FROM TRIPOD

Fight For Five: The Flambeaux Strike Of 1946

<https://www.wwno.org/post/fight-five-flambeaux-strike-1946>

Mardi Gras had been suspended for 4 years due to war.

1946 the war is over.

Then the strike.

1. There is also an article by PAPERMONUMENTS: <https://neworleanshistorical.org/items/show/1436>

The papermon article hits the radical angle more, and has quotations from blacks of the time.

1. Also an article in OXFORD AMERICAN that was referenced in the TRIPOD article, and was written by one of those interviewed by TRIPOD.

<https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/1103-the-keepers-of-the-light>

Like many white New Orleanians back then, we thrilled to the tinny plink-plink-plink of the coins as they skipped across the pavement and to the drama of the men’s struggle to balance their fire-heavy burdens as they stooped to scoop up the silver.

* Early 1990’s stopped throwing coins, Now they are placed in palms.
* Carnival is not all mirth and gaiety. The festival season is a hustle for many, an albatross worn like a neckful of plastic beads, and the worst time of the year for more than a few. The ugly underbelly of Mardi Gras manifests itself in countless ways, plainly visible, often unmasked
* One of the earliest descriptions of a New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration, dating back to 1730 and collected in the recently published book A Company Man: The Remarkable French-Atlantic Voyage of a Clerk for the Company of the Indies, can be found in the memoir of Marc-Antoine Caillot, a Frenchman and minor administrator newly arrived in the nascent colony. Dressed as a white-corseted shepherdess, Caillot rallied a band of maskers and set off for a party “accompanied by eight actual Negro slaves, who each carried a flambeau to light our way.” Additional mentions from the colonial era are hard to come by. But open most any modern Mardi Gras guide, and you’ll read tales of enslaved and free men of color forcibly conscripted in this same manner into illuminating the Mardi Gras weekend for a city that, because its system of gas-fueled streetlights was so lousy, otherwise lived in the shadows
* 2016- most, as custom dictates, wore tattered, soot-stained white robes.
* a passerby, obviously a tourist because he was dripping in beads before the parade had even begun, stopped to stare at the black men in white robes holding burning crosses. “This looks like a KKK rally,” he whispered to me, his eyes wide at the disjunction in the scene. We shared a nod.
* They will walk in the parades without being of the parades
* Researching the history of the flambeaux is tricky. Men treated as walking spotlights did not warrant a mention in the pages of city newspapers of yore
* THE FIRST FLAMBEAUX:? *On January 7, the Daily Picayune trumpeted “a new and startling feature” of Carnival: the Crescent City Flambeau Club. Modeled after similar “flambeau battalions” hailing from the Mardi Gras–less cities of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Topeka, this local franchise promised a splendid display of flambeaux and fireworks. After a weekend of soggy weather delayed the scheduled event for several days, the C.C.F.C. took to the streets late in the evening hours of Lundi Gras, or the Monday before Mardi Gras, February 21. A procession billed as one hundred fifty “drilled and disciplined” men, many of them Confederate army veterans, and all presumably white, marched platoon-style in matching white helmets and white uniforms trimmed with brass buttons. A brass band led the way, according to newspaper reports, followed by a drum corps, hulking ammunition wagons, ten pikemen armed with gold-tipped spears, and, throughout, the flambeaux, wielding torches laced with chemicals that made their fires sparkle red, green, gold, and white. Another downpour could not deter the crowds, who arrived by the thousands, huddling under umbrellas to witness the cavalcade wind its way through the city’s business district, before culminating with “a grand pyrotechnical display.”*

The flambeaux I’ve known since childhood don’t march in “drilled and disciplined” fashion. The flambeaux I know peacock and buckjump and twirl their torches, to the delight—and fear—of the audience. They make their strenuous walk a competition, a tutorial in improvisation, transforming the parade route into a five-mile soul train, inciting spectators to empty their pockets. They become the center of attention, out-spectacle the spectacle, reinvent the inner workings of Mardi Gras by becoming more carnivalesque than Carnival itself.

There’s no record of when the flambeaux first transformed their walk into a dance, no reports of when tipping the torchbearers began, but it likely happened organically, from the freedom provided by having one’s feet on streets that were otherwise unwelcoming to black men. Dancing would become a form of resistance.

* Chris Lawless, a longtime carrier, told me that toting is like getting paid to exercise: “free money,” he called it. A perfect parade evening—clear skies, warm weather, and well-liquored crowds—can guarantee a flambeau three to four hundred dollars. The largess increases stratospherically if you’re one of a handful—torch-toting lifers all—who lead the procession into the black-tie galas that climax many of the bigger parades
* Wages gradually increased over time—Clarence Holmes remembers making seven and a half dollars when he started toting in the late 1960s—to the current value of sixty or eighty dollars, depending on the parade (captains make upwards of twenty dollars more)
* I met two flambeaux old enough to recall the era when the police patrolled the flambeaux scene with a mafioso’s mien. Before the Clarences supervised the process, police officers randomly handed out numbered tickets to a mob of potential carriers. The disorder inherent in the system was met with violence. “They put the dogs on you,” Walter McGee remembers (in particular one vicious canine with a gold tooth that the men knew to avoid). Bill Grady, a Times-Picayune reporter, described a similar process in 1987. The police made the carriers run a gauntlet between a pair of snarling Rottweilers to acquire their torches. The men were mauled. They lost fingers. They carry scars
* Integration eventually came in 1984, when the flambeaux admitted Patrick Landry, a musician and resident bohemian, into the fold. Though he is now a respected veteran, his fellow torch carriers still call him Vanilla Ice, the nickname he received on the day he dared ask for a light.