

Joe Cain and the Mobile Mardi Gras

It's Fat Tuesday as I write this. It's the last day of the carnival season, and the Mardi Gras parades are rolling out in Mobile, New Orleans, and lesser towns nationwide. Mardi Gras is a French term that translates to "Fat Tuesday." The day after is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent for Western Christian Churches. To put it into simple terms, Fat Tuesday is the last day to party and fatten up before Lent starts. Forty days of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are on the doorstep. If you are from an area that does not have a Mardi Gras celebration, there is a good chance you are celebrating Shrove Tuesday, and your church may have a pancake breakfast. That is all fine and good if that is how you want to celebrate, but I have a feeling Mardi Gras may blow your mind.

Mardi Gras seems to be growing in popularity, and you don't even have to go to Mobile or, god forbid, New Orleans to see a parade. A quick Goo-



gle search shows me that Mobile County has over 20 parades, with more parades in the Baldwin County towns of Orange Beach, Foley, Fairhope, Daphne, Gulf Shores, and Fort Morgan, to name a few. As you move north in the state, you will find parades in towns such as Andalusia, Dothan, Wetumpka, Birmingham, Decatur, and Huntsville. My son sent me a video of the parade in Auburn as it passed his dorm and headed towards Toomers Corner. Who would have thought?



Joe Cain as Chief Slackabamarinico

It might not be the real thing, but these cities are putting their all into celebrating Mardi Gras. The floats are impressive, the beads are plentiful, and everyone pretends that King Cake tastes good, not just the sad coffee cake it really is.

Are you still confused about what Mardi Gras is? I will explain more in the story, but for the purest out there, you may find me using the term Mardi Gras for the carnival season and not just Fat Tuesday.

When the world thinks of Mardi Gras, they think of New Orleans, and one would be mistaken to believe it was started there. But as every Mobilian will quickly tell you, Mardi Gras started in Mobile, Alabama.

Mobile was founded in 1702 by the French as the first capital of Louisiana, 17 years before that other Mardi Gras-celebrating city was founded. Mobile was a French colony for the next 100 years. The city then fell under the control of Great Britain and then Spain as part of Spanish West Florida before being seized by the United States in the War of 1812. It became part of the State of Alabama when it was granted statehood in 1819.

Mobile may have been “founded” in 1702, but the first celebration began a few years earlier. The French celebrated “Boeuf Gras,” which means fattened ox, and the French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville and his men are credited for starting this tradition in Mobile. In 1699, d’Iberville recorded in his journal that the men in the camp donned masks, feasted, and danced.

In 1703, Nicholas Langlois started the annual carnival, strictly a French Catholic celebration. He established a carnival organization called the Societe de Saint Louis with a masked ball called the Masque de la Mobile. The first parade in Mobile started in 1711 when the Boeuf Gras Society paraded with 16 men pushing a cart with a papier-mâché cow’s head.

As the colony changed hands, the celebrations would change to a degree. The celebration would change even more once it became a part of Alabama and the United States. In 1831, the celebration moved from the pre-lenten season to New Year’s.

Michael Kraft, a cotton broker, and some friends brought cowbells, rakes, and other farming implements and spontaneously marched throughout the city. When asked what was happening, they said they were the Cowbellion de Rakins Society and wanted to celebrate the coming year. The Cowbellions became the first of the secret organizations behind the parades.

In Mobile, these organizations would be known as Mystic Societies. They would host balls and parades during the carnival season. In New Orleans, these organizations are called Krewes. In 1856, three Cowbellion members met in the New Orleans French Quarter with three former members to create a new se-

cret society to follow the New Orleans Mardi Gras parade. They would become the Mistick Krewe of Comus, the first and oldest of New Orleans Krewes.

The Cowbellions were composed of white upper-class men, and they refused to let anyone else into their society. Working-class men and even woman would eventually organize their own societies.

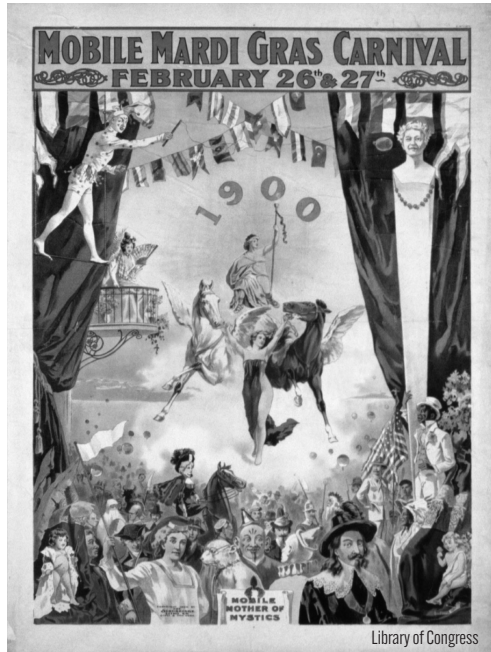
Things were going great with Mardi Gras until the civil war broke out, and the parades and balls were halted. When the war was over, the city of Mobile, and the south in general, were not in great shape. And the local citizens were reminded of it daily by the occupying Union forces who took control in April 1865.

If and when Mardis Gras would be resumed was probably not a high priority, but for one man, it was a priority. His name was Joe Cain.

Joe Cain was born in Mobile in 1832, the year before Mardi Gras moved to New Year's. He grew up enamored with the societies and became a charter member of the Tea Drinkers Society at the ripe old age of 13.

During the war, it is thought that he served in the Confederate army and lived briefly in New Orleans before returning in 1866. He wanted to revive Mardi Gras and return it to its original pre-lenten period, which was observed in New Orleans.

Cain and six members of the Tea Drinkers Society dressed as Indians and rode through town in a decorated charcoal wagon. Cain led this parade dressed as



Mobile Mardi Gras Carnival, February 26th & 27th 1900

Chickasaw Indian chieftain Slackabamarinico. This impromptu parade was a big hit with the citizens of Mobile.

There was no real Chief Slackabamarinico, but parading as a Chickasaw Indian had special meaning. It was a dig at the Union soldiers who would know that the Chickasaw tribe had never been defeated in war.

The following year, Chief Slackabamarinico returned. This time, he was joined by Confederate veterans playing instruments who called themselves the “L.C. Minstral Band,” which most people know as the “Lost Cause Minstrels.” The mythology of the Lost Cause, the idea that the South did not fight for slavery but honor and chivalry and that the slaves were treated well, would be a central theme of the Mardi Gras for many years.

Cain would work in many jobs in Mobile, but later in life, he and his wife moved in with his son in Bayou la Batre and became a farmer. He was a favorite at local festivals and died on April 17, 1904. He was recognized all over for his service to Mobile’s Mardi Gras. The Birmingham News published a notice with the dateline, Mobile, Ala., April 18. “Joseph S. Cain, the “father” of Mardi Gras in Mobile, died here today at the age of 72 years.” He was buried outside of Bayou la Batre in the Oddfellows Cemetery.



The societies stayed secret and exclusive to well-to-do white men

for years, but change eventually happened. In 1884, a Mobile store owner, Dave Levi, was denied membership in mystic societies because of his Jewish faith. He started the Comic Cowboys.

In 1894, the Order of Doves was the first African-American mystic society, lasting until around 1914. Another group, now known as the Mobile Area Mar-

di Gras Association or MAMGA, had its first parade of societies in 1939 for African-Americans.

The first all-woman parading society, The Order of Polka Dots, was formed in 1949.

In 1961, Le Krewe De Bienville formed Mobile's only civic and charitable organization to promote Mobile and its Mardi Gras. It started as a non-parading organization, and its ball was called the out-of-towners ball.

In 1980, the Order of Osiris held its first ball for the city's gay and lesbian community.

Even with all these groups forming societies, most Mobilians were resigned to being spectators. By the 1960s, there was a drive to make the parades more inclusive, but it really didn't take off until local author Julian Lee Rayford decided to honor the "father of Mardi Gras," Joe Cain. He thought it would be a great idea to take his body from Bayou la Batre and reinter it at the Church Street Graveyard in downtown Mobile. Rayford didn't just do it in the middle of the night. He had to convince surviving family members and city officials that it would be a great idea. He stated his case in *The Courier*, Bayou la Batre's newspaper. It took a little prodding, but all parties finally relented. Cain and his wife's mortal remains would return to Mobile.

In 1967, Rayford, dressed as Old Slac, as he was also known, led a jazz funeral procession through downtown to the Church Street Cemetery and to his grave, where the gravestone carries the inscription:

Here lies old Joe Cain
The heart and soul of Mardi Gras in Mobile
Joseph Stillwell Cain
Slacabamorinico - Old Slac
1832 - 1904

This procession would become an annual event from then on. Rayford would wear the feathers until he passed on the role of Old Slac in 1970. The feathers have been passed only two more times in the 55+ years of the procession's existence.

Today, Joe Cain Day is celebrated on the Sunday before Fat Tuesday, with the main event, the Joe Cain Procession. It is different from the other parades in that it is the people's parade as opposed to others run by a mystic society. At first, anyone could join the procession,

but it got so big that organizers had to limit the number of people and floats.

Once the procession reaches Joe Cain's grave, Mobilians dance upon his grave, and he is mourned by "Cain's Merry Widows." Formed in 1974, these veiled women, dressed in all black, cry aloud and mourn Cain's loss. In life, Joe Cain had but one wife. In death, he has 20. These women, with names such as Sue Ellen, Scarlet, Pearl, and Emmy Lou, will bicker about which one he loved the most.

Another group in mourning is "Joe Cains Merry Mistresses." They wear bright red gowns and veils and throw roses into the crowd. They join the Merry Widows



Wayne Dean, dressed as Joe Cain, Jr., poses at the grave of Joseph Stillwell Cain, Jr., in the Church Street Cemetery in Mobile.

in mourning the loss of Joe Cain.

I started writing this episode on Fat Tuesday, and you may be listening to this episode months later. Lucky for you, there is time to start planning your Mardi Gras trip to Mobile. Parades will begin in January and gain steam as they approach Fat Tuesday.

If you are a student of Mardi Gras in Mobile, I am sure you may find errors with the dates in my story or even how I have told it. While researching Joe Cain, I discovered that the truth might differ depending on who you are. If you read any Mobile Mardi Gras history from a New Orleans perspective, you might not like their thoughts about who started it.

The real truth about the beginning of Mardi Gras is everywhere. It's mysterious and secretive, like the Mystic Societies and Krewes that run Mardi Gras today. And I think that makes my story perfect.