

## Prima, Lucille



### St. Patrick's Day and St. Joseph's Day "Kissing Canes"

St. Patrick's Day is celebrated all over the United States, but nowhere as uniquely as it is in New Orleans. The New Orleans St. Patrick's Day parade blends Mardi Gras and Irish American traditions. The morning usually begins with attendance at a Roman Catholic mass. Later, groups of tuxedo-clad Irishmen strut and dance their way through the streets of the Irish Channel to the music of a brass band. Floats follow the Irishmen, and green doubloons, beads, and the ingredients for Irish stew are tossed to spectators. Each member of the marching clubs carry a flower cane, decorated with clusters of green and white (and sometimes orange) paper flowers. Every flower on the cane is given to women in exchange for a kiss. These flowers are treasured long afterwards as part of the traditional celebration.

Two days later, on March 19, the city celebrates St. Joseph's Day in much the same manner. Members of Italian American marching clubs parade through the French Quarter wearing tuxedos and carrying flower canes in the colors of the Italian flag (red, green, and white). They exchange flowers for kisses from women along their route.

Since 1968, Lucille Prima has made the colorful flower canes (or kissing canes, as she sometimes calls them) carried by several Italian American and Irish American clubs. A native of New Orleans, she is of French, German, and Italian heritage. She began practicing Italian traditions when she wed Frank Prima, Jr. She began making the canes upon request of her sons. After observing the kissing canes on parade routes, she figured out how to make the paper flowers. She says she has made great improvements on the canes over the last 25 years. Mrs. Prima works in her home to make the paper flowers year round.

Each cane is the result of more than six hours of handwork. Each of its 150 tissue-paper carnations is made from three strips of paper, which is bunched and squeezed together in the middle, then wrapped in the middle with wire to form a stem. To form the petals, she separates the paper and uses an upward tug. The flowers are arranged in a circle and fastened to a foam strip. The strip is attached to a bamboo walking cane. The result is a "barbershop" spiral of color. The colors of the paper flowers match the costumes of the marching clubs and the flags of Ireland or Italy. Decorations of net, ribbon, and small trinkets are attached to give the cane an even more decorative look.

Although the canes are dismantled quickly during the parade, Mrs. Prima says, "Making them is truly a labor of love." Mrs. Prima's canes are in demand among members of the Italian American

Marching Club, the St. Patrick's Day Irish Channel Marching Club, and Mardi Gras marching clubs who know her as "The Flower Lady."

One of her kissing canes is on exhibit in the Creole State Exhibit in the State Capital Building in Baton Rouge. Mrs. Prima has demonstrated her craft at the Louisiana Folklife Festival and the New Orleans Jazz Festival.