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Like Mardi Gras parade throws? Thank the 12th Night Revelers, which will mark its 150th year starting with upcoming ball

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com DEC 29, 2018 - 7:45 AM

1 of 17



Photo by DANIEL ERATH -- The Twelfth Night Revelers opened the Carnival season in 2018 with their ball at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel with Queen Caroline Acomb and the Lord of Misrule. The krewe celebrates its 150th anniversary this year.

Daniel Erath

Carnival queens and grand marches, parade throws and political satire — without those, what would modern-day Carnival in New

Orleans be like?

Ever been to a ball without pageantry or a parade without throws? Case closed.

The Twelfth Night Revelers, a krewe that had its first parade and ball in 1870, pioneered many of the elements that still make New Orleans Carnival special. This year begins the celebration of its 150th anniversary, which falls in 2020 — an occasion to be celebrated with extra pomp starting with the upcoming ball.

When the city was founded in 1718, French and other European immigrants brought Carnival festivities with them, and as one would expect in an emerging settlement with not a lot of law enforcement, the celebrations could get out of hand.

Recognizing a need to rein in the partying — it was giving the city a bad reputation — the Mistick Krewe of Comus organized a parade and ball on Mardi Gras 1857, formalizing this element of New Orleans' Carnival. (Comus also minted the word "krewe," to mean Carnival organizations.)

Thirteen years later, on Twelfth Night — Jan. 6 — in 1870, a group of New Orleans men dressed in costume and paraded through the French Quarter. The Lord of Misrule reigned over that early Twelfth Night ball.

With the theme of “Continents,” the first Lord of Misrule appeared with 18 floats. The first Carnival queen in New Orleans history was to be chosen at the ball.

But alas, the frivolity — and raucousness — of the parade carried over to the ball in the new Opera House (later known as the French Opera House).

According to "New Orleans Masquerade: Chronicles of Carnival" by Arthur Burton LaCour, the men borrowed from a centuries-old European custom and rolled out a giant cake to begin distributing slices to young ladies at the ball. Within one slice was hidden a golden bean, intended to signal the queen of the ball. But it all ended up a shambles, as costumed revelers used spears and other items to skewer cake slices and then tried to give to them to young ladies. In the mayhem, the bean was lost.

The element that did manage to survive to the next year was the grand march, when the monarchs and their retinue promenaded around the ballroom dance floor. This custom of New Orleans balls originated with the Twelfth Night Revelers.

No doubt there was a meeting about these activities afterward, with the 1871 ball less of a cake fight and more of good night. The festivities were themed “Mother Goose’s Tea Party,” and it was the first time, as cited by the press, that trinkets were tossed from a float by a member masked as Santa Claus. Why Santa? No one knows for sure: It could be because Christmas was only 12 days earlier and they wanted to extend the celebration (or re-use a Santa suit); then again, it may be because of the connection of the British Lord of Misrule, who reigns over Christmas.

The ball also introduced the first Carnival queen, Emma Butler.

The krewe disbanded and regrouped twice in the 19th century and ceased parading in 1876, after presenting six parades. While the parades

lasted, though, it was the first to feature political satire; in 1873, "The World of Audubon" was a parody of local politicians.

Other breaks occurred during World War I and World War II. In 1920, there were three queens: "Liberty" "Victory" and "Peace," each with her own court. In 1946, the ball presented its usual court with the queen and three maids from 1942, 1943, 1944 and 1945 being honored.

Today, the ball remains a time-honored tradition. Sometime in the early 20th century, the cake became a wooden cake and the beans — gold for queen, silver for maid — were placed into boxes that they choose from. The queen, a debutante of the season, usually 21 years old and a junior in college, has no idea until she gets the bean, which she wears for the rest of the ball. It is also one of the few balls for which the queen of the previous year gets a few last moments to reign before turning over her crown to the new queen. Also, part of the retinue are the members dressed as cooks, as well as members' sons who are dressed as junior cooks, who hand out the night's programs.

Twelfth Night falls on a Sunday in 2019, so the krewe is holding its ball the day before. The krewe is planning some special activities this year, said a Twelfth Night Reveler representative. More than 40 previous queens are scheduled to appear, and captains of Momus, Proteus, Rex, Atlanteans and Comus will attend in their costumes with each presenting a scroll from their respective organizations, recognizing Twelfth Night Revelers' 150th anniversary.

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