

## DIXIE CLASSIC

Writer **ROBERT BITTNER** trades New Orleans mayhem for the **MOBILE FETE** that makes the Mardi Gras tradition a family affair.

NEW ORLEANS may have the claim to fame when it comes to Mardi Gras mayhem. But cities large and small along the American Gulf Coast celebrate the late-winter days leading up to Lent. And nowhere is there a more loyal—or historic—gathering than in Mobile, Alabama.

“We are the city that brought Mardi Gras to North America in a serious way,” says George Ewert, director of the Museum of Mobile. According to museum records, Mardi Gras came to the States—via Mobile—at the start of the 1700s, but it quickly languished. Then in the 1830s, Michael Krafft, a Pennsylvania-Dutch transplant, began celebrating the season with yearly dinner parties where guests would end the evening parading through the streets. From Krafft’s homemade tradition, Mardi Gras took off.

Today, Mobile is mad for Mardi Gras. It’s the heavy, hot aroma of kettle corn and roasted pecans for sale in the street. It’s the heart-stopping drums of high-school marching bands. It’s packaged Moon Pies flung from passing floats into eager hands.

Unlike its more-famous Louisiana cousin, Mobile’s Mardi Gras is a family-friendly affair. “A family can come here and never have to worry about the kinds of things you’d see in the French Quarter,” Ewert says.

That’s partly because of the ties between Mardi Gras and Mobile society. In this town, there’s more emphasis on pageantry than on partying. Debut balls launch the season at Thanksgiving, and debutantes stay in the public eye until they are honored as the Mardi Gras queen and court at a coronation ceremony.

Because every fete needs finery, many in the queen’s court will wear the one-of-a-kind creations of local seamstress Karen Thornton. For 23 years, Thornton has created spectacular gowns for the balls and fundraising events synonymous with Mardi Gras in Mobile. Imported fabrics, fur, and millions of Swarovski rhinestones mean that a dress can end up costing more than \$20,000. Once worn, they are permanently retired and, often, exhibited at the Museum of Mobile.

“There’s a lot of money in Mobile, but they don’t flaunt it like other places. You can’t buy your way into the Mardi Gras court,” Thornton says. “To get there, you have to have been conceived under an azalea bush!”

The rest of us will just have to find a good place along the parade route. And look out for those Moon Pies. ★

ROBERT BITTNER *freelances from Michigan.*



### THE TICKET

The Museum of Mobile is located at 111 South Royal St. Call 251/208-7569 or visit [museumofmobile.com](http://museumofmobile.com).