



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?