

Anecdotes from Opal

Mardi Gras has always been my favorite holiday. I love all the other holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter—because they generally bring us together with our families and loved ones whom we may not have seen for a while. Additionally, those holidays usually entail a lot of work, preparing food, gifts, and accommodations, which I love, but with those holidays, for me, comes the stress of "getting it right" for everyone.

When Mardi Gras rolls around, it is just one big celebration for everyone. The preparation for the holiday is generally not as stressful as getting everything right for Christmas, Thanksgiving, or Easter. Mardi Gras is about having that last party before the Lenten season begins. The Lenten season is a time of fasting, praying, and reflecting upon the coming events of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday when Jesus rises, which is, after all, the reason we have Mardi Gras.

When I was a little girl, I would get so excited watching my grandmother (who learned English in the 8th grade) prepare for the Mardi Gras riders to come to her house to perform the Mardi Gras dance and song, then beg for some food for the community gumbo. Some riders were given the opportunity to chase a chicken from her collection, while other groups of riders were given brown paper sacks filled with rice, eggs, onions, flour, or potatoes—the other ingredients necessary for a gumbo. The riders were always dressed in disguises, appearing on horseback to provide us with a little song and dance. Before departing, they would always invite us to the feast that night. Seeing our traditions transported to another city like Bastrop, Texas, is a wonderful way to honor our ancestors. I am so appreciative of the efforts of Bastrop!

I have such fond memories of my childhood and parents. As a child, my parents and the surrounding neighbors would frequently have "house parties." As they lived out in the country, it was not always easy for them to "get to town to a dance hall." So, my parents, along with the neighbors, would take turns hosting a "house party." This would consist of them moving all the furniture out of the living room, cooking a big pot of food, such as gumbo, crawfish etouffee, or some other such common meal. They would pool together their collection of records, consisting mostly of Swamp Pop records (my mother's favorite was "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" by Freddie Fender and my grandmother's favorite, which was "La porte d'en arrière" – "The Back Door"). "The Back Door" is also my favorite Cajun French song by Mr. DL Menard. The house party would begin with all the adults dancing, while all the children would sit against a living room wall watching the adults dance. Our parents would each take a turn with their children – this is how we learned to dance. As the night wore on, as one would imagine, the children would get tired and fall asleep. ("Fais do-do" translates to, "go to sleep"). Our parents would then deposit us onto a bed in a designated room in the house, and all of us kids ended up piled up in one bed, all sleeping cross-ways in the bed, on the floor, or in a chair. It is one of my fondest memories of childhood, watching my parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents dancing, smiling, laughing, and having a great time, listening to all the great music. Such a simple time, but so sweet and cherished by all of us little ones. So, I guess I have been literally participating in a Fais do-do all of my life. It has always been a significant aspect of my life; I hadn't recognized its uniqueness until now... 😊

– Opal Andrus, President
Evangeline Parish Tourist Commission