

Mardi Gras by Dr. Joan Gorski

Mardi Gras takes place each February or March on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Lent begins. Lent, the forty day period of preparation for Easter, was for many years a time of strict fasting for Christians. On the day before the fast began, however, people held magnificent balls, parties and parades. It was a time for loud and lively celebrations before the serious and solemn Lenten period. Today's Mardi Gras celebrations, like those long ago are filled with excitement.

On Shrove Tuesday, many Europeans bake splendid breads and cakes. In Denmark and Norway, children try to take bites of Shrovetide buns which are hung from the ceiling and swung back and forth, In England, people call the holiday "Pancake Day" because they could not eat fat during Lent and by frying their pancakes, they used up leftover fat in the house. A few towns in England still stage pancake contests on the holiday. In one, women contestants run while carrying a pan of pancakes. Each runner must flip the pancakes over three times during the race. The term "flapjack" may have come from this game.

French settlers in New Orleans, Louisiana held the first American celebration of Mardi Gras in 1704. Today, Mardi Gras is a legal holiday in parts of Louisiana as well as Florida and Alabama. The New Orleans Mardi Gras parade, which takes place at night, is certainly the most spectacular celebration of the holiday in the United States.

The parade follows about 50 smaller parades held during the previous weeks by organizations called "Krews". One of these organizations, the Rex, chooses the king for the nighttime parade. No one outside this organization, however, knows who will be king until he rides down the parade route on his float.

The king is the only person in the parade who does not wear a mask. Even spectators wear masks and dress in costumes representing monsters, clowns, animals and celebrities. Many floats are pulled by mules and some are illuminated by torches. Often the floats have animated papier mache animals, serpents, mermaids and other creatures from myths and history. Gala balls take place after the parade, concluding the Mardi Gras celebration.