

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Mardi Gras Memories**

Everyone has his own unique Mardi Gras memories. For some of us, it may be an "over the top" costume - or perhaps a "missing the top" costume. It may be that moment in time when special friends or family all came together to celebrate in a meaningful way. Or for others, it was that memorable romantic encounter - when you met that special someone for the first time on a French Quarter balcony.

Many of these memories are captured in an old photograph, such as the time I was costumed all in black as Zorro and captured on film amidst a sea of saffron Hare Krishna robes. Others magic moments, no matter how zany, reside only in our minds.

Mardi Gras 1967 (early that year on February 7th) was quite a Carnival for me, considering how cold it was. The headline in the *Advocate* proclaimed "Zut Alors! Polar Bear Suits Yet". The *Times-Picayune* predicted a "biting cold Mardi Gras" with temperatures in the 30s for most of the day. What's more, there were to be "northerly winds at 20 to 30 miles per hour," and maskers planning "to wear skimpy costumes" were advised to "steel themselves for a chilly time."



*Times-Picayune Weather Frog,  
Mardi Gras, February 7, 1967*

When I reached the Vieux Carré, I realized I was not dressed quite warmly enough. I had forgotten gloves to warm my hands, and the weather was indeed icy. Stopping into a corner French Quarter drugstore, I inquired if gloves were available. There were none to be had, but the clerk behind the register recommended a large pair of barbecue mitts. Naturally, I was so cold that I immediately purchased them. The oversized mitts were adorned with an array of western branding irons. Perfect! As a result, my costume that year was that of a 1950s suburban Patio Daddy-O backyard chef.

1967, as frigid as it was, was not the coldest Mardi Gras on record. Carnival Day in New Orleans 1899 was a freezing 22 degrees!

1979 was the year of the police strike. A political maelstrom churned for two weeks before, pitting the city of New Orleans against its striking police force. Finally, a decision was reached by Mayor Ernest "Dutch" Morial and the leading citizens and businessmen who comprised the oldest parading organizations: Without the necessary and critical assistance provided by the police, the Carnival parades that year could not and would not roll. Both sides had concerns to be negotiated, and people would be disappointed with the decision to cancel the parades, but the bottom line was that Mardi Gras could not be held hostage.

A few krewes moved their parades to the suburbs, but the oldest, most historic and largest krewes at the time agreed to forgo their parades. Also, the elaborate masked balls with their courts carried on as usual. And the French Quarter still had its maskers and merriment that couldn't be dampened. I recall how easy it was that year getting to the Quarter: less traffic and easier parking.

Most New Orleanians remember the many years when most carnival balls were held at the city's Municipal Auditorium. On Mardi Gras night, the Rex ball was held on one side of the auditorium, while on the other half of the building at the same time, the city's oldest krewes, the Mistick Krewe of Comus, held its ball. This made the historic tradition of the "Meeting of the Courts" quite simple. This is when the monarchs have all made their exits and the Captain of Comus literally closes the curtain on the Carnival season.

In recent years, since the Municipal Auditorium was damaged during Hurricane Katrina, the Rex and Comus organizations have held their balls in the Sheraton and Marriott Hotels on Canal Street. A long red carpet is rolled out for the Rex court to cross Canal Street to attend the "Meeting of the Courts".

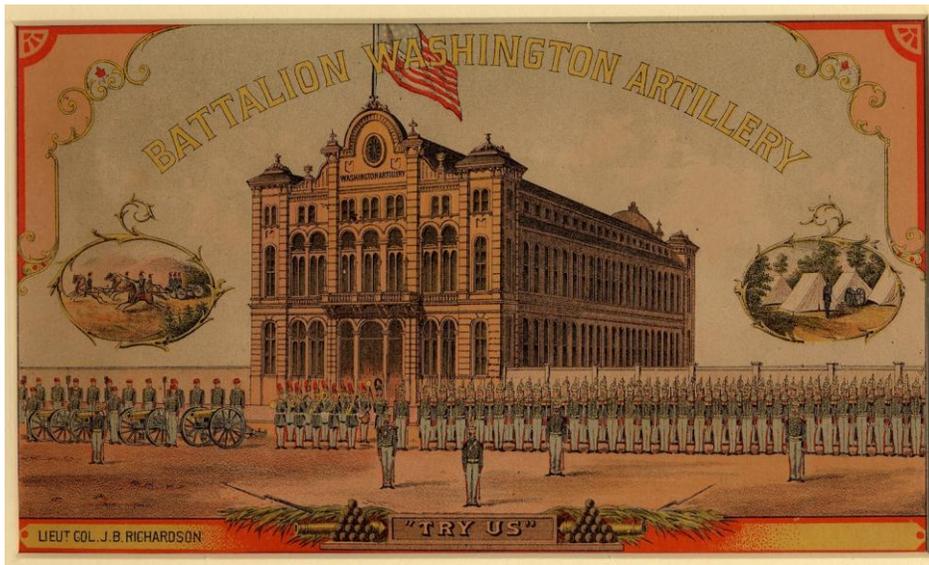
But in days gone by, carnival balls were held in a variety of locations including the French Opera House on Bourbon Street, as well as a

number of the city's theatres. The very first Rex ball was held in 1873 within the large, ornate Grand Industrial Exposition building (called Exposition Hall) located on St. Charles between Girod and Julia, and it was there that the first Queen of Carnival was selected. Facing St. Charles, the building ran all the way through to Carondelet Street. Used as an exposition hall for the 1872 Grand Industrial Exposition held in New Orleans, the facility's grand hall would be the site of other Rex balls. And, although not suitably adapted for tableaux and with a limited seating area, it became renowned as the Carnival Palace of Rex and his royal consort from 1879 until 1906.



*Grand Industrial Exposition Building on St. Charles*

In 1878, the structure became the Washington Artillery Hall (upstairs) and the Washington Artillery Armory (downstairs), used as an arsenal for the battalion's cannon, rifles, uniforms, sabers and ammunition. There was even a shooting range constructed within the three-story complex, considered a luxury for the time. The grand old building is now no longer standing.



*Washington Artillery Hall on St. Charles between Girod and Julia, site of many a Rex ball*



*An elegant ball within the Washington Artillery Hall*

The old St. Charles Street arsenal, located at 745 St. Charles, was eventually sold and became the Stephens Buick automobile dealership, but by the 1950s fell into disrepair and was finally demolished (yielding two hundred thousand bricks) in 1952.

The Grand Duke Alexis of Russia, who was entertained at the Rex parade in 1872, attended the Comus ball that evening at the Varieties Theatre. It was also there that the great tragedian, Lawrence Barrett, was appearing and who had earlier graciously lent his Richard III costume to Lewis J. Salomon, the first Rex, for his royal raiment.

The Mardi Gras of 1839 was memorable in that there is a description of its one single float, consisting of a giant fighting cock, more than six feet tall, drawn by two horses. The massive bird was mechanized so that it flapped its wings and, according to the *Times-Picayune*, "emitted hoarse sounds as the float moved through the streets, while the crowd roared hilariously."

In 1975, you may have walked right past the costumed couple pictured below and not have given them a second thought.



It's a photo of Paul and Linda McCartney clowning incognito at Mardi Gras. They were in New Orleans to record a new album, *Venus & Mars*, at Allen Toussaint's Sea-Saint Studios.

In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt's oldest daughter Alice made her social debut in a gown that was to become known forever as "Alice blue," creating a color trend in women's attire. In 1903, she was an honored guest at the Boston Club on Mardi Gras Day. According to the *Picayune*, Alice "was presented with a bouquet of Golden Gate roses. The table at which Miss Roosevelt sat, and which was especially arranged for her, was decorated with roses and tulips."

50 years ago this Mardi Gras, another President's oldest daughter was entertained at the Boston Club, Lynda Bird Johnson - along with her escort, actor George Hamilton. That evening, she viewed the Comus

Parade from the Pickwick Club balcony and did something (as reported by the *Times-Picayune*) that would be deemed insensitive today: To the music of a marching band that passed by, she sang Dixie. That was Tuesday, February 22, 1966.



*Lynda Bird beams as she exits the Pickwick Club with George Hamilton*

Mardi Gras 1966 was interesting in other ways. "A lifesize balloon astronaut broke loose" from one of the floats on Canal Street and, according to the *Advocate*, "lazily floated skyward as onlookers shrieked with laughter." And "in one tavern on the parade route along Canal, a middle-aged barmaid, clad in gold lamé slacks and matching low cut blouse, was charging – and collecting from many persons – a quarter for restroom privileges." Heaven forbid!

Also in 1966, beloved journalist, humorist and historian Charles L. "Pie" Dufour (1903 - 1996) described Carnival in New Orleans as that time "when the parade season opens, then John Q. Public and the little Publicans join the act and provide the ceaseless clamor, the expectant shouts, the pleading bids for beads and baubles."

On January 29, 2016, the *New York Times* announced *Ojen's* return to the Crescent City in time for Mardi Gras. "Ojen (pronounced OH-hen) returned to New Orleans shelves and glasses for the first time in years, thanks to the Sazerac Company, the locally based liquor business.



*Original Ojen*



*New Legendre Ojen*

'We had a reasonable stash of old bottles of it,' said Mark Brown, the president and chief executive. 'We sent our chaps in the lab to research Ojen and then create what they felt was a really good quality Ojen. They were able to benchmark it against the old bottles.' The new product's full name is Legendre Ojen. A bottle costs about \$20."

(To read more about *Ojen's* romantic history, please revisit my article in the archives entitled "*Ojen Update*," which includes my 2007 article on the subject, "Banana Republics and *Ojen* Cocktails.")

Upon interviewing a friend who was enjoying the new *Ojen* on Lundi Gras evening before the Proteus Parade, he commented that the new concoction seemed "a little sweeter than the original," but couldn't swear to it since some time had passed since he'd last sipped the popular Mardi Gras anise-flavored liqueur.

The memories of Mardi Gras can become cloudy over time like the billowing *louche* of an *Ojen* cocktail. Hope yours are vivid, memorable and fun.

## **NED HÉMARD**

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