

Mardi Gras History

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Many forms of the Mardi Gras festival are celebrated throughout the world. From the Carnival celebrations of Rio and Venius to the Mardi Gras festivals of Paris and New Orleans it is a time of the year when many corners of the World revel in merriment.

Mardi Gras, in French meaning "Fat Tuesday" came to the United States from Paris where it has 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.

In 1833, Bernard Xavier de Marigny de Mandeville, a wealthy plantation owner, solicited a large amount of money in order to help finance an organized Mardi Gras celebration. It was not until 1837, however, that the first Mardi Gras Parade was staged. Two years later, a description of the 1839 Parade noted that it consisted of a single float. Nonetheless, it was considered to be a great success and apparently, the crowd roared hilariously as this somewhat crude float moved through the streets of the city. Since that time, Mardi Gras in New Orleans has been an overwhelming success, continuing to grow with additional organizations participating each year.

But Mardi Gras roots predate the French. The history of a Mardi Gras celebration existed many years before Europeans came to the New World. Some time in the Second Century, during mid-February (usually February 15 according to the Julian calendar), Ancient Romans would observe what they called the Lupercalia, a circus-type festival which was, in many respects, quite similar to the present day Mardi Gras. This festival honored the Roman deity, Lupercus, a pastoral God associated with Faunus or the Satyr. Although Lupercus is derived from the Latin Lupus (meaning "wolf"), the original meaning of the word as it applies to Roman religion has become obscured over the passage of time.

When Christianity arrived in Rome, the dignitaries of the early Church decided it would be more prudent to incorporate certain aspects of such rituals into the new faith rather than attempt to abolish them altogether. This granted a Christian interpretation to the ancient custom and the Carnival became a time of abandon and merriment which preceeded the Lenten period (a symbolic Christian penitence of 40 days commencing on Ash Wednesday and ending at Easter). During this time, there would be feasting which lasted several days and participants would indulge in voluntary madness by donning masks, clothing themselves in the likeness of spectres and generally giving themselves up to Bacchus and Venus. All aspects of pleasure were considered to be allowable during the Carnival celebration and today's modern festivities are thought by some to be more reminiscent of the Roman Saturnalia rather than Lupercalia, or be linked to even earlier Pagan festivals.

From Rome, the celebration spread to other European countries. In medieval times, a similar-type festivity to that of the present day Mardi Gras was given by monarchs and lords prior to Lent in order to ceremoniously conscript new knights into service and hold feasts in their honor. The landed gentry would also ride through the countryside rewarding peasants with cakes (thought by some to be the origin of the King Cake), coins (perhaps the origin of present day gifts of Mardi Gras doubloons) and other trinkets. In Germany, there still remains a Carnival similar to that of the one held in New Orleans. Known as Fasching, the celebrations begin on Twelfth Night and continue until Shrove Tuesday. To a lesser degree, this festivity is still celebrated in France and Spain. A Carnival season was also celebrated in England until the Nineteenth Century, originating as a type of "renewal" festival that incorporated fertility motifs and ball games which frequently turned into riots between opposing villages, followed by feasts of pancakes and the imbibing of alcohol. The preparing and consumption of pancakes on Shrove Tuesday (also known as "Pancake Day" or "Pancake Tuesday" and occurring annually between February 2 and March 9, depending upon the date of Easter) is a still a tradition in the United Kingdom, where pancake tossing and pancake races (during which a pancake must be tossed a certain number of times) are still popular. One of the most famous of such competitions, which takes place in Olney, Buckinghamshire, is said to date from 1445. It is a race for women only and for those who have lived in the Parish for at least three months. An apron and head-covering are requisite. The course is 415 yards and the pancake must be tossed at least three times during the race. The winner receives a kiss from the Ringer of the Pancake Bell and a prayer book from the local vicar. "Shrove" is derived from the Old English word "shrive," which means to "confess all sins".

In the late 1700's 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 (or masked parties) were again permitted. Four years later street masking was legalized and thus the American tradition of celebrating Mardi Gras was begun.

The traditional colors of Mardi Gras are purple (symbolic of justice), green (symbolic of faith) and gold (symbolic of power). The accepted story behind the original selection of these colors originates from 1872 when the Grand Duke Alexis Romanoff of Russia visited New Orleans. It is said that the Grand Duke came to the city in pursuit of an actress named Lydia Thompson. During his stay, he was given the honor of selecting the official Mardi Gras colors by the Krewe of Rex...thus, did these colors also become the colors of the House of Romanoff. The 1892 Rex Parade theme ("Symbolism of Colors") first gave meaning to the representation of the official Mardi Gras colors.

Some traditions associated with Mardi Gras include: the selection of the "Court" - the King, Queen, maids, and dukes of a Carnival organization. "Doubloons" are often given or sold by Krewes who work as a non-profit group who help the community and provide enjoyment to others. The "King Cake" is a favorite tradition of the Carnival season in New Orleans. More than 750,000 king cakes are annually consumed in the metro New Orleans area during this time. Also, Mardi Gras would not be complete if one did not take part in the collecting or sharing of beads.

Mardi Gras can occur on any Tuesday from February 3 through March 9. The fluctuating date was established by the Catholic Church, which designed the Gregorian calendar with a fixed date for Christmas, but with moveable dates for other religious holidays. Easter can fall on any Sunday from March 23 to April 25, and its exact date was set to coincide with the first Sunday after the full moon that follows the Spring Equinox. Mardi Gras is always scheduled 47 days preceding Easter (the 40 days of Lent, plus seven Sundays).

So if you're new to the Mardi Gras tradition, you're invited to participate by celebrating the Carnival season and sharing the spirit of friendship and camaraderie.