

# *The True History of Mardi Gras*

Mardi Gras dates back to primitive's man celebration of "The Coming of the Blossom of New Life". The Greeks and Romans twisted this celebration into an excuse for lawlessness and Debauchery. The newly founded Christian church tried to stamp out this practice but succumbed to the resistance and adapted it as part of the church ritual as a day of feast before the Lenten season of fast and promise. The Latin term "Carnelevarre" (farewell to flesh) was adopted as a result of this ritual.

During the Dark Ages the festivals all but faded until its reawakening by the French in the Middle Ages. The French embraced the celebration giving it the name "Mardi Gras", translated "Fat Tuesday", celebrating with masquerade balls was soon joined by the "Boef Gras" (fatted cow), a huge bull with gilded horns, sometimes live and sometimes manmade that became the traditional symbol of Mardi Gras. The fall of the Bourbon King soon saw a decline of Mardi Gras in France. In 1805 Napoleon resurrected the event with a six hour parade called the "Promenade du Boef Gras".

In 1830 Mobile, Alabama, saw the origin of the "Cowbellion de Rakin Society". This began with a group of young men celebrating the New Year by strumbling out into the streets clanging rakes, gongs and cowbells as they went.

In 1837 New Orleans soon picked up this tradition by parading through the city streets at night. African men would lead these parades dancing their native dances while holding fire torches. The flambeau carriers lighted the parade path throughout the city. This tradition is still part of New Orleans today. New Orleans is credited with forming the first "Krewe". The name Krewe was adopted by carnival organizations spelled the old English way with a "K". The first and oldest, Mystic Krewe of Comus, was born.

Many traditions of Mardi Gras continue today. Secret identities provided by masks gave freedom from inhibitions. Anyone can be anything during this short time. Throwing trinkets and candy from floats evolved from the practice of throwing sugar coated almonds called "Dragee" into the crowd. Even the prohibition of float building during the Civil War could not keep the Krewe of Comus from parading through the streets of New Orleans on foot.

1872 saw the arrival of his Imperial Highness of Russia. While in New York the Duke was enchanted by a burlesque performer, Lydia Thompson, who sang the song "If Ever I Cease to Love". Weather by design or chance, Ms. Thompson was presented in New Orleans for that years Mardi Gras. The song was put to march music and to date has remained the traditional Mardi Gras song played at every ball during the entrance of the King and Queen.

The Mardi Gras colors of purple, green and gold were first seen in 1872. The most widely accepted interpretation is purple for justice, green for faith and gold for power. The King cake originated as a symbol of the three Kings visit to the Christ child on the feast of Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Twelfth Day of Christmas. Served with a bean baked inside the cake, whoever got the bean became King and Queen of Mardi Gras.

Today's parades and general Mardi Gras celebrations have evolved into a mixture of ideas that have become traditional over the years, but the real spirit retains the ageless spirit of the original French Mardi Gras.