

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Worst Mardi Gras Ever**

For some New Orleans residents or Carnival visitors to the Crescent City, the “worst Mardi Gras ever” might have been that time (hopefully in the far distant past) when one has awakened in some strange location, dressed in some strange costume (not necessarily the one we began the day with), and realizes he has had too much to drink. The questions, “Where am I?” or “Who am I?”, are an indication that one has certainly overindulged.

But back in the years of pre-organized mayhem, Mardi Gras was not always that festive. During the 1700s under French rule, pre-Lenten masked balls and festivals were commonplace. But when the city came under Spanish colonial rule, the custom of masking was banned. This regulation remained in force even after Louisiana became a state up until 1823, when the governor was finally persuaded to allow masked balls. In 1827 street masking was once again legalized, and students (emulating revelry they’d observed in Paris) donned colorful costumes and danced through the streets of New Orleans.

This, of course, did not prevent street hooligans from throwing bags of flour on passersby during Carnival in New Orleans. James R. Creecy in his *Scenes in the South, and Other Miscellaneous Pieces* describes these New Orleans revelers in 1835 dressed in “grotesque, quizzical, diabolic, horrible, strange masks, and disguises”. These “human bodies are seen,” he wrote, “in rich confusion, up and down the streets, wildly shouting, singing, laughing, drumming, fiddling, fifeing, and all throwing flour broadcast as they wend their reckless way.”

The *New Orleans Daily Delta* reported on February 22, 1855: “Job Swan came near creating a riot in the Third District, by dressing himself in priestly robes, and in these sacred garments, cutting up such fantastic tricks as made the angels weep, and raised the ire of the faithful. He was arrested and put in jail to prevent a mob.”

Also that day the paper revealed, “The juvenile portion of the

community fairly reveled in the day, and seemed to think there was nothing like the *flour* of their youth." It was "the *flour* of their youth" that ended up tossed upon the citizenry of the city.

It wasn't until 1857 that the Mistick Krewe of Comus created a torch-lit parade with floats, making Mardi Gras more organized and less rowdy.

The "worst Mardi Gras ever" (happy to proclaim) was nowhere near New Orleans, but it *was* a "torch-lit" affair. It transpired in Florence, Italy, on February 7, 1497, at the Mardi Gras festival. It was there that the most infamous *falò delle vanità* in history took place. *Falò delle vanità* is Italian for "Bonfire of the Vanities," or the burning of objects thought to facilitate the occasions of sin. Targets for this conflagration were things that might lead to temptation, items of pleasure or vanity such as mirrors, fine clothing, cosmetics, playing cards, paintings and even musical instruments. Other objects were included, such as books, artwork and sculpture deemed to be immoral, secular songs and the works of Giovanni Boccaccio, the important Renaissance humanist. A woman's compact (containing her powder, mirror and powder puff) is to this day known as her vanity.

This particular "bonfire" occurred when followers of the Dominican priest Girolamo Savonarola (1452 – 1498) gathered up and publicly set fire to thousands of objects deemed sinful. The author Tom Wolfe used this fifteenth-century Florentine flare-up as a metaphor and title for his 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. The act of burning objects of vanity was not originally Savonarola's idea. These bonfires were a common occurrence after the sermons of San Bernardino di Siena (1380 – 1444) in the first half of that century.



Above is a scene of Saint Bernardino of Siena orchestrating a vanities bonfire, Perugia, from the *Oratorio di San Bernadino* by Agostino di Duccio, constructed 1457 - 1461.

Perugia is also famous for another February favorite, especially around Valentine's Day: chocolate, primarily through the efforts of a single Italian firm, *Perugina*, whose *Baci* chocolates are exported around the world. The youthful heir to *Perugina*, Giovanni Buitoni, and Luisa Spagnoli, wife of *Perugina*'s co-founder, fell head-over-heels in love. A confectioner herself, Luisa created the chocolate and hazelnut *Baci* (Italian for kisses) in 1922. Because their romance was to remain a secret, Luisa wrote love notes and wrapped them around the chocolates she sent to Giovanni for his inspection. As a result, today's *Baci* kisses come wrapped in love notes written in English and Italian. The City of Perugia, as well as the company *Perugina*, has as its symbol the mythical griffin (as shown below).



"Hershey's Kisses" Brand Chocolates were introduced in 1907, well before the Italian *Baci*. But another Pennsylvania chocolatier, H. O. Wilbur & Sons Chocolate Company, had been making a similar product known as "Wilbur Buds" since 1894. The shape and size of this similar product appears to have served as the inspiration for "Hershey's Kisses". Hershey's itself explains the origin of the "Kisses" moniker, "It's not known exactly how they received their name, but a popular theory is that the candy was named for the sound or motion of the chocolate being deposited during manufacturing." The candy making machinery made a "kissing" sound. Hand packaging of the "Kisses" was replaced by automated wrapping in 1921. The idea for the paper strip (with the Hershey's name protruding out the top of the aluminum foil wrap), however, may have come from the *Baci* love note.

Saint Bernardino of Siena's bonfires (it must be said) are not responsible for the color "burnt sienna," although the color's name does come from his hometown. It is created by heating raw sienna, dehydrating the iron oxide within and giving the new pigment a rich reddish brown color. Umber (in its natural form) is called raw umber and contains minerals that make it darker than sienna. When heated, the color becomes more intense, and is known as burnt umber. The

name comes from *terra di ombra*, or earth of Umbria, the region of Italy where Perugia is located.



*San Bernardino di Siena*

Saint Bernardino of Siena is especially remembered for his devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus and for devising the symbol IHS, the first three letters of the name of Jesus in Greek (in Gothic letters on a blazing sun). These devotional letters are not to be confused with the acronym INRI affixed to the cross of Jesus, which stands for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (Latin: *Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum*).

Saint Bernardino was also great defender of the entrepreneur and the economics behind making business work. Merchants, he believed, provided people with many useful services. They transported commodities from areas of surplus to scarce regions, they took risks so that others could benefit and they transformed raw materials into value-added finished products.

But the business friendly saint also preached against the evils of gambling, so into one of his blazing bonfires went the dice, playing cards and other gambling paraphernalia. A painter of playing cards complained that the incendiary saint was taking away his means of

making a living. Saint Bernardino told him to start painting the symbol IHS, and the former painter of gambling items (it is said) made more money than ever before.

If Saint Bernardino and Savonarola were around today, I'm sure the Hershey's Kisses would be thrown into one of their bonfires. Fortunately, today the flames of February are only those of festive *flambeaux* following flickering floats (those *tableaux vivants* on wheels) with bygone themes vaguely recollecting those rituals so long ago relegated to the ash heap of history.

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