



CONTACT:

Arthur M. Smith
Director, Marketing & Communications
Louisiana State Museum
504.568.6867
asmith@crt.la.us.gov

Clarence Becknell
Zulu Historian
Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club
504.615.8655
Clarence.becknell@us.army.mil

From Tramps to Kings: 100 Years of Zulu

A synopsis by Charles Chamberlain, Ph.D., Louisiana State Museum Historian

The Louisiana State Museum and the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club are partnering to commemorate Zulu's centennial in 2009 with a special yearlong exhibit at the Presbytere on Jackson Square. Here is a brief synopsis of Zulu history from its whimsical origins in 1909 to its present role as a vital institution that benefits the whole community.

Most New Orleans residents know Zulu as a parading organization. But few realize that Zulu is a social aid and pleasure club in the mold of the countless African-American benevolent associations that have provided essential social services, such as funeral costs, for members since the 19th century. The earliest Zulu parades were sponsored by African-American businesses, the most significant of which were the Gertrude Geddes Willis Funeral Homes and Good Citizens Insurance Company. The Geddes location on Jackson Avenues has for decades served as an important meeting spot for the parade. From 1917 through the early 1950s, the parade began at the New Basin Canal and Claiborne Avenue. After that date, the parade began in the vicinity of Claiborne and Jackson Avenues.

Zulu traces its origins to 1909, when the original founders paraded as a marching club. Between 1912 and 1914, the group had adopted an African theme for their costumes and became known as the Zulus. The group took its inspiration from a vaudeville troupe known as the Smart Set, which performed a skit featuring a Zulu theme at the Temple Theater. This intersection of popular culture and masking is not surprising given that the new Temple Theater (234 Loyola

Synopsis, page 2.

Avenue) was located one block from the original Zulu clubhouse on Perdido at Loyola Avenue, where a parking lot exists today.

The early Zulu costume was inspired by the skit “There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me,” in which the characters wore grass skirts and dressed in blackface, a common practice in vaudeville theater, both black and white. In the 1910s, Zulu members gathered grass (known as “seagrass”) that grew along the Mississippi River, which founder John Metoyer’s wife, Catherine, used to make skirts for the members. The costume also included black-dyed turtlenecks (known as “goosenecks”) and tights purchased from theatrical supply stores. The original wigs consisted of straight black hair. After the 1910s, the costume evolved slightly, as members began to import grass skirts from Hawaii and black cotton tights from South Carolina. Some members used the Spanish moss from nearby swamps for wigs and rabbit fur as a decoration. Zulu boots were painted gold.

In 1916, the club incorporated and gradually gained a legion of supporters with their Mardi Gras antics. After World War I, a visionary club member and army veteran, James Robertson, instituted the dramatic arrival of King Zulu by boat where the New Basin Canal crossed Claiborne. By the 1930s, huge crowds of Mardi Gras revelers lined up at the canal to await King Zulu. This custom fell by the wayside in the 1950s when the city filled in the canal, but Zulu eventually reprised the waterborn landing in 1993 with a riverfront arrival for the annual Zulu Lundi Gras festival at Woldenberg Park.

Characters and Queens

The Zulu characters have been a part of the Zulu parade since the very beginning, starting with the king. By the early 1920s, as Zulu grew, the club created additional characters to add to the merriment. These characters include the Big Shot of Africa, the Witch Doctor, the Mayor, the Ambassador, the Province Prince, the Governor, and Mr. Big Stuff. In the 1930s and 1940s, Zulu parades included a number of short-lived characters, such as Chief Ubangi, Zambango the Snake Man, the Head Hunter, and Jungle Jim.

From 1923 to 1933, male members had masked as the Zulu queen, following a common Mardi Gras tradition of men appearing as women, often to comic effect. When the Ladies Auxiliary formed in 1933, the Zulu club began selecting queens from this group, a practice that continued into the 1970s. In 1933, the first female queen debuted at the official toasting site of Geddes and Moss on Jackson Avenue, a tradition that continues to the present day. In 1948 Zulu

Synopsis, page 3.

became the first Mardi Gras organization to feature a queen in its parade, when Edwina Robertson and her maids rode on the first Zulu queen's float.

Coconuts and King Louis

Zulu is well known for its coconut tradition, in which parade riders use hand-decorated coconuts as carnival throws on Mardi Gras. The origins of the coconut tradition are not well documented, but Zulu historians believe that the prized items date back to the early 1910s. Because of New Orleans' role as a major port for Latin American food products such as coconuts, it is not surprising that the item was adopted. A major centerpiece of the exhibit will be a re-created coconut decorating workshop displaying the various steps in the decorating process.

The exhibit will also highlight Louis Armstrong's reign as King Zulu in 1949. Armstrong, who grew up near Zulu's first clubhouse, had always dreamed of being a member, but never thought he would be king. When the Zulu Club elected the jazz legend to serve as King Zulu in 1949, Armstrong claimed it was one of his greatest honors, and he relished every moment of his reign. *Time* magazine paid tribute with a cover illustration of King Louis wearing his crown. The exhibit will feature numerous artifacts from Armstrong's reign, including a coconut he distributed, a reproduction of his scrapbook, and personal audiotape recordings.

Civil Rights

Zulu made civil rights history in 1969 when the city granted the club permission to parade on Canal Street, the historic route of Rex and other white parades. This route change, not typically viewed as a civil rights victory, was significant and symbolic in that an African American carnival organization became part of the city's official Mardi Gras festivities, and paraded in a public space historically reserved for white parades. While boycott supporters generally perceived Zulu members as valuing Carnival celebration over the fight against discrimination, Zulu members generally believed that the two activities were not mutually exclusive. By 1973, Zulu historian John_Rousseau proclaimed, "Our members support all organizations fighting for the rights of blacks, the oppressed and all men."

The Modern Era

Given the new higher-profile route of Zulu and the dismantling of formal segregation, Zulu entered a new era of unprecedented popularity and support in the 1970s and 1980s. Under

Synopsis, page 4.

President Roy Glapion Jr., who later became a city councilman, Zulu gained a new respectability and made greater efforts to support the community as part of its mission. Finding inspiration in its benevolent society origins, Zulu members volunteered to feed the needy at holiday time and organized fundraisers for sickle-cell anemia research as the Zulu Grinders Can Shakers. The club also organized the Zulu Ensemble gospel choir, reflecting the spiritual enthusiasm of many members. The Zulus began to reach out to young people with a youth organization and partnerships with local schools to encourage academics and an interest in New Orleans parading traditions.

This centennial year provides an excellent opportunity for the Louisiana State Museum and Zulu to celebrate the club's rich history, its accomplishments, and its dedication to community service.

#