

MARDI GRAS AT



Photo by Lee Schexnaider

Floats adorned with dazzling lights, colorful beads and sparkling doubloons wound around the crowded city streets delighting spectators of all ages. The event was Mardi Gras, and the sights and sounds of a Venetian carnival were recreated last week in Galveston. People flocked to the island for all



Photo by Lee Schexnaider



Photo by Russell James

Top: Bobby Cordell of Galveston selling balloons on the Strand. Middle: Shawn Kadlecheck of Hitchcock, Tx, in costume. Bottom: John Hawkins (center) in the San Louis costume contest.

the festivities, which culminated in an extravagant Grand Night parade Saturday night.

The pageantry began Feb. 5, and before ending Tuesday there were many masquerade balls, lighted parades, art exhibits, an Italian tragedy, mask-making parties and lots of entertainment.

The events were part of the last chance for merrymaking and excessive indulgence of food and drink traditionally held before Lent. The parades gave the participants the opportunity to show off their fancy attire and entertain the public.

For the estimated 400,000 people witnessing this elaborate Grand Night parade on the island last Saturday, catching one of the many doubloons (coins) or strands of beads was almost as entertaining as the floats themselves.

As the float riders passed the people lining the parade route, they saw the hungry stares of adults and children alike, all hoping to catch a small reminder of the festivities. As trinkets were thrown, people within 10 feet of the floating piece dove into the air, ready to snatch the falling trinkets from others' hands before they landed on their neighbors' feet.

The Budweiser Clydesdales, the

Longhorn band and the float with Mardi Gras Queen Julie Ann Hutchins headed the parade. They were followed by Venetian costume characters, men in gondolas and walking heads, which looked like giant puppets with paper mache heads.

Prior to the parade, thousands of people packed themselves into a small section of the Strand and begged for imitation jewels and aluminum coins being thrown from the fourth story of a building. The anxious shouts brought smirks to the faces of the jewel owners, who tauntingly dangled lone strands above the greedy crowds.

Further down the street the introduction of Otis Day and the Knights, the famous Animal House band, led to even more hearty shouts and cheers. Singing several well-known songs from the top balcony of the Old Galveston Square, the band ended the performance with an uplifting rendition of "Shout."

Small children, teenagers, college students, parents and grandparents wandered the streets enjoying the music and the surroundings. They wore costumes ranging from colored masks covered with glitter and feathers to full disguises. Brightly

colored hair and beards were essential for some to really feel the true spirit of Mardi Gras.

Friendly would be an understated description of the nature of the crowds. Smiles and laughs were found on the faces of all. One woman even held up a sign seeking someone to party with, and after finding a companion she passed the sign to someone else.

Many A&M students decided to journey down to Galveston for a fun-filled weekend, since Galveston is only three hours from College Station.

Chris Marco, a senior economics major, skipped classes Friday and Monday just to attend the festivities.

"I'm having the best time of my life," Marco said. "All Aggies should be here. There are a ton of Ags here, more than anyone else."

Sam Noto, a senior marketing major, said he had a blast.

"This is definitely going to be an annual event," Noto said.

Drinking a beer at 5 p.m. Saturday, Ernie Junemann, a 1984 graduate of A&M, wasn't sure how much he liked Mardi Gras yet, but he thought he'd have a better idea after a couple of hours of celebrating.

The celebrants may have only joined in the festivities for a short while, but for the organizers of the event, Mardi Gras was more than just a week of parties. It was a year-round job. The first priority was selecting a theme.

Laura Lee, secretary of the Dancie Perugini Ware public relations firm said Ware chose the Italian theme of "Carnavale di Venezia." The Galveston theme was unique to this celebration, and the only real similarities between this Mardi Gras, Texas' first, and New Orleans' Mardi Gras is the throwing of beads and minted doubloons, she said.

However, the floats at both Mardi Gras celebrations were primarily made by the same New Orleans float maker known as "Mr. Mardi Gras," Blaine Kern, Lee said.

Shipped by barge from New Orleans, the enormous, elaborate floats are then assembled in Galveston. The \$15,000 to \$20,000 cost of each float is paid by a company from Houston or Galveston who sponsors it. As a result of the sponsorship, the company employees ride in the parade.

At Saturday's parade, each company threw doubloons with offers for free dinners and beverages. Some of the more valuable doubloons were thrown by the costumed riders of the Continental Airlines float, who threw 200 doubloons, each worth a free plane trip.

Each float is reused the next year, after minor changes are made. Ginger Jackson, administrative



Photo by Russell James

John Hawkins, of Galveston, was a participant in the San Louis Hotel's costume contest on Saturday. His Viking costume includes moose horns, deer headdress, an alligator on his arm and a muskrat

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