



Gerald Frugé

Cajun Mardi Gras Capitaine

Mardi Gras runs or *courirs de Mardi Gras* take place each year in almost two dozen Cajun and Creole communities in Acadiana's prairie parishes. In one of Louisiana's most richly dramatic traditions, masked and costumed riders on horses, trucks, or wagons ride from house to house in their community begging for contributions to their gumbo that night. At each stop, they entertain their hosts by singing, dancing, and clowning in exchange for donations.

The small rural Acadia Parish area known as "Tee Mamou" has hosted an all male Mardi Gras run for as long as anyone can remember. Gerald Frugé' has been its head *capitaine* for over twenty-five years. When the women in Tee Mamou decided they wanted to form their own Mardi Gras run more than twenty years ago, they approached Gerald Frugé' about being their captain as well. He continues to captain for the women's run each year on the weekend before Fat Tuesday. As captain, he remains undisguised and, assisted by five or six assistant captains, is responsible for maintaining discipline and order among the group of costumed Mardi Gras riders.

As a boy, Gerald Frugé watched his older brothers run Mardi Gras, as participating in the *courir* is called, and had always hoped to mask himself one day. However, by the late 1960s, the popularity of the local MardiGras run had waned and the group no longer had a *capitaine* to lead them. With his wife Linda, he attended a Tee Mamou Mardi Gras dance at the old FourCorners Club and was recruited as a temporary captain for the dance. Afterwards, he agreed to be their capitaine the following year and hassle the maskers, who ride on a brightly painted, converted cattle trailer, on their route through the countryside each year since then.

At only 24, he was young to be a head *capitaine*, but he felt strongly that the tradition should be kept alive for those who wanted to run. As he says, "When I saw it [about to] die out, I knew what it meant to me to try to have a Mardi Gras, and I was always looking forward to being able to run Mardi Gras when I got out of school.... And I guess that's what...motivated me to be a captain so that other young people that wanted to run Mardi Gras wouldn't be in the predicament that I was."

Under Frugé's leadership the run underwent some reorganization and has steadily grown. The men's Mardi Gras run on Tuesday typically draws at least forty to seventy participants and the women's Saturday run usually attracts at least thirty runners. A downtown festival in the nearby town of Iota on Mardi Gras day is timed to coincide with the Mardi Gras run's triumphant march into town and thousands of locals and visitors line the streets to watch their approach. Mardi Gras is truly a family tradition for the Frugé's today. Gerald's wife Linda often participates in the women's run, as do his two daughters. His two sons usually accompany him as assistant captains. The weeks before Mardi Gras are

busy ones for the family, spent handling numerous last minute arrangements and working on costumes and masks. Although being *capitaine* is a great deal of work, Frugé says that seeing people "from all walks of life" get together and "all have fun doing the same thing" makes it worthwhile and "keeps me going."

The Tee Mamou Mardi Gras association has performed at the Jean Lafitte park in New Orleans, the Louisiana Folklife Festival, and the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival.