cleveland's top candy makers concocted the promotion.

BILL LUBINGER, THE PLAIN DEALER, 2005, AS QUOTED BY THE
MOUNT VERNON NEWS

12

candy makers in the
group

~20,000

boxes given away

26

charities helped in
New York, 1940

Kindness, or candy sales?

So was it kindness, or was it selling? The record says both. The candy makers hoped people would buy more candy. They also gave away close to 20,000 boxes.

Many people blame greeting card firms for the day. American Greetings says that is wrong. The company says, “We had nothing to do with it.”

In the 1930s, film stars started their own candy giveaways. The day reached cities like Detroit and Buffalo. It spread slowly.

New York tried too. In 1927, the week of October 10 was called Sweetest Week. In 1937, the National Confectioners Association began a campaign. It wanted the day to rank with Mother’s Day and Valentine’s Day.

In 1940, a Sweetest Day group in New York gave over 10,000 boxes of candy to 26 charities. At one chapel, 225 children got candy. Another 600 boxes went to Big Sister groups.

Who gets the box today?

Over time, the day grew. It came to include sweethearts, family, friends and co-workers.

Today it is still strongest where it began. Ohio, Michigan and Illinois lead in sales, says American Greetings. Texas, California and Florida are now in the top ten.

Whoever had the idea, the first boxes went to newsboys, orphans and the poor. That part is on the record.

How it unfolded

- **1921** Twelve Cleveland candy makers give candy to newsboys, orphans and the poor.
- **1922** The Plain Dealer runs a full page on the day. Makers call for a national Candy Day.
- **1937** A candy trade group tries to make the day as big as Valentine's Day.
- **1940** New York gives over 10,000 boxes of candy to 26 charities.
- **2005** Reporter Bill Lubinger writes that candy makers planned the day.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most holidays have one clear founder. This one has a legend, a group of candy makers and a long argument. The sources do not agree on every detail, and the story says so.

Both tellings agree on one thing. The first gifts went to people who were left out.

OUR TAKE

A day can start as a sales plan and still put candy in a child's hand. Kindness and business can share the same box.

What we can learn

1 Start with the forgotten

The first boxes went to newsboys, orphans and the poor, not to people who already had a lot.

Try this: Think of one person who rarely gets thanked. Send them a short note this week.

2 Be honest about your motives

The candy makers wanted sales. They also gave away close to 20,000 boxes. Both were true.

Try this: When you help someone, name what you also gain. Write it down for yourself.

3 Check the nice story

The Kingston legend is lovely. The old news record points to a group of candy makers instead.

Try this: Before you share a feel-good story, look for one old source. Do it once this week.

4 Small gifts travel far

In New York in 1940, 225 children got candy at one chapel. Small boxes added up to 10,000.

Try this: Pick one small gift for someone who rarely gets one. Give it by Saturday.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

The first sweet box went to someone who was forgotten.

Sources

Cleveland Scene

[On the 12 Cleveland confectioners behind Sweetest Day](#)

Wikipedia

[Sweetest Day \(cites The Plain Dealer and The New York Times\)](#)

WEWS News 5 Cleveland

[How a Cleveland candy maker created the holiday known as Sweetest Day](#)

WOIO Cleveland 19

[American Greetings did not invent Sweetest Day, but a Clevelander did](#)

Fact-check note: This origin is disputed, so the story keeps to what the sources share. The year: Cleveland Scene dates the Plain Dealer article October 8, 1921; Wikipedia gives the first Sweetest Day as October 10, 1921 and cites the 1922 article; WEWS says 1921; WOIO says 1922 in its text and 1921 in a post it quotes. The story says October 1921. Boxes: Cleveland Scene says 19,500 (from the Plain Dealer); Wikipedia says over 20,000. The story says close to 20,000. Herbert Birch Kingston: WEWS credits him and calls it a legend; WOIO calls it the most cited origin; Cleveland Scene says it is almost certainly false; Wikipedia does not mention him. The story tells it as a legend. Movie stars: Cleveland Scene and Wikipedia place Theda Bara and Ann Pennington at the first giveaway; WEWS puts celebrity giveaways in the early 1930s and gives the 2,200 newsboys figure, so the story does not date that. Bill Lubinger's 2005 article is no longer online (Cleveland Scene), so his words are second-hand. The 1927, 1937 and 1940 New York details come from The New York Times as cited by Wikipedia; we did not open those articles. The group's other eleven names come from a blog, so only the leader is named. Sources spell the actress's first name Ann and Anne. The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History page could not be opened. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.