

Catching the Mardi Gras spirit in Alabama

By **Patricia Harris** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 17, 2015

MOBILE, Ala. — With all the Mardi Gras glitz, it's hard to believe that the most coveted souvenir is a strand of black plastic beads thrown from a float full of women dressed in black. But that's what I was after as I waded into the crowd along Royal Street on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

Sure you can deck yourself out in multiple strands of gaudy beads — purple and gold are Mobile's signature colors — but that's just adornment. The staid black beads are history. And the only chance to get them is during the Joe Cain Procession on Joe Cain Day, when Cain's Merry Widows dispense them to the crowd.

Nearly 35 parades march through the streets of Mobile in the three weeks before Lent. The real flurry of activity takes place in the five days leading up to Ash Wednesday — this year Feb. 13-17. Joe Cain, the market clerk who set Mobile Mardi Gras on its quirky, populist path, always claims pride of place



PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Spectators vie for beads at Mardi Gras in Mobile, Ala.

on Sunday. It's true that New Orleans Mardi Gras gets more attention these days, but the folks in Mobile still throw a family-friendly, less rowdy, but equally rousing party attended by about 1 million people a year.

Almost everyone agrees that the first Mardi Gras in the United States was held in 1703 at a French settlement on the site of the current Mobile and that the city launched the tradition of the mystical societies that sponsor the signature parades. Joe Cain, however, is credited with reviving Mardi Gras as Mobile recovered from the Civil War. His first parade in 1867 may have been modest, but it certainly made an impression. Dressed as Slacabamarinico, a "chief" of the Chickasaw tribe, Cain drove a coal wagon through the city, trailed by the Lost Cause Minstrels, a group more adept at making lots of noise on homemade instruments than at carrying a tune. Now Cain's parade is the highlight of Mardi Gras season.

Following the lead of the crowd, I positioned myself near the barricade, smiled, waved, and yelled as loudly as I could as the floats began to pass by. Unlike better-prepared Mobilians, I didn't have a rake to haul in goodies that had fallen to the street, but I nonetheless managed to snag one little strand of black beads — and an armful of colored ones. I never observed women baring their breasts and most of the drinking was taking place in bars and restaurants, which were doing gangbuster business.

If you go to Mobile, Ala.

Battle House Renaissance Mobile Hotel & Spa is on a parade route and has an upper terrace for great viewing.

“This is our time of year. We wait all year for this,” server Kevin Houghton told my friends and me when we joined the crowd decked out in beads and hats for brunch at Cafe 615. As we ate the chef’s unique take on eggs Benedict (with grits instead of muffins and a layer of crab meat for good measure), the “Champagne angel” and “Bloody Mary devil” circulated among the tables making sure that no diner went thirsty.

“Joe Cain Day is my favorite day,” said Miranda Pixley, who had embraced her role as the devil with an inspired use of black eyeliner as lipstick. The kitchen gets into the spirit too, using MoonPies — another favorite Mobile Mardi Gras “throw” — to make bread pudding. By then I had managed to catch a few of the marshmallow-filled sandwich cookies tossed from floats. Usually coated in chocolate, they’re sort of a Southern version of a whoopie pie.

According to Steve Joynt, the editor of Mobile Mask, the relatively soft MoonPies became a hit after the city purportedly banned the throwing of Cracker Jack because people were getting hurt by the flying boxes. We ran into Joynt one day at the Blind Mule Restaurant & Bar. Jumping for prizes works up an appetite and we’d stopped in to try the famous shrimp and grits. Joynt was taking a break from covering the parades. The Richmond native is a Mardi Gras convert.

“It’s like waking up one morning and realizing there’s a whole new holiday,” he told us. “And it’s not just for kids.”

That said, kids get their share of the action, and even ride as royalty during the Floral Parade that takes to the streets on both Saturday and Monday.

Joynt’s publication is the definitive guide to all the goings-on during Mardi Gras. But the festival is a subject Mobilians hold dear all year. The Mobile Museum of Art is marking its 50th anniversary with a special exhibit called “The Art and Design of Mardi Gras” (up through May 3) to celebrate the

artists and designers who bring new flights of imagination to Mardi Gras each year. Site-specific installations help fill the galleries with the sights and sounds of the city's signature event.

Opened in 2005, the Mobile Carnival Museum teases out the history of the parading societies and has an impressive collection of Mardi Gras trappings. The elaborate robes worn by the kings and queens hint at the pride of being chosen as Mardi Gras royalty, while more bizarre costumes emphasize the offbeat sensibilities that make Mobile Mardi Gras fun for commoners as well.

“If you think drag queens are a new phenomenon, they are not,” said volunteer guide Craig Roberts as we paused in a small gallery devoted to the Comic Cowboys, whose queen, Little Eva, is always a burly guy in a dress. Founded in 1884, the Cowboys run a funky parade — putting most of their effort into coming up with tacky jokes for the big signs that they plaster to the sides of wagons and trailers. “They make fun of everything and everybody,” said Roberts. The group's motto “Without Malice” does not prohibit them from skirting — and occasionally crossing — the boundaries of good taste. This is a parade where you might not want to bring the children.

On Fat Tuesday, the parades always conclude with the Order of Myths, Mobile's oldest continuously parading group, which debuted in 1868. Their emblem float is pulled by mules and always carries figures of Death and Folly racing around a broken column as they beat each other with dried and inflated pig bladders painted gold. Folly, by the way, always wins and balloons are never substituted for the bladders. There are still enough bladders to toss to the crowd.

Joynt had urged me to boost my Mardi Gas cred with one of these unique — but rather smelly — throws. By the time the parade rolled around on a rainy evening, I had my wave, yell, jump, and grab motion down to a science. But I decided to stick with beads — and MoonPies!

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