



Celebrate! Holidays In The U.S.A.

Mardi Gras

(It takes place at the end of a long carnival season that begins on January 6. The climax is on the day before the Christian season of Lent, called "Shrove Tuesday")

Mardi Gras, from the French words meaning "Fat Tuesday," combines religious tradition with a carnival or festival to welcome spring.

In 1829, some young men returned to New Orleans, Louisiana, from a visit to Paris. Carrying on a lively French custom, they dressed in costumes and masks and paraded through the narrow streets of the French Quarter of New Orleans. More people joined and followed them until they caught the attention of the ladies of the town, who leaned over their balconies and threw chocolates and kisses to them. From that time on, masked walking parades became fashionable in New Orleans in the springtime.

The festivals became more organized and elaborate. In 1857, a group of people calling themselves "The Mystick Crewe of Comus" made their way through the streets on floats pulled by horses. One float was carrying the king of the Crewe on a throne and another carried a devil sitting among flames made from paper and representing hell.

Later, a person of true royal blood found his way into the festival. Alexis Alexandrovich Romanov, the brother of the heir to the Russian throne, visited New York and fell in love with an American actress named Lydia Thompson. He followed her to New Orleans, where the Mardi Gras was being planned. When the planners discovered that a royal person was attending the noisy festivities a float was added for a new king, "Rex."

That year, 1872, set the pattern for the boisterous fashion in which the Mardi Gras is celebrated today. Purple, green and gold became the official holiday colors. The Grand Duke Alexis was surprised and honored to sit on the float and play the role of Rex. Alexis and Lydia probably never even met, but they began a tradition. Rex and his queen are chosen each year to ride on the largest float. They are masked and in costume. Those around the royalty, called "maskers," toss "throw-outs" to the crowd in response to the traditional cry, "Throw me something!" The "throw-outs" are large tin coins, plastic beads and other trinkets.

The holiday had become a full carnival by the time Alexis participated. The word "carnival" comes from the Latin and means "take away the meat." It is a time of merry-making and intense fun because "Fat Tuesday" is the last day that Catholics can eat meat before Lent. "Ash Wednesday" officially marks the beginning of Lent, the forty-day period of fasting before Easter. Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "lengten-tid" (a lengthening time).

Although Mardi Gras in New Orleans may be considered by some a minor version of "carnival" in Brazil and other Latin countries, Americans are no less enthusiastic in having a good time and enjoying themselves to the fullest during the festivities!

It is a federal holiday in Alabama, Florida and in 8 counties of Louisiana.
