

## Miller, Jackie



### **Prairie Cajun Mardi Gras Screen Mask and Costume Maker**

Jackie Miller of Iota, Louisiana in Acadia Parish grew up among old-time Cajuns. She listened to their recipes, remedies, stories, music, and their traditions. As a young girl, she watched her mother, various aunts, relatives and friends, spend quite some time before the start of the Lenten season preparing costumes and masks for the men and teenage boys to wear in their *courir de Mardi Gras*. This rural Mardi Gras run is quite different from the New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration. In fact, the *courir*, as celebrated in Tee-Mamou, is thought to have its roots in medieval peasantry.

Historians believe that the peasants would construct makeshift masks and costumes to wear as they traveled in groups from house to house to beg for food. In imitation of the fashion of the Queen and other wealthy and powerful citizens, they would fashion conical hats much like a dunce hat, which are called *capuchins*. The masks used to hide their identity were made from whatever material was available.

In southwest Louisiana since the 1850s, cardboard box material, cloth, needle and thread, horsehair, wool, screen, and plant parts have been used. Today Jackie makes her masks either from wire screen or from plastic mesh or canvas. This screen is cut into a six to eight inch form that fits over the face. The mask is then decorated with acrylic yarn, paint, or any other found material and with lots of imagination. Ribbons, braid, sequins, bone, pom-poms, and old wigs ensure that each wire mask is unique. An elastic strap attached to each side of the wire holds the mask snugly in place.

For the *capuchins*, a piece of poster board is shaped and taped in a long, conical shape. This is then covered with brightly colored cloth. Another quarter yard of cloth is gathered and attached to the bottom, back edge of the cone, extending around to each side of the face area. This loose hanging cloth drapes over the back and shoulders of the person, covering the neck and the sides of the face. The capuchin is then decorated with ribbon, braid, ruffles, bells, sequins, pom-poms, lace and

anything else one can imagine. Each mask and each *capuchin* is unique and original and if not a thing of beauty, at least a thing of wonder!

Jackie makes masks and *capuchins* for herself, her five sons, and for their friends. Jackie has an apprentice to whom she is teaching this unique craft. Jackie demonstrates her craft at various fairs and festivals throughout the state, including Louisiana's 1995 Folklife Festival in Monroe. Jackie has been officially recognized by the state of Louisiana as a master craftswoman by being accepted into the Louisiana Crafts Program.