

## Cajun Mardi Gras Run

David Bertrand was born in 1955, and presently lives in Elton, Louisiana. He is the fifth generation of his family to farm rice and raise cattle in Elton. Along with his wife, he is the owner of Estherwood Rice/Bertrand Rice. He is an expert rice farmer, miller, and a talented artist. David makes hand painted rice bags featuring his sketches of the local Mardi Gras runs. He is also a skilled woodworker and makes handmade wooden boxes.

In the early 20th century the rural Mardi Gras tradition was very strong in Elton. The town hosted two Mardi Gras runs each year, one which ran north of town and one that ran south of town. By the time David was a young man, the local Mardi Gras run had disappeared. David Bertrand says, "about a half a dozen years ago, we wanted to start running again, because everybody from our town was scattering to run in Mamou, Oberlin, and in Eunice. Everybody was scattering and we were losing our traditional run at home. We were very fortunate to find some of the elderly people who had run in 1925 to give us an oral history of the tradition at the time. In 1996, we ran the same route that they ran in 1925, making the same stops, and trying to keep in real tradition."

The all male run travels on horseback through the countryside and into Elton. The riders are dressed in tall, pointed hats called capuchons, fringed Mardi Gras suits in bright colors, and screen masks. The leader of the run, the capitaine, carries a braided whip, or quoit, made from a burlap sack. When the procession stops at a house, the captain approaches to ask permission from the homeowner for the Mardi Gras to visit. When permission is given, the riders dismount and crawl towards the house on hands and knees, whooping loudly. They then dance for their hosts in exchange for the gift of a live chicken, rice, other ingredients for their gumbo, or money. Before leaving, they invite their hosts to come share their gumbo that evening.

Mr. Bertrand and other community members continue to make their Mardi Gras run in Elton each season.

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