

Aluminum Doubloons Up For Grabs In Annual Mardi Gras Festivities

By **MIKE ROSS**
Contributing Correspondent
Special to *Alumination*

■ **NEW ORLEANS, LA.**—More than 300,000 pounds of aluminum will be given away free of charge here in February.

If you'd like some of it, you're going to have to do battle with a few million others who have the same idea. But this is no scrap sale or inventory liquidation. This is Mardi Gras—the religious festival celebrated on the day before the beginning of Lent, a 40-day penitential season.

The aluminum is in the form of commemorative "doubloons" minted by local clubs (called "krewes") who parade and party during the holiday season. A typical doubloon is made from 15 gauge aluminum, is 1-1/2 inches in diameter, and weighs about 1/5 of an ounce.

30 Million Doubloons

An estimated 200 carnival organizations this year will mint about 30 million aluminum doubloons. Stacked one on top of each other, they would reach into the ionosphere, 50 miles high. Each krewe sells the doubloons to its members, who then throw them from the krewe's floats during one of 63 carnival parades scheduled between February 11 and Mardi Gras, February 27. Members of krewes which don't parade give doubloons as special favors to friends at formal Mardi Gras balls or parties.

The reason for all this celebration is steeped in the traditions of the Catholic Church.

In preparation for the Lenten season, Catholics in some cultures have held grand parties on the day before Ash Wednesday. This party day is known as Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras—French for Fat Tuesday, an appropriate name since the eating and drinking preceding the Lenten fasts are considerable.

Since one day of partying is seldom sufficient for lively cultures, an entire season known

as "Carnival" (from the Latin words: *carne* and *levare*—farewell to meat) evolved. Carnival begins on January 6, the Twelfth Night of Christmas, and ends on Mardi Gras.

Modern Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans trace their roots back to 1857, when the first carnival group—the Mystic Krewe of Comus—was established. The first decorated float appeared in 1860. The first trinkets were thrown from a float in 1871 by a man dressed up as Santa Claus. Various items have been thrown since then—Indian beads, candy, flowers, peanuts, and even bagged goldfish, for example—but the most popular "throw" until 1960 was a string of gaily colored beads. They were cheap and pretty. But they were not distinctive. One krewe's beads looked just like another's.

Enter the doubloon.

Three men claim credit for instituting this new Mardi Gras tradition: H. Alvin Sharpe, Ford T. Hardy, and the Captain of the prestigious Rex Parade (who traditionally remains anonymous).

King Of Carnival

The Rex Parade is the second oldest Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans. It was first organized in 1872 to welcome to the city His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Alexis Alexandrovich, the younger son of the Russian Czar. Traditionally, Rex, the King of Carnival, is chosen from members of the Rex organization each year.

Sharpe, a retired sea captain, metal die maker, and dilettante student of history, came up with the idea in 1959. He proposed that Rex mint aluminum medallions and throw them from their floats during their grand parade in 1960.

"The ancients made medals representing generals and leaders and threw them to the people," Sharpe said. "People never change. If the Greeks and

Romans liked them, our people will too."

Sharpe contacted Hardy, a member of the Rex organization. Hardy had often been approached by persons having unsolicited suggestions for Rex to incorporate into its Mardi Gras activities. Unlike the others, however, Sharpe's idea hit a responsive chord.

"At that time we were looking for something new that would make the Rex Parade different from the others," Hardy said. He passed Sharpe's proposal up the chain of command to the Rex Captain.

A key concern was safety. "People complained about being hit by the beads thrown from the floats," the Captain remembered. "I didn't want to throw anything that would have hurt people."

Sharpe knew his aluminum medallions could be safely thrown. He demonstrated that to the Rex Captain by hurling handfuls of the coins at the Captain as hard as he could throw.

"They didn't hurt me at all," the Captain said. "So I approved of the idea."

The Rex Board of Directors, however, refused to spend krewe money to make the first medallions. The Captain was so convinced of the merit of Sharpe's idea that he personally underwrote the minting of 80,000 medallions. They would depict the likeness of Rex, the King of Carnival, on one side, and the seal of the organization on the other. Sharpe cut the first dies and the coins were minted by a mint in Mississippi. The first Rex medallions were sold to krewe members for three cents each and were thrown to the crowds on March 1, 1960—Mardi Gras Day.

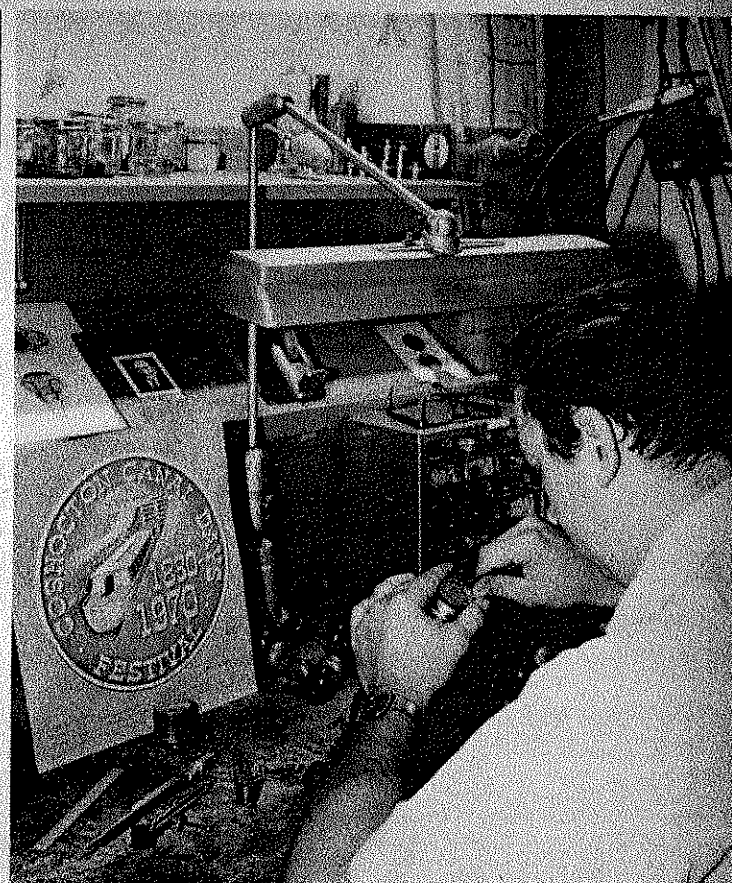
Collectors' Item

Mardi Gras in New Orleans hasn't been the same since. A local newspaper columnist, Charles L. "Pie" Dufour, noted the day after Mardi Gras that the medallions—which were soon dubbed "doubloons"—were a success with the public and would certainly be collectors' items.

Others didn't see it that way immediately. "We had a hell of a time getting rid of the original doubloons," the Rex Captain remembered. "People were fools not to take them." Fools, perhaps, because Dufour's predictions came true. A 1960 Rex doubloon costing three cents is now valued at more than \$20 in doubloon price catalogs.

The Krewes of Arabi, Babylon, Iris, Poseidon, and Venus each made doubloons in 1962. Sharpe had intended the doubloons to be the exclusive throw of the Rex Parade. But the other krewes gave the public what they clamored for—doubloons and more doubloons!

When Mardi Gras 1979 is over, the total number of doubloon varieties minted since 1960 by just the 65 largest krewes will be more than 4,000. When you count the doubloons not listed in the catalogs, the number likely doubles.



FINE DESIGNS: hand engraved by skilled craftsmen.

OHIO FIRM MAKING A MINT PRODUCING SPECIALTY COINS

■ To coin a phrase, Osborne Coinage Company is making a mint. In fact, the company is considered to be the oldest privately owned mint in the United States, and has continuously produced coins and tokens since it began operations in 1835.

The Cincinnati firm, which produced the first aluminum coin in the early 1890s when aluminum was worth as much as \$2.25 a pound, is supplying some 13 million aluminum coins to be used as souvenir doubloons during the 1979 Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans. The specially minted coins, about the size of a silver dollar, were struck from 180,000 pounds of aluminum supplied by Kaiser Aluminum.

The order is a small one for Osborne, which can mint up to 13 million coins a week. During World War II the company produced over five billion food rationing tokens for the U.S. government, as well as prisoner-of-war money. The New York Transit Company once ordered 45 million tokens, and other metropolitan transit districts also number among Osborne's customers.

Most aluminum doubloons are made in "bright" aluminum. It's shiny and silvery—the natural color of aluminum. But many krewes anodize and then dye their doubloons. Rex, for example, throws only gold anodized doubloons. Other colors seen include pink, purple, turquoise, chartreuse, mahogany, orchid, and even black. During the 1976 Mardi Gras, many krewes issued sets of red, white, and blue Bicentennial doubloons. And the Krewe of Bacchus, named for the god of wine, throws a variety of colored doubloons including, appropriately, burgundy.

Roughly 60 percent of all Mardi Gras doubloons are ordered through the Blaine Kern Advertising Specialties Co. of New Orleans. Kern was involved

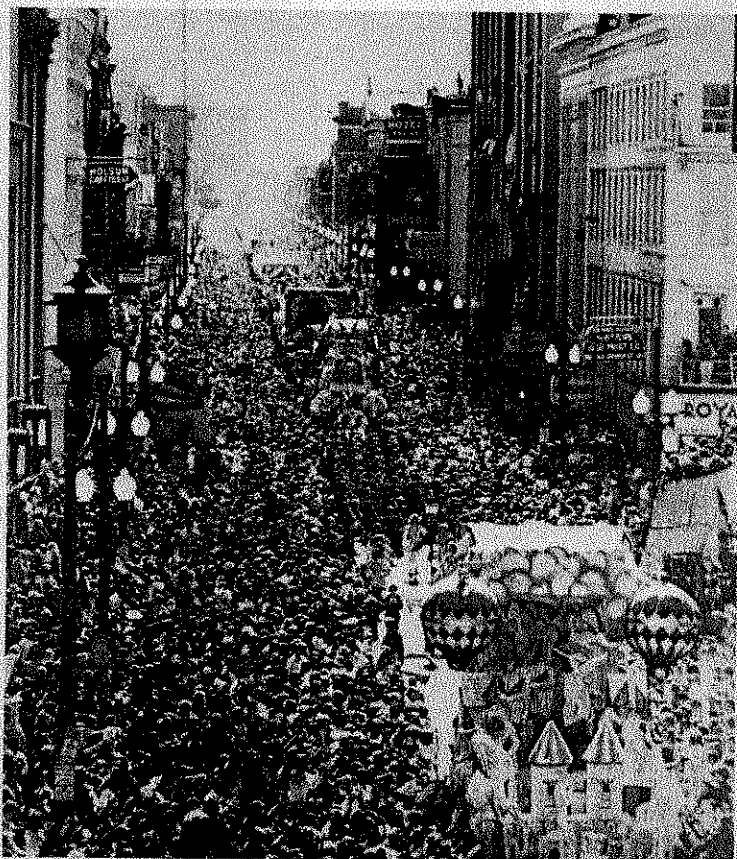
Osborne mints coins from every metal normally used in coins, including aluminum, brass, copper, fine silver, gold, and platinum, as well as special alloys it has developed for the purpose. It has even used plastic and fiber, but metal accounts for most of its production. Its chief product lines include the Presidential series, which it has struck and sold since the 1930s, and the Zodiac series, incorporating the 12 signs of the Zodiac and appropriate horoscope engravings. King Farouk of Egypt was so impressed with the Presidential series that he ordered a complete set, struck in solid platinum, at a cost of \$3,500.

At the other extreme, inexpensive Osborne coins have found their way into Cracker Jack boxes where they were eagerly sought by numismatic munchers. President Lincoln used the company's facilities to mint presidential campaign tokens, and large and small companies, and fraternal and religious organizations, regularly use Osborne coins for promotional and commemorative purposes. ■

with Mardi Gras long before doubloons came onto the scene. He designed and built parade floats, made crowns and scepters for krewe royalty, and minted membership medals and ball favors for various krewes. While doing the latter, he established contacts with excellent German die makers. "With my connections with the krewes and the die makers, doubloons were a natural extension for my company," Kern said.

What is the future for Mardi Gras doubloons?

They are likely to increase still in both diversity and number. The 1979 minting orders are about five percent above last year's. And the number of Carnival groups increases every year. ■



BIG PARADE: one of 63 planned during Mardi Gras season.