

## Mardi Gras Miscellany, Part Trois

It was the Mystick Krewe of Comus, the first official Carnival "krewe", who in 1857 transformed the chaotic Creole Carnival into an organized, themed torch lit procession on Mardi Gras evening. Comus, it must be noted, is not a king but a god: the god of parties, festivity, merrymaking and nocturnal dalliances. Within the krewe, Comus is known as "Number One" and raises not a sceptre, but an enchanter's cup emblazoned with rhinestones. It was Comus, as Mardi Gras historian Henri Schindler explained, "who ritually closed, and still closes, the most cherished festivities of New Orleans with splendor and pomp."



*Mystick Krewe of Comus float, Mardi Gras, 1886*

In 1872, Rex took to the streets of the Crescent City in a magnificent display of boosterism. The daytime parade was organized by the city's business leaders in an effort to put on a spectacle in honor of a visiting royal guest, the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia, during the 1872 Carnival season. In addition, the pageant was staged to attract tourism and new business to New Orleans in the years after the American Civil War.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known to the world by his pen name Mark Twain, wrote about Mardi Gras in New Orleans in his 1883 memoir *Life on the Mississippi*. Although misspelling the Mystic Krewe of Comus, in his chapter entitled "Enchantments and Enchanters," Twain described the krewes of Comus and Rex:



*Mardi Gras on Canal Street, from Mark Twain's "Life on the Mississippi"*

"The largest annual event in New Orleans is a something which we arrived too late to sample: the Mardi-Gras festivities. I saw the procession of the Mystic Crew of Comus there, twenty-four years ago

— with knights and nobles and so on, clothed in silken and golden Paris-made gorgeousnesses, planned and bought for that single night's use; and in their train all manner of giants, dwarfs, monstrosities, and other diverting grotesquerie — a startling and wonderful sort of show, as it filed solemnly and silently down the street in the light of its smoking and flickering torches; but it is said that in these latter days the spectacle is mightily augmented, as to cost, splendor, and variety. There is a chief personage — 'Rex'; and if I remember rightly, neither this king nor any of his great following of subordinates is known to any outsider. All these people are gentlemen of position and consequence; and it is a proud thing to belong to the organization; so the mystery in which they hide their personality is merely for romance's sake, and not on account of the police."

So if there's secrecy among these ancient krewes, remember it's "merely for romance's sake."

Eventually Rex and Comus would officially meet in what New Orleanians refer to as the "Meeting of the Courts".

### **When was the first "Meeting of the Courts" by Rex and Comus? When was this popular event first televised?**

According to a February 5, 1978, article in the *Times-Picayune*, Louisiana historian "Pie" Dufour wrote that the first visit of Rex to Comus "came in 1874, when W. S. Pike was Rex" and Margaret Maginnis was Queen of Carnival. Another so-called "Meeting of the Courts" occurred in 1882, when the King of Carnival, Rex (who also happened to be Joseph A. Shakspeare, Mayor of New Orleans), and his queen, Frances Isabel "Belle" Morris, paid a formal visit to the throne of Comus at the Mistick Krewe's *bal masque*.

The *Picayune*, on February 22, 1882, revealed that "25,000 invitations had been issued for the Rex ball," and it was noted that "the royal party drove to the French Opera House, where private boxes had been reserved for them, and from these boxes they witnessed the ball of Comus."

Following the Comus ball at the French Opera House," reported the *Picayune*, the King, Queen and their entire court, with a number of friends," drove to the residence of the queen's father, John Albert Morris, "No. 21 South Rampart street, where they were entertained at supper."

Although Rex and his queen paid a visit to the Comus throne, there was no actual "court" to meet. Comus did not have a queen and court until two years later, in 1884. But those early ritualistic meetings of Rex and Comus in 1874 and 1882 evolved into the symbolic conclusion of the Carnival season, a tradition which continues to this day.



*Accompanying Rex on Mardi Gras Day 1882, the 21st of February, were the societies of the Phunny Phorty Phellows and the Independent Order of the Moon, whose "Grand Ball & Tableau" was held the Thursday before at Werlein Hall, as shown in the invitation above. The Picayune assured its readers that their "comic representations will excel anything of the kind in the past."*

Some readers may remember Gay Batson's narration of the "Meeting of the Courts", which was an annual Carnival presentation of WDSU-TV under the station's ownership by Edgar B. Stern, Jr. But Batson was not the event's first announcer. That honor belongs to Tiger Flowers, who was the host for WDSU's very first broadcast of the "Meeting of The Courts" in 1953. Batson took over from there.

Mr. Batson's script, having been provided by the Rex and Comus organizations, did not vary much each year, and the viewing public learned to recite portions of the narration by heart.

Born in 1919, Batson began his broadcasting career in New Orleans in 1939 as an announcer for WSMB-radio. After a stint in the Army Air

Corps during World War II, he joined WDSU-radio in 1944. By 1950, Gay was delivering five newscasts a day for both radio and television. He narrated the "Meeting of the Courts" broadcasts for over two decades. Ann Meric joined Gay as co-host in the late 1960s and continued in that role with Bart Darby and Terry Gerstner after Batson's death in 1976.



*Announcers Tiger Flowers and Gaines "Gay" Batson*

After WDSU, the city's local PBS affiliate WYES began hosting the annual "Meeting of the Courts", with Peggy Scott Laborde, Errol Laborde and Henri Schindler providing the "play by play" narration. The most recent years' coverage has been provided by host Peggy Scott Laborde, along with Carnival historian Errol Laborde and Dr. Stephen Hales, New Orleanian pediatrician, Rex official and krewe archivist.

But in 2017, Henri Schindler joined Peggy and Errol by serving as "pinch hitter" for his friend Dr. Hales, who had the great honor of reigning as Rex that year. "Carnival Fêtes and Feasts" was the theme of that year's parade. Beginning with the station's first broadcast of the event in 1997, 2018 will mark the 22nd year WYES will carry the annual coverage of the Rex Ball and the "Meeting of the Courts" of Rex and Comus.

Some contend that even though Rex is the titular King of Carnival, the fact that he leaves his own festivities to be received by a seated Comus at his ball, Comus must therefore be the more prestigious of the two organizations in the Carnival hierarchy. Or it may be that Comus is a god and Rex merely a king. But, as "Pie" Dufour once explained, "deference" is given by Rex simply due to the fact that Comus is "the oldest of the Carnival krewes".



*Hales, Laborde and Laborde, "Meeting of the Courts" 2016*

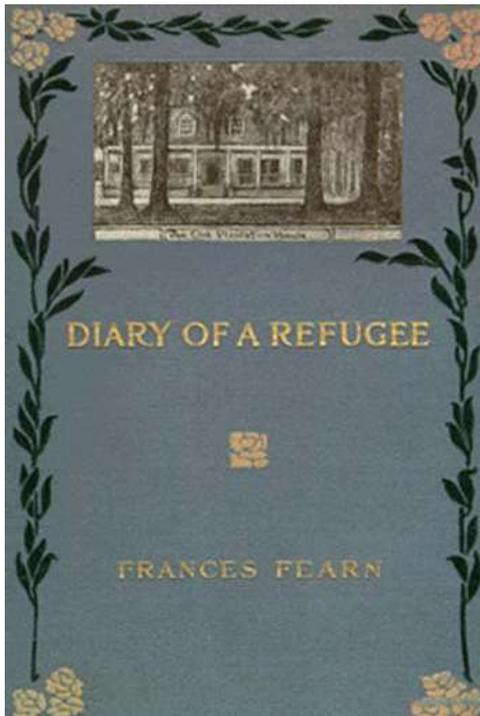
**Who was the first Mardi Gras queen? Was she the queen of Comus or Rex? Were queens always chosen from debutantes, and, if not, when did this tradition begin?**

The very first New Orleans Mardi Gras queen of record was Emma Butler, who reigned during the Mardi Gras of 1871, and she was neither the queen of Comus nor Rex. She was the lovely consort of the "Lord of Misrule," the monarch of the Twelfth Night Revelers.

There was to have been a Twelfth Night queen the year before, January 6, 1870, when the the Lord of Misrule" first appeared, but things went awry at the tableau ball, when a giant Twelfth Night Cake was cut. Some of the cake slices were passed on spears. Others were thrown to ladies in the boxes. But in all the pandemonium, the special gold bean, a king cake tradition, was lost and the "Lord of Misrule" was without a queen.

In 1871, things would be different. The Twelfth Night Revelers parade was followed by a masquerade ball where the Twelfth Night Cake was once again cut and served. The *Daily Albany Argus*, dated January 16, 1871, reported the bean's successful delivery: "The 'bean,' which was a lovely gold locket, brought to its lucky finder, Miss Emma Butler the honors of Queen of the Ball, and then the music sounded its merry welcome to 'wily mazes of the dance,' which was maintained till morning."

Rex paraded the following year, but there was no ball and no queen until 1873, when Colonel Edward Bass Wheelock reigned as King of Carnival. As the orchestra played at Exposition Hall on St. Charles, Rex circled the ballroom in search of a consort. Many a lady's hopes were dashed as, one by one, the Mardi Gras monarch passed them by. Finally he stopped before a married lady, Mrs. Walker Fearn, who was totally surprised to be chosen. Not even considering it a possibility, she was upset that she had come to the ball wearing her "second-best" black silk dress and bonnet, the same outfit she had worn earlier in the day to view the parade.



*Diary of a Refugee, edited by Frances "Fanny" Hewitt Fearn*

*Mr. Walker Fearn, diplomat*

Mrs. Fearn tried to refuse the honor, but Rex placed a cushion at her

feet and commanded her to kneel. She obeyed and, with some difficulty, struggled to undo the ribbons securing her bonnet. Tossing her headwear to her husband, she beamed when Rex replaced it with a jeweled crown. He then placed a regal mantle around her shoulders and, as the orchestra played the anthem, led her to the throne where they both greeted their subjects. New Orleans historic artist George Schmidt later captured this event in a wonderful painting.



*Mrs. Walker Fearn, nee Fanny Hewitt*

Born in Alabama, John Williams Walker Fearn was a Yale educated American diplomat, who from 1885 to 1889 served as the American minister to Serbia, Romania, and Greece. Mrs. Fearn, nee Frances Hewitt, was born in Kentucky in 1849 and called Fanny. In 1910, Mrs. Fearn edited and had published *Diary of a Refugee*, a dramatized version of a Southern lady's diary from Louisiana in the time of the Civil War. Mrs. Fearn and her husband are buried in Richmond, Virginia.



**Margaret Maginnis was the first debutante Queen of Carnival.**

Mardi Gras 1874, the year after Mrs. Fearn was chosen, banker William Spencer Pike reigned as Rex and selected his queen in a totally different manner. Upon pausing at a reviewing stand during the parade, Rex waved his scepter at debutante Margaret Maginnis, formally mentioned her by name and thereby chose Rex Queen Number 2. Ever since then, the Queen of Carnival has been an unmarried young lady, a debutante selected from the upper tier of society.

With time, Carnival organizations found that the element of surprise in choosing a queen was not always a good thing. Secrecy is still maintained, but a new protocol was established, and the kings and queens are informed well ahead of time to make all the necessary plans. Also, debutantes, kings and queens are given special "court training" before their reign begins. Every attention to detail is considered.



*W. S. Pike, Rex 1874*

Lieutenants and other krewe members perform a great deal of preparation and work so that that each parade and ball is a success. Some of them are later rewarded for their considerable efforts with a royal invitation for themselves, or in the court for their daughters (as a queen or maid) or their sons (as pages).

As mentioned earlier, Comus had neither a queen nor court until Mardi Gras evening, February 26, 1884. Remember, he wasn't a king, but a god. The theme that year was "The History of Ireland," and as ladies in their beautiful gowns filled the French Opera House for the elaborate ball, they would soon be introduced to the Mystick Krewe's very first court. Jefferson Davis, once President of the Confederacy, was in attendance, as were the daughters of Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. After the tableau, Comus called out Mildred Childe Lee, the youngest child of the late General Lee and his wife, Mary Anna Custis, as the first Comus queen. The daughters became the first Maids of Honor. They were: Miss Mary Custis Lee, Mildred's sister; Miss Julia Jackson, Stonewall's daughter; Miss Nannie

Hill, daughter of Lieutenant General Daniel Harvey Hill; and Miss Varina Anne "Winnie" Davis, daughter of Jefferson Davis.



*Mildred Lee, first Comus Queen*

*Lee removed*

It is interesting to note that the Robert E. Lee Monument at Tivoli Circle (since commonly called Lee Circle) on St. Charles Avenue had been dedicated only four days earlier, on February 22, 1884, Washington's birthday. Lee's statue was removed on May 19, 2017.

Mildred Lee was especially fond of New Orleans and died there on March 26, 1905. Almost the last words uttered by Miss Lee (she never married), were these, as disclosed by the *Picayune*:

"Oh, how I love dear old New Orleans! The people are so good to me here; and the veterans — God bless them — no sooner hear that I am in the city than they fill my room with flowers. I am seriously thinking of buying a house here and settling down and spending the remainder of my days in dear old New Orleans."

How prophetic were these words!

Mildred was interred at Lee Chapel, Lexington, Virginia, on the campus of Washington and Lee University, with her father and other members of her family.

In light of these Confederate connections, one might find it unusual to learn that Fanny Hewitt Fearn's parents were James Hewitt and Clarice Grant, General U.S. Grant's first cousin. Fanny Hewitt married John Williams Walker Fearn in 1865. In April, 1880, then past President Ulysses S. Grant and his wife Julia were guests of the Fearn's in New Orleans. Grant referred to her as "Cousin Fanny".

He may have been President, but she was a queen — Rex's first.

## **NED HÉMARD**

New Orleans Nostalgia  
"Mardi Gras Miscellany, Part Trois"  
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