

It's Secretaries' Week, bosses; why not give raises instead of roses?

By LIZ BIRD

I THINK IT was the Romans who had a ceremony when, for one day of the year, slaves were allowed to do no work — just laze around and give orders to their masters. And in the British military, there's a custom in which the enlisted men sit down to be served Christmas dinner by their officers.

Anthropologists sometimes call these customs "rituals of reversal": They seem to be a kind of safety valve in which, by turning everything upside down for a day, you actually confirm the status quo even more clearly for the rest of the year.

America seems to like these events a lot — we're right in the middle of one now. Unless you've missed all those gushing radio ads, you should know we're celebrating National Secretaries' Week. For a whole week, if they can keep it up, the nation's executives are supposed to be nice to their secretaries, "appreciate" them and make their hearts flutter with carefully selected gifts of flowers and candies.

I always wonder how the smart executive actually gets all the goodies to his secretary, given that she serves as his major link with the outside world. Does he lift the phone and call the florist himself, or does he favor more businesslike methods?

"Get Herbert Schultz on the phone right away, Ms. Smith."

"Hi, Herb, thought we'd better do something about this National Secretaries thing — keep the girls happy, y'know?"

"Sure, let's see . . . I'll get my girl to call your girl and she can send out for a bouquet for Jim's girl. Jim's girl can call my girl to order for your girl, and your girl can order for my girl — keep the element of surprise."

"Sounds good . . . but what if Jim's girl gets roses and mine just gets carnations — don't want any office catfights, do we?"

"Good thinking, Herb. Tell you what; I'll get my girl to order for the whole department — they're doing a nice Standard Natsec bouquet at Interflora. She can do the cards for everyone, and I'll get my wife to do one for her — keeps the personal touch but doesn't single anyone out."

So all the secretaries get their flowers, the boss gets his own coffee for a day or two, and for a while

Liz Bird teaches anthropology courses at the University of Iowa. This article is from the University of Iowa Daily Iowan.

TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX FILM CORP.



Dabney Coleman and Lily Tomlin in "Nine to Five"

there's a warm glow of good feeling all around. The executives feel good; as Tom Lehrer sings in "National Brotherhood Week," it's heart-warming to "Be nice to people who/ Are inferior to you/ It's only for a week, so never fear."

Everything gets back to normal as soon as possible, but the "girls" are reminded that, with such benign bosses, it would be rather churlish to start getting restive, for a while at least. After all, there aren't many jobs in which employees get these little bonuses once a year, and are actually thanked for doing the job they're paid for.

You wouldn't send a box of candy to a maintenance man for fixing a fuse box — it might just be considered an insult. But then, he gets a good salary for what he does — a damn sight more than that college-trained secretary, anyway.

So now we have National Secretaries' Week — a useful little ritual designed to remind secretaries of their true worth to their grateful bosses. What if, starting this time next year, the bosses had to start paying that worth in cash instead of candy? Somehow I think this particular week would swiftly fade into the past — where it belongs.