



ORIGINAL ILLINOIS CLUB TURNS 125



Wiley Knight founded the Illinois Club to hold formal balls for African-Americans.



2019 King Gregory P. Perrault and Queen Carrington Williams

TRADITIONS ARE REVERED AT THIS BLACK CARNIVAL ORGANIZATION

BY SUE STRACHAN

Debutantes in white gowns wait backstage for the first strings of the orchestra to begin, marking the start of the Original Illinois Club Ball and Cotillion. The spotlight will be on these young ladies, as the organization is commemorating its 125th year. The 2020 ball celebrates this club's place in the history of New Orleans and Carnival.

The debutantes have spent months preparing for this night, going to etiquette classes, ball rehearsals, teas, and parties. The club members have been hard at work as well, making the theme come alive. The result is an illustration of a strong tradition, one that has endured through wars and social shifts in culture.

It all started in 1894 when Wiley Knight landed in the Crescent City with a mission. He had spent years as a butler, valet, waiter, and a Pullman porter on the railroad, most likely on the Illinois Central Railroad, which connected Chicago and New Orleans. While he was working on the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he met the Morgan railroad family, who offered him employment in New Orleans.

When he got to the city, this native of

Bolivar, Tennessee, noticed that there were no clubs to teach formal social customs and dance to young black men and women, so he founded Knight's School for Dancing, located at Cadiz and Camp Streets.

"When I came to New Orleans, there were no Carnival balls for Negroes," Knight said, speaking to journalist John E. Rousseau in 1949. "The only entertainments were square dances and quadrilles. I saw a need for introducing dancing and social graces to the Negro community, so I opened a dancing school which I conducted during my spare time."

In 1895 the school staged its first Carnival ball, which was suggested by the students. They met in the Chestnut Street home of Louise Fortier, who was the first queen, as well as the first club president, when the Illinois Social Aid and Pleasure Club was founded later that year.

It was clear to all that the debutantes were the focus of the ball, both then and now. "We believe that with young ladies going into society, it is important they be able to embrace the newness

of adulthood," said club President Tracey L. Thibodaux, who was King Illinois 2009. They should "have a respectful demeanor and project a positive image."

Debutantes in the black Carnival organizations are usually 17 to 18 years old and seniors in high school or freshmen in college. The young lady can be the daughter or a relative of a club member, but in some cases she is not. Each young lady needs a sponsor who is a member. The sponsor gets the debutante to fill out an application, which is then put before the committee which interviews the potential candidate with her parents.

Thibodaux admits it is not for everyone. "Some people don't understand what this is about," he said. "Or don't want to spend the time to learn the dances, go to the high teas, or meetings." The club has a formal orientation, where the debutante coordinators, Bettye Johnston and Marion Maheia, meet the young ladies and mothers. It is at the orientation where they receive the Debutante Handbook, which tells parents and daughters what is expected of them, and the Etiquette and Social Graces Handbook, an informative guide that covers everything from what to wear to balls and other parties, to how to set a formal table and behave at a party.



The 125th anniversary theme is Under The Big Top

"Their parents have already been doing this," said Johnston, who has been a coordinator for about 35 years. "With us they get to put it in practice." Johnston added, "Many black girls don't have an opportunity. So this is an avenue to approach womanhood."

After the orientation, there is the Just Us Girls party, where the debutante coordinators go over the handbooks in detail with the debutantes and their mothers. After that there are events such as an art and culture day in the French Quarter, a health, wellness and decorum workshop; and a debutante tea. Ball rehearsals are almost every weekend starting around Thanksgiving up until the final rehearsal a few days before the ball, which will be February 15, 2020. Some of the debutantes have parties held in their honor by parents, family, or friends. The party acts as a precursor to the ball; it is a mini-presentation, but focusing on that honored debutante.

The debutantes also meet the club modiste, Gwen Hawkins, who a few years ago took over from longtime modiste, Mari-



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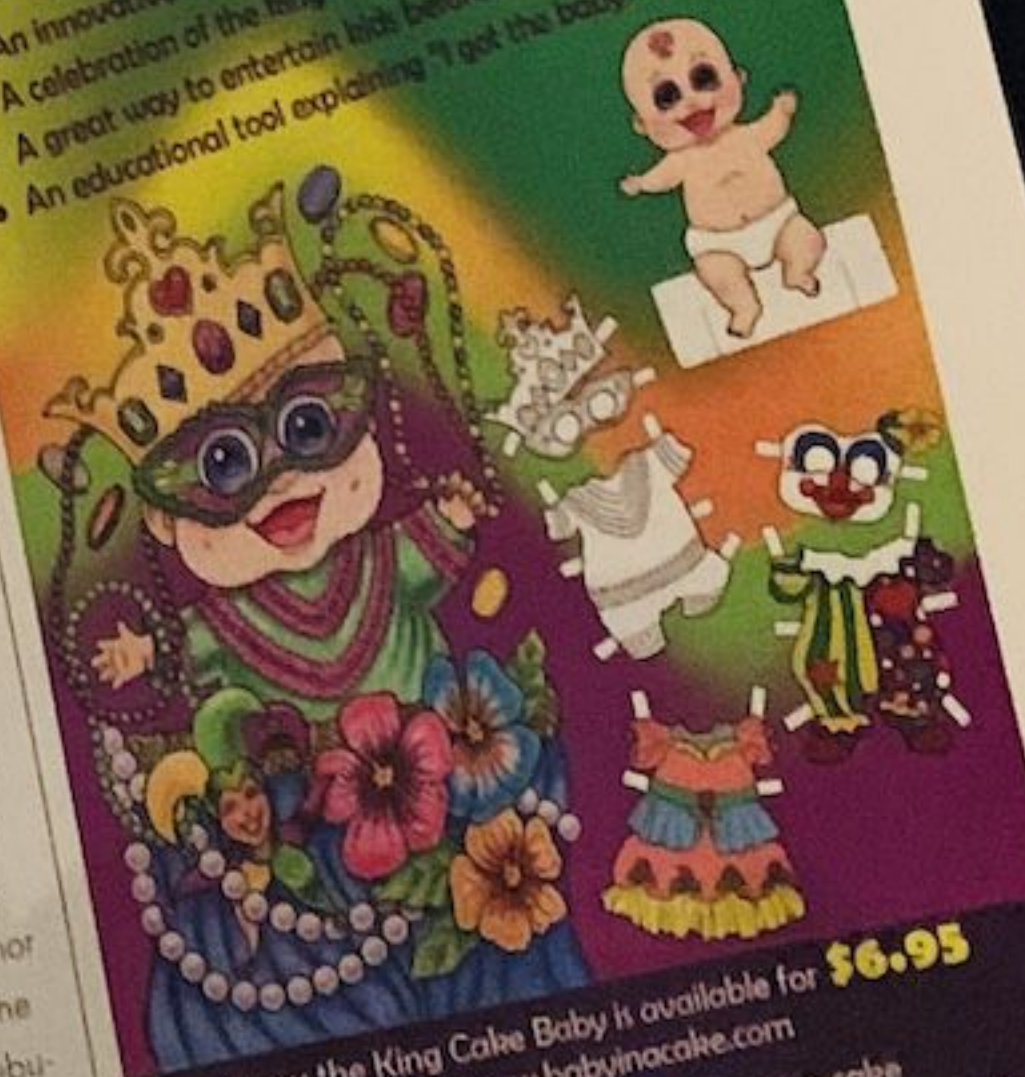
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gold Hardy. It is the modiste who makes the debutantes' coordinating ball dresses. Queen Illinois, who is one of the debutantes, using Hawkins or her own designer.

The royal ensembles for the Queen and King Illinois (who is a member of the club) also include a mantle that goes with the theme of the ball—in 2020 it will be *Under the Big Top*.

Thibodaux said it is a play on words, "Our way of saying 'in the limelight.'" The theme the year Thibodaux reigned was *The Men that Waltz*, no doubt referring to a tradi-

1895

MARDI GRAS LAND

100th BALL

1999

Souvenir Program
100th ANNUAL BALL
DEBUTANTE COTILLION

Arthur Hardy Collection

tion the club is best known for: the Chicago Slide, an ornate and formal dance performed by debutantes and their sponsors during the ball. The song "Dance, Dance Queen Illinois," composed by G. R. Holland and Dr. V. E. Smith, has been performed at each ball since 1965.

This 2020 ball—the 118th because some were canceled due to war and other circumstances—will have three debutantes and one queen and one king. There are no legacies this year, but in the past there have been grandmothers, daughters, and granddaughters who have all been queens or debutantes. What will make this ball special is that the club has invited back previous queens, who will pass the scepter, one after another, to the 2020 queen—emphasizing the unbroken line of this treasured institution.

Sue Strachan is a writer and editor based in New Orleans. For more than five years she chronicled Carnival balls and debutantes for *The Times-Picayune/NOLA.com* and covered society for *St. Charles Avenue* magazine for 12 years.



2014 Illinois royalty King Colbert Anthony Clark and Queen Amanda Christine Newsome

The CreoleGen website notes in interviews held in 1945 and 1950 that Wiley Knight (Original Illinois Club founder) talked about the first ball being held at Globe Hall on St. Peter and Marais Streets. It started at 10 P.M. "due to the fact the some of their members were butlers, maids and had to complete their jobs at their place of employment."

The club remained co-ed for about 10 years until a male president declared it only for men, though it wasn't until the mid-1940s that a King Illinois was named.

In 1927, some members were dissatisfied and broke off from the club to start their own organization, the Young Men Illinois Club, which also has a Carnival ball.

The Original Illinois Club, so named after the split, did not have balls five times in the club's history: 1934 during the Great Depression, 1942 to 1945 during World War II, and 2006 and 2007 after Hurricane Katrina, which damaged much of the club's archives. They recently donated many remaining items to the Amistad Research Center.

The ball has been held in a number of locations: besides the Globe Hall, the Parisian Roof Garden on top of the Pythian Temple (now a mixed-use development on Loyola Avenue), Bethlehem Masonic Temple, Les Jeans Ami, Rosenwald Auditorium and Municipal Auditorium, which was opened up to black Carnival clubs in 1953 through an effort of United Clubs Inc., a group of black Carnival clubs. Other locations include the Orpheum Theatre, the John A. Alario Center, and the Jung Hotel.

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