

# *Lagniappe* Reviews :

## Local historian pens Mardi Gras series

By: [Kevin Lee](#) | May 27, 2015

For the last few decades, Mobilian Ann Pond has taught history at Bishop State, Spring Hill College and the University of South Alabama in addition to her work as a freelance journalist. Now she's managed to combine all of those pursuits into one project with the potential to impact local legends.

As part of her doctorate work at the University of Southern Mississippi, Pond decided to focus on a distinctly Creole phenomenon in the United States: Mardi Gras. Her dissertation aimed to untangle the knot of folklore around the holiday's American origins and she has now turned all that research into a trilogy of books.

Her initial offering, "The First Cowbellion: Masons, Mummies and the Birth of America's Mardi Gras," couldn't be more self-explanatory. It traces a consummate story of American creation, blending pre-existing cultural elements to fashion something new.

Pond begins the story with the first French incursions into the New World but then widens scope. With an academician's sense for truth, she thoroughly covers the holiday's background, its customs centuries beforehand.

The first of Ann Pond's three books inspired by Mardi Gras begins with the first French incursions into the New World but also paints a picture of Mobile in the 1830s.

However, it's her ability as a writer to speak in relatable language that will endear the book to average Gulf Coast residents. Likewise, the picture she paints of Mobile in the 1830s — on the cusp between its frontier roots and the feudal South soon to emerge — is crucial to grasping context.

Pennsylvanian Michael Krafft and his family relocated to Mobile as it was at the beginning of the Cotton Boom. It wasn't long before Michael reshaped Mobile's social calendar, with New Year's celebrations spawned in part by similar happenings in Pennsylvania and elaborated further through input from others.

Following "The First Cowbellion" is a volume entitled "Masons and Mardi Gras." It explores how secret societies formed for Mobile New Year's events shifted time, place and form to something we would more clearly recognize now.

New Orleans' licentious Carnival party resulted in their banning masking in 1803. However it was the violent and rambunctious happenings of free-for-all parades in the 1840s and '50s that led local press to call for the events' outlaw altogether.

Once again, customs merged as Mobile's habits and patterns for New Year's were applied to New Orleans pre-Lenten celebrations. What emerged was a more modern version of what we know as Mardi Gras processions.

Pond goes further, though, with an examination of possible secret purposes to the fraternal societies. She looks at the private and public lives of the men behind the masks and rumors of how it was tied to the Civil War's beginning.

The last of the trilogy is "Cain and His Lost Cause Generation." Pond looks at the modern connotation of Joe Cain for Mobilians and holds it up against the truth of his times.

The first book is currently available. The second goes on sale June 1 and the third will be available July 1. All are available on Google, Amazon or [ann-j-pond.squarespace.com](http://ann-j-pond.squarespace.com). Kindle and electronic versions may also be purchased.

It's obvious Pond has put years of research and scholarship into this. Anyone who loves regional and national history would be well served by her efforts.

The greater part of Pond's contributions to Gulf Coast history is that she makes a wonderful effort to not shine a light on the truth for its own sake but to fill in the divides many strive to entrench between Mobile and New Orleans on the subject of Mardi Gras. Such pedantry is not just unbecoming but self-defeating, as it robs us of our hallmark strength as Americans.

## Second book in Mardi Gras trilogy peels back the masks

By: [Kevin Lee](#) | July 15, 2015

Author and historian Ann Pond's second book in her trilogy on Gulf Coast Mardi Gras landed in the Artifice email recently. Its relatively short length relative to the first work — roughly 66 pages apart from footnotes — made it a quick read, but that's no indictment of its story.

If anything, Pond has revealed a history far more baroque than the shortened version so widely disseminated in these parts. Interwoven with so much of the cultural landscape and our nation's knack for reinvention, she has given us a tale quintessentially American.

The first book established the Gulf Coast backdrop in the colonial and early American era, along with the emerging prosperity of Mobile and the birth of the city's New Year's Eve celebrations at the hands of Michael Krafft and friends. It also showed New Orleans' own Fat Tuesday masking tradition documented as far back as 1730.

This work, "Masons and Mardi Gras," briefly touches on those times then ventures headlong into titular matters. Pond maintains such fraternal organizations imbued the Cowbellion de Rakins and subsequent groups with uniquely mysterious elements.

According to the author, "Masons and Mardi Gras" examines the private and public lives of the men behind the masks, the reason for all the secrecy, and the rumors that link Mardi Gras in New Orleans to the start of the Civil War.

Freemasonry was an important component of colonial America. Brought from Europe, it was "redefined and standardized" in the mid-1700s by American intellectual and political leaders. Its strong presence was evidenced throughout the philosophies and arguments of our Founding Fathers and George Washington even sported Masonic attire at his inauguration.

Mobile's first Freemasons lodge was founded in 1813. Its Grand Warden even happened to hold the office of mayor at the time the Cowbellion de Rakins were organized.

Freemasons used mystique to their advantage. They draped their doings in ritual and secrecy, a fanciful adaptation which quickly migrated to the New Year's Eve groups.

One of the Freemasons' few public efforts were parades, which waned not long before the New Year's groups launched their efforts. Ironically, the last procession of the last lodge of an order dedicated to "the refinement of virtue" marched past a slave market and public slave whipping post on their way down Royal Street.

Pond quoted New Orleans Picayune notes of Crescent City parades in 1837, but on Fat Tuesday. They were a shadow of the pomp and circumstance seen in Mobile streets on New Year's at the time.

The author noted Mobile's Krafft could have been in New Orleans in 1837 but the term "cowbellion" used in said article was a general term for a rambunctious gathering. It emerged in New Orleans newspaper accounts long before Mobilians' impact.

Another influence in the 1830s and '40s was the emergence of live theater on the Gulf Coast. Theatricality grew in both cities' Freemasonry, in Mobile's New Year's festivities in the form of tableaux and themed parades and in the masquerade balls popular in New Orleans on Fat Tuesday.

An interesting footnote is that John Wilkes Booth's father visited Mobile for a stage performance in 1838, not three years after he wrote a letter to President Andrew Jackson threatening to cut the chief executive's throat with a knife over a pair of captive pirates Booth wished free. Talk about foreshadowing.

The tone of Mobile's festivities also changed over those first decades. When the New Year's groups began at the spark of Mobile's biggest-ever boom, observers found all levels of society gleefully merging in the soirees. Within 20 years, the events grew more exclusionary, with costumes ordered from Paris and members who took themselves far more seriously.

New Orleans still held generally rowdier and more-inclusive affairs. Another difference was the longtime popularity of New Orleans' mixed-race balls, whereas Mobile passed city codes banning blacks from events.

As the Cowbellion de Rakins grew more refined through the 1840s, New Orleans' events lost luster. Daytime costumers ebbed and the pranking of young boys became worse, with weapons being thrown amidst the traditional powdered sugar and flour. In 1848 the Picayune wrote "few respectable persons now dare to show themselves in the streets, and mob law has triumphed." The evening's balls, however, retained hearty endorsement.

In 1852, one last attempt at a daytime New Orleans parade was a shambles. The author credits two men — cotton broker Joseph Ellison and merchant Samuel Manning Todd — with a solution.

Both New Orleanians had dealings and connections in Mobile, with Todd having once held public office here. They solicited advice from Cowbellion de Rakins and members of similar Mobile groups and from that grew the Mystick Krewe of Comus, New Orleans' first Mardi Gras parading society built on the Mobile New Year's template.

As that came to fruition, war brewed between North and South. Before long, both cities were ravaged and their separate days of frivolity ceased. In 1864, the Mobile Advertiser and Register noted there were no New Year's events.

"The Civil War might have caused an irrevocable break with the past in Mobile, as it did in many other American cities, had it not been for the richness, the quality and the depth of the ritual experience among Mobile's elite," Pond wrote. "There remained in Mobile an undeniable continuity with the past exhibited in its continued conservatism toward all social and economic aspects of life. Such a conservative response was well grounded in the functions of the antebellum fraternal order ... The continuity of ceremonial ritual was synonymous with Old South values."

Her extensive footnoting and documentation give this history heft uncommon to urban mythology and folklore. The arrival of the third book and the tale of Fat Tuesday's renaissance is eagerly anticipated on this end.

For more on this book and its companions, go to [ann-j-pond.squarespace.com](http://ann-j-pond.squarespace.com). Kindle and electronic versions may also be purchased.

## Mardi Gras mystery solved in Cain book

By: [Kevin Lee](#) | November 11, 2015

A favorite quote likens journalists' social status to that of prostitutes and bartenders, but their philosophical standing as "beside Galileo because they know the world is round." Those attributes aren't independent but intertwined.

Outside the power structure, you have nothing to lose by speaking truth. Yet to do so is a path to alienation and marginalization.

The same could be said of a good historian. Part detective, part epistemologist and philosopher, their dogged adherence to uncovering truth often puts them at odds with the status quo.

Ann Pond enters the fray with the last in her trilogy of books on Mobile Mardi Gras, "Cain and his Lost Cause Generation." More than a regurgitation of threadbare popular myth, Pond's citation of sources and unraveling of fable reads as well-grounded in diligence.

Pond's preview revisits territory meticulously traced in the previous works — "The First Cowbellion" and "Masons and Mardi Gras" — and sketches the intricate symbiosis between Mobile's New Year's celebrations and New Orleans' Mardi Gras. It's a good primer.

The first chapter delivers a wallop when it looks at the central question of how modern myths about the holiday emerged despite ample documentation to the contrary. Two names emerge as the wellspring.

Artist and writer Julian Rayford is well known as the man who gave us the modern Joe Cain Day and wrote the first book-length historical account of Mobile Mardi Gras, "Chasin' the Devil 'Round a Stump." It canonized contemporary beliefs.

But where did Rayford gather his information? It seems to have come from Francois "Frank" Diard, an early 20th century Mobilian committed to elevating the status of his hometown without adherence to a historian's ethics.

Diard amassed a so-called “family history,” an abundance of information and “records” about colonial Mobile and its residents as spurious as his claims of relationship to the Brothers Le Moyne, d’Iberville and Bienville. Pond said no proof of such lineage exists.

The problem with Diard’s research is his dedication to making his findings fit his end goal of giving Mobile as many credited “firsts” as possible. Among those claims are that Mobile and his family had the first azalea, the first garden, the first gumbo and the first Mardi Gras on the Gulf Coast.

Through his 38-year occupation with the Mobile Register and lifelong association with its editor Erwin Craighead, Diard’s claims were never subjected to due scrutiny. Plus, there is the human tendency to believe what is most flattering.

Diard claimed “Boeuf Gras” celebrations began in colonial Mobile and continued uninterrupted until Fat Tuesday of 1861. Pond and previous researchers say historical proof for this is nonexistent, not in d’Iberville’s journals, the Penicaut Narrative or historically documented stories from subsequent French immigrants. Diard disseminated these other fanciful ideas as widely as possible, including in articles written for national publication. After a while, it became the accepted narrative.

Rayford was undoubtedly influenced by Diard. Rayford also championed a vision of Joe Cain as a symbol of wresting power from elites and spurning outside influence.

Pond cites not only Cain’s participation in New Orleans Mardi Gras festivities of 1867 but newspaper accounts claiming the 1868 Mobile Mardi Gras celebrations “ushered in a new era.”

To Rayford, Cain was a worthy source of information about Mobile’s most cherished pastime. He extolled Cain’s virtues, engineered the long-dead city clerk’s disinterment from Bayou La Batre to historic Church Street Graveyard and spurred the inception of the Joe Cain Day procession on the Sunday preceding Lundi Gras.

Pond’s book goes on to discuss the Mobile of Cain’s youth, a town on the crest of the Cotton Boom wave. The social picture she paints is that of a frontier town on the rise, reinventing itself and hewing away the rougher parts of its culture.

Also included is an in-depth telling of the story of the Boyington Oak and the tragedy that led to its eerie legend. Fittingly, the oak stands not far from Cain’s current resting spot.

There’s no way to tell this story without ample focus on New Orleans, and Pond doesn’t disappoint in that regard. Her descriptions of the Crescent City culture and Mardi Gras customs are just as vivid and detailed as those of Mobile, detailing the similarities and differences.

Unsurprisingly, the nascent civic rivalry between both cities is obvious and manifested in the tourism marketing undertaken in the antebellum period. Let’s just say the “family Mardi Gras” angle was well underway long before Mobile even observed Carnival.

If “the truth will set you free,” then these three volumes are pure liberation.