

History of Mardi Gras

By Arthur Hardy

"It took the city of New Orleans to transform the centuries-old celebration of Mardi Gras into America's Greatest Party."

The celebration of **Mardi Gras** came to North America from Paris, where it had been celebrated since the Middle Ages. In 1699, French explorer Iberville and his men explored the Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico. On a spot 60 miles south of the present location of New Orleans, they set up camp on the river's **West Bank**. Knowing that the day, March 3, was being celebrated as a major holiday in France, they christened the site Point du Mardi Gras.

But **Mardi Gras'** roots predate the French. Many see a relationship to the ancient tribal rituals of fertility that welcomed the arrival of Spring. A possible ancestor of the celebration was the Lupercalia, a circus-like party held in mid-February in Rome. The early Church fathers, realizing that it was impossible to divorce their new converts from their pagan customs, decided instead to direct them into Christian channels. Thus Carnival was created as a period of merriment that would serve as a prelude to the penitential (asking for forgiveness) season of Lent.



Answer the following questions with short answers:

- 1. Since when has Mardi Gras been celebrated in Paris?*
- 2. What was the name of the circus-like party held in Rome?*
- 3. How is what the church fathers do with Lupercalia similar to what they did with the rituals which were the origins of La Chandeleur?*
- 4. What word means “ asking for forgiveness?”*

In the late 1700s pre-Lenten balls and fetes were held in New Orleans. Under French rule **masked balls** flourished, but were later banned by the Spanish governors. The prohibition continued when New Orleans became an American city in 1803, but by 1823, the Creole

populace prevailed upon the American governor, and balls were again permitted. Four years later street masking was legalized.

Answer the following questions with short answers:

1. *Which rulers banned the masked balls, and during what era (period of time)?*
2. *In what year did street masking become legal again?*

In the early 19th Century, the public celebration of **Mardi Gras** consisted mainly of maskers on foot, in carriages and on horseback. In 1837, a costumed group of revelers walked in the first documented "parade," but the violent behavior of maskers during the next two decades caused the press to call for an end to **Mardi Gras**. Fortunately, six New Orleanians who were former members of the Cowbellians, (a group that had presented New Year's Eve parades in Mobile since 1831), saved the New Orleans **Mardi Gras** by forming the Comus organization in 1857. The men beautified the celebration and proved that it could be enjoyed in a safe and festive manner. Comus coined the word "krewe" and established several **Mardi Gras** traditions by forming a secret Carnival society, choosing a mythological namesake, presenting a themed parade with floats and costumed maskers, and staging a tableau ball.

Answer the following questions with short answers:

1. *About what year was an end recommended for Mardi Gras, and why?*
2. *What group was responsible for Mardi Gras being reinstated? What traditions did they begin?*

A visit by the Russian Grand Duke Alexis Romanoff was the partial inspiration for the first appearance of Rex in 1872. The King of Carnival immediately became the international symbol of **Mardi Gras**. Rex presented **Mardi Gras'** first organized daytime parade, selected Carnival's colors--purple, gold and green, produced its flag, and introduced its anthem, "If Ever I Cease To Love." In 1872, the Knights of Momus also entered the Carnival scene.

The popular Krewe of Proteus debuted in 1882 with a glittering parade that saluted Egyptian Mythology. The Jefferson City Buzzards, the grandfather of all marching clubs, was formed in 1890. The first black Mardi Gras organization, the Original Illinois Club, was launched in 1894. Two years later, Les Mysterieuses, Carnival's first female group, was founded.

1. *Who inspired the first Rex- the King of the Carnival?*

2. *What are the colors of Carnival?*
3. *To what year does the first black Mardi Gras organization date, and what were they called?*
4. *In what year did Les Mystérieuses appear, and for what were they famous?*

(Start of information for timeline)

The final year of the Century saw snow in New Orleans on Fat Tuesday. Legend has it that **Rex** paraded with a frozen mustache!

One of the first and most beloved krewes to make its appearance in the 20th Century was **Zulu**. Seven years before its incorporation in 1916, this black organization poked fun at **Rex**. The first **Zulu** King ruled with a banana stalk scepter and a lard can crown. While **Rex** entered the city via a Mississippi River steamboat, **Zulu** used an oyster lugger to plow up the New Basin Canal.

The new Century brought with it some difficult years. World War I canceled Carnival in 1918-1919, but **Mardi Gras** survived this struggle, along with the Prohibition of the Twenties and the Great Depression of the Thirties.

In 1934 Carnival festivities hit the West Bank of the Mississippi with the first **Alla** parade. Random truck riders were organized into the Elks Krewe of Orleanians in 1935. The **Krewe of Hermes** and the **Knights of Babylon** were organized in 1937 and 1939, respectively.

In the Forties a new spirit of **Mardi Gras** was ushered in, pausing only for the United States' involvement overseas. Before World War II canceled four Carnivals, the first women's parade graced the streets of New Orleans with the Krewe of Venus' inaugural pageant in 1941. New Orleans' favorite son, **Louis Armstrong**, returned home to ride as King of the **Zulu** parade in 1949.

The Fifties provided international publicity and continued expansion of **Mardi Gras**. Real royalty, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, honored the make-believe Monarchs of Merriment as



they bowed to **Rex** and Comus at the 1950 Comus ball. The next year the Korean conflict canceled much of Carnival, but several krewes combined to form the Krewe of Patria, which paraded on Fat Tuesday. The decade also saw the formation of other krewes, including Zeus, the first suburban krewe, which paraded in Metairie.

On a separate sheet of paper, make a timeline for the information that is begins right next to the picture on the preceding page.

The Sixties were characterized by turbulence and change. The early years saw the Tourist Commission try to convince the hippies that the title "Greatest Free Show on Earth" was not to be taken literally. The Easy Rider generation had City Hall worried, and rumors that the infamous Hell's Angels were going to roll into town and crash Carnival had the entire town uptight. Nothing negative happened, and Carnival continued.

Thinking that the group's antics were undignified, portions of the black community put pressure on **Zulu**. The king resigned and the 1961 parade was almost canceled. Not only did **Zulu** survive, however, but by 1969, its parade was a main attraction on Canal Street.

Finally, just as the decade began with the historic introduction of the **Rex** doubloon, so did the period end with another landmark event--the start of the **Bacchus** organization. The krewe's founders, feeling that the traditional **Mardi Gras** institutions had become static, wanted to attract national attention and make Carnival more accessible. In 1969, **Bacchus** shook the establishment by presenting the largest floats in Carnival history, by having a Hollywood celebrity ride as its king (Danny Kaye), and by presenting, in place of the traditional ball, a supper dance to which tickets could be purchased by both visitors and locals. These revolutionary innovations proved immensely popular and were to be copied by several future organizations.



1. *What rumor spread about Hells Angels in the 1960s?*
2. *What did the Bacchus organization do that transformed the establishment of Mardi Gras?*

Carnival's growth continued throughout the Seventies with the birth of 18 new parading krewes, and ironically, the death of 18 others. More than one dozen clubs featured celebrities in their parades. Argus brought a Fat Tuesday parade to Metairie, and [Endymion](#) exploded into a super krewe in 1974. A ban on parading through the [French Quarter](#) ended a 117-year tradition and a moratorium of new parade permits put a cap on expansion in Orleans Parish. The decade ended with a police strike in New Orleans, causing the cancellation of [Mardi Gras](#) parades in Orleans Parish.

The decade of the 1980s saw 28 new parades debut and 17 fold. The [Mardi Gras](#) parade calendar shrank drastically in St. Bernard Parish, while in St. Tammany and Jefferson Parishes, Carnival continued to grow. By 1989, more than 600,000 people annually attended parades on the east and west banks of Jefferson Parish on Fat Tuesday.

Feeling the need for better safety measures and more coordination of Carnival activities, the Mayor of New Orleans formed a Mardi Gras Task Force to study all aspects of the celebration. In 1987, [Rex](#) resurrected "Lundi Gras," its customary Monday arrival on the Mississippi River which the krewe had enjoyed from 1874-1917. The traditional [tableau ball](#), once an essential activity for all parading krewes, lost its popularity, with only about 10 of the 50-plus krewes still retaining a bal masque format by the decade's end.

Doubloons lost some of their luster as several krewes stopped minting them. Krewe-embled throws of every imaginable variety gained popularity, however, with imprinted cups leading the pack.

Perhaps the greatest change in [Mardi Gras](#) in the 1980s was the tremendous increase in tourism during the Carnival season. Conventions which once had avoided New Orleans at [Mardi Gras](#) used the celebration as a reason to visit. International media attention was focused on [Mardi Gras](#) in the late 1980s, with camera crews from Japan, Europe and Latin America showcasing the festivities. [Mardi Gras](#) also became a year-round industry as more off-season conventions experienced the joys of Carnival when they were treated to mini-parades and repeat balls held in the city's convention facilities year-round.



Scholars may one day record the decade of the Nineties as a pivotal one in Carnival history. While an in-depth economic impact study revealed that [Mardi Gras](#)' annual economic impact finally surpassed the half-billion dollar mark, political intervention decreased the size and scope of the celebration. Shortly before the 1992 season, a New Orleans city ordinance was enacted

that required all parading krewes to open their private membership. Comus, Momus and Proteus protested the government's intrusion into their affairs and canceled their parades in protest, while Rex opened its membership to blacks.

1. *During what decade did tourism become a focus of Mardi Gras, and from where did some of the tourists come?*
2. *Why did three krewes cancel their parades in 1992?*
3. *Which krewe opened its membership to people of color that year?*