



The Miami-Dade County Youth Fair & NIE presents

The Story of Mardi Gras

by Carol-Ann Rudy

The best-known Mardi Gras celebration in the United States takes place in New Orleans. The words Mardi Gras, pronounced MAR-dee GRAH, are French, and mean Fat Tuesday in English. Another name for this holiday is Shrove Tuesday.

Originally, Mardi Gras was a day when people of the Catholic religion prepared for the season of Lent. Mardi Gras is always celebrated the day before Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of Lent for Catholics. The Lenten season is a forty-day period of time when people prepare for Easter.

In early history, people were not allowed to use fat during Lent, so any fat in the house—like butter, oil, or the fat found in meat—would be used up by the end of Fat Tuesday. Mardi Gras is always 47 days before Easter—40 days when Lent is observed, and seven Sundays.

In New Orleans, Mardi Gras is not celebrated just one day. It is a carnival, which begins on the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6th, and ends at midnight on Mardi Gras.

In 1699 the United States was a very young country, still being explored. Pierre le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville was a French explorer from Canada. He established settlements at a number of places in the

South. About 70 miles up the Mississippi River was the place that would become New Orleans in 1717.

Mardi Gras was celebrated in the early settlements of Mississippi, but the form of Carnival as it is known today began in 1857. That year, a group calling itself the Mistick Krewe of Comus organized a street spectacle. Their parade set the pattern for others to follow. Two floats, maskers (people wearing masks), and bands, were followed by a ball. Kings, queens, and other “royalty,” would be selected and reign at the balls. It was considered a great honor to be selected as king or queen.

There were many other “krewes” including the Proteus, Knights of Momus, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. The Original Illinois Club was the first Black Mardi Gras organization, and is still going strong.

In 1872 Rex, the king of Carnival, was chosen for the first time. This tradition continues and is considered to be the highest honor. A few years later in 1892, the colors of the Carnival were chosen and named: purple for justice, green for faith, and gold for power.

Twice the celebration of Mardi Gras was put on hold: once during the Civil War, and again during the Second World War. Today it attracts visitors from all over the world.



This is the first of three articles that tell the story of Mardi Gras. Brought to you by Newspaper In Education at The Miami Herald, and sponsored by the Miami-Dade County Fair & Exposition.

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What is Mardi Gras?



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Krewes are organizations that take part in Carnival and pay dues for the privilege of belonging to the krewe. The members spend a great deal of money on floats, costumes, masks and “throws.” These are trinkets thrown to the crowd, such as beads, doubloons, and charms. One very modern “throw” is a “vibloon,” which is a miniature CD!

Traditionally, a king and his “court” were chosen to reign over a parade by the krewe sponsoring it, and this was regarded as a great honor. However, some of the best-known celebrities in America have reigned as Grand Marshalls, Kings, or Celebrity Monarchs of the many Mardi Gras parades. Frankie Muniz, the 15-year-old star of the television series “Malcolm In The Middle” made an appearance as a Celebrity Grand Marshall. Actresses Glenn Close and Whoopi Goldberg have appeared as Celebrity Monarchs. Kyle Turley, the offensive tackle for the Saints rode in the parade dressed as Uncle Sam in honor of the United States’ Armed Forces.

The people of New Orleans are known for their love of music. When people think of New Orleans, they usually think of jazz and zydeco. Jazz has

its roots in African and European music and owes its development mainly to African-Americans. It varies from Dixieland Jazz to improvisation, and is considered to be the only music that is original to the United States.

Zydeco music was developed over the last 400 years by the Creole people of Louisiana. One of the instruments featured in zydeco is the accordion, and another is the fiddle. Music, dancing, good food and good friends seem to go hand-in-hand with the experience of zydeco.

The Black residents of New Orleans developed their own traditions: their krewes are named for make-believe Indian tribes. It was a way of paying respect to the native Indians who helped them when they were fleeing from slavery. They are renowned for their costume and mask design.

Traditionally, a strict code of secrecy was kept about the person behind each mask at parades and balls. Mardi Gras participants wear many kinds of masks. Some resemble headdresses of noblewomen and men of the Middle Ages. Some have the features of animals. The makers of masks are limited only by their imagination!



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The city of New Orleans is sometimes called the Crescent City because it was originally located along a sharp bend of the Mississippi River. It has a population of about 1.3 million people, making it the 34th largest city in the country. The city covers about 200 square miles on both sides of the river and is bordered on the north by Lake Ponchartrain.

There are two groups of people in New Orleans and Louisiana that are famous: the Cajuns and the Creoles. Both groups are of French descent and have lived there for centuries. The Creoles lived in the city, and the Cajuns lived in the country.

The Creole people of New Orleans are descendants of the French who settled in the area in the 18th century.

The word "Cajun" comes from "Acadian". The Cajuns arrived in Louisiana after being exiled from New Acadia in Nova Scotia, Canada in 1765.

It wasn't until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 that English-speaking people, "Les Americaines" or "The Americans" arrived.

Although New Orleans is best known for the celebration of Mardi Gras, many other Mardi Gras events and activities take place in the countryside surrounding New Orleans. Metairie and Lafayette are

two cities well-known for their parades.

The Mystick Krewe of Comus changed the way Mardi Gras was celebrated in New Orleans in 1857. They introduced large decorated floats and brass bands. The first parade to feature electricity took place in 1889—it featured lighted helmets worn by one of the krewes!

Another big change came in the 1950s when a young man, Blaine Kern, studied Carnival traditions in Europe. When he returned to the United States, he built floats for the parade that surpassed everything that had come before.

Next year Mardi Gras will take place on March 4. Even if you can't be there, you can celebrate Mardi Gras with your family; you can bake a traditional King cake. Look for the recipe on the Internet at <http://www.soulard.com/renaissance/mardi97/kingcake.html>. If you lived in New Orleans, you could even order your King cake to be delivered to your home!

Another way you might celebrate is by creating your own mask and costume. There are many good books about the art of creating them in the library.

As the people of New Orleans would say, "*Laissez les bon temps rouler!*"—"*Let the good times roll!*"



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