



Photo by Nick Brethauer

A curious spectator tries to get a better view of the parade.

New Orleans. Mardi Gras. Carnival. Party. Party. Party. Carnival season in New Orleans is without a doubt the biggest party in the United States. Beginning on Twelfth Night (the sixth of January) and culminating with the pageantry of the parades and balls of Mardi Gras, Carnival has been a tradition in New Orleans for hundreds of years. Although some non-Louisianians

think Mardi Gras and Carnival are the same, they are not. Mardi Gras, French for Fat Tuesday, is the grand finale of the festive Carnival season. It is the day of the parades and balls, the day when the Carnival Kings and Queens reign over the city. The first newspaper accounts of the parades were in 1838, and since then the parades have grown into elaborate productions.

In this country, most major events are sponsored by some corporation or another. Football stadiums are wreathed by signs claiming one beer is better than another. "Official" sponsors of the U.S. Olympic teams are numerous. But you will not see a soft drink logo attached to any of the floats in the Mardi Gras parades. The official sponsors of Carnival in New Orleans are secret social organizations called krewes. Each club has a Captain, who has much responsibility during Carnival. And the hours this man puts in are not reflected in any

paycheck. All the work is volunteer, and the knowledge of a job well done the only reward. The designing artist works to make the parade of his krewe as fantastic as possible. Working within restrictions of length, height, and the limits of the materials to reproduce an idea, the artist distorts proportion and perspective to achieve the proper effect.

All the parades are fantasies come to life, and New Orleans' parade of Rex, King of Carnival, is no exception. Legend has it that Rex's father was old King Cole, his mother Terpsichore, his home on Mount Olympus, mythical home of the Greek and Roman gods. Rex is supported by two associations, the Royal Host and the Carnival Court. The Rex of 1872 is credited with first using the accepted Carnival colors of green, gold and purple. And you thought maroon and white was the oldest color scheme around.

The parade that is the highlight of Mardi Gras is the parade of Comus, which was founded in 1857 and is the oldest Mardi Gras organization in the city. Comus is god of festive joy and mirth, and is reputed to be the richest king of Carnival. His floats are the

most fantastic, and always feature ne art techniques in the decorations.

As the parades pass by, shouts of "Throw me something, mister!" abound. The float riders toss the famous trinkets to the crowd, and men, women and children frantically dive for the keepsakes.

This may sound a little sexist so far because nowhere are women described as having anything to do with the organization of the parades. That's because, for the most part, the don't. There are women's krewes, but the major parades and balls are sponsored by men's krewes. Each krewe chooses its Queen, and to reign as Queen is the highest honor New Orleans society can bestow on young women. Once the Queens are selected, their royal regalia is designed, and the more spectacular the better. One of the most beautiful Queen's costumes was worn by the Queen of Comus in the Golden Jubilee of 1924. Her costume was described in a New Orleans paper this manner: "The Queen wore gloves dipped in



The New Orleans police officers were not above putting on costumes for the festivities. Photo by Nick Brethauer



Costumed celebrators threw beads to the crowds below in Lee Circle

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