

Mars, Jupiter, Saturn star in February


ONLY THREE planets will be easily visible in February. Mars and Jupiter are in the evening sky while Saturn is in the pre-dawn sky. Both Mercury and Venus are officially in the morning sky, but both are close to the horizon and difficult to see.

The amount of sunlight we receive in this month increases by one hour and 11 minutes.

Sunrise on Feb. 1 was 7:45 a.m., and sunset was at 5:46 p.m., for a possible 10 hours and one minute of sunshine. By Feb. 28, the sun rises at

skywatch

Raymond E. Bullock



7:09 a.m. and sets at 6:21 p.m., for a possible 11 hours and 12 minutes of sunshine.

FEBRUARY IS the shortest month of the year, containing only 28 days.

People often wonder why one month should be so short when all the other months are 30 or 31 days long. February could have had 30 days if one day had been taken from January and another from March, resulting in three consecutive months of 30 days.

The reason can be blamed on politics in Roman times.

The ancient Roman calendar originally began with the month of March and ended with February. It was an imperfect calendar and, over the course of many centuries, was no longer in synchronization with the seasons. Calendar reform was badly needed.

The calendar would have been much easier to deal with if our year (the time it takes the earth to complete one orbit around the sun) were exactly 360 days long. There could be 12 months, each having 30 days. Unfortunately, the earth takes 365.26 days to complete its orbit and those extra 5.26 days complicated matters.

JULIUS CAESAR brought the calendar back into step with the seasons, deciding that the months would alternate in length, having either 31 or 30 days.

March, the traditional first month of the year, was given 31 days. April followed with 30 days, May had 31 and so on.

By the time February, the last month of the year, rolled around, there needed to be only 29 days to add up to a total of 365. February would have its full 30 days only once every four years to allow for leap year.

Being very pleased with the results, Julius Caesar named one of the months "July" to honor himself.

HIS SUCCESSOR was his nephew

Augustus, who felt that he was entitled to have a month named for him as well — hence the month August.

But because August followed a month of 31 days, it had only 30 days of its own. Believing he was every bit as good as Julius, Augustus decided that his month should have just as many days as July, so he took one day from February and added it to August.

That left February with only 28 days, or 29 on leap years. At least that gets us one day closer to spring!

A former coordinator of the Cranbrook Institute of Science, Raymond Bullock currently works for Image Engineering Corp., specializing in laser displays and effects.

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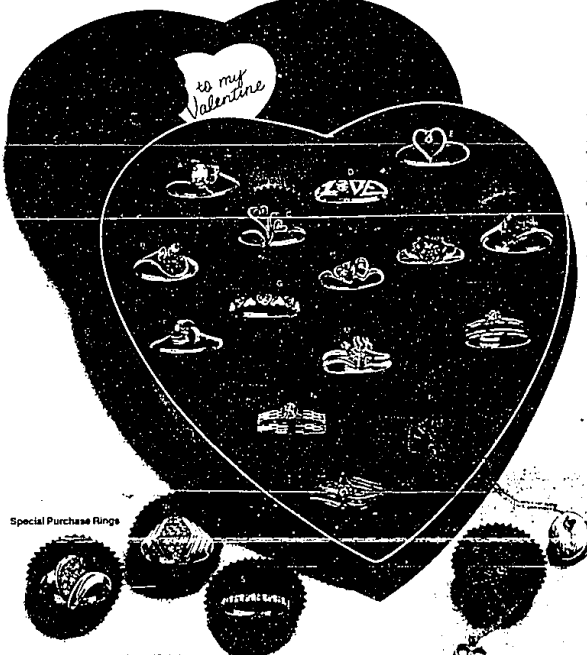
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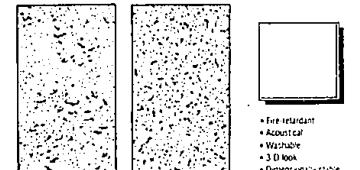
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