

Revelry and riches: Millions spent to produce Mardi Gras

Continued from Page 1A

year's new theme.

Every group that owns its floats does this. According to longtime Mobile float builder Craig Stephens, most groups have multiyear contracts to have their floats refitted and redecorated each year.

Many groups, Stephens said, have between two and four emblem floats that don't change. The rest have to be completely redone to fit the next year's theme.

To build a float from the ground up, including the chassis, would run between \$16,000 and \$22,000, Stephens said, but a standard rebuild is far less than that.

Some of the smaller groups rent some or all of their floats from the larger groups, and the going rental rate is between \$750 and \$1,000 per float, according to several sources.

Float barn: If you own floats, you need a place to store them, and in Mobile, those warehouses are generally referred to as float barns.

The Paraders placed their annual barn and related expenses at \$39,400 for the year.

Many groups also have meeting facilities in their barns for holding meetings or banquets.

Costumes: The floats change every year, and so do the costumes worn by the float riders. Usually, each float has its own costume design, which matches the float.

Last year, the Paraders spent \$32,000 to costume their 250 or so riders.

Julie Andrade Jones has been making costumes for riders for 31 years now. This year, she said, she'll have turned out 2,700 costumes "and I'm at my limit."

"People ask me, 'What do you do when it's not Mardi Gras?' Well, it's always Mardi Gras for me. This is a year-round job."



BRONWYN COFFEEN / Staff Artist

Insurance: Parading groups usually get policies that cover all of their activities, but the parade itself is the most expensive to insure, and there's only a handful of agents who will take their business, according to maskers.

The Paraders estimated that the portion of their insurance policy covering the parade accounted for \$4,800 of the premium last year.

Horses: Not every masker rides a float. Some, either through seniority or because they pay higher dues, are "marshals" of the group, and they ride horseback.

The Paraders spent \$3,250 last year renting the horses that their marshals rode.

The horse farm usually re-

quires proof of insurance from the parading group, and the marshals must come out to the horse farm before the parade for a riding lesson.

The cost of horse rental also includes a number of handlers from the farm to accompany the parade.

Pulling the floats: Most floats are not self-propelled. In New Orleans, floats usually are pulled down the street by tractors. In Mobile, they're pulled by heavy-duty pickup trucks.

Generally, according to Sonny Davis, the trucks are provided by McConnell Automotive and rented out to each group.

The Paraders spent \$715 on truck rental last year.

"McConnell provided 75

trucks for rental last year," Davis said, "and they had a total of 435 pulls." On Lundi Gras and Fat Tuesday, he said, every one of those 75 trucks was used.

Driving the floats: Many groups, Davis said, use off-duty firefighters to drive their floats. The Paraders spent \$1,105 to hire drivers.

But the drivers, according to the Paraders, generally refuse to pull the floats out of the barn or put them back in. So the Paraders spent another \$300 hiring people to perform those tasks.

Marching bands: Most parades include marching bands. Sometimes, a mystic society will bring in a high school, or even a college band from another county.

selves up as a little something different in a parade.

Sometimes they're free, sometimes not. The Paraders spent \$1,250 on additional units for the parade.

Other expenses: From float security and emergency road service to banner carriers and generator rental, there's a number of additional expenses.

For the Paraders, those expenses totaled \$2,670, and that included \$200 for a parade-day assistant, who's responsible for pulling it all together on the big day, much like a wedding planner.

Throws: The Paraders estimated that their riders spent an average of \$600 apiece on throws last year. Davis, however, said he thought the Mobile average was more like \$500 per float rider.

"Buying throws is very personal; there's no average about it," said Stephen Toomey of Toomey's Mardi Gras, easily the largest local purveyor of throws. "Every person who comes to our store spends a different amount."

Some maskers grab a shopping cart and just go through the aisles of Toomey's store, while others buy throws through their mystic society, which in turn buys in bulk from Toomey or elsewhere.

And groups also have specialty items, such as beads, cups or doubloons, made with their logo on them.

"Some people wait until the last minute, while others shop for throws all year long," Toomey said. "Honestly, the more I do this, the less I know about it."

"But I think we're very blessed to have such a fun event that lasts so long. The joy that Mardi Gras brings, the sense of community, there's nothing else like it."

"Like my dad said, there's three things you make time for: hunting, fishing and Mardi Gras."

But in general, Mobile high school bands charge about \$1,000 per parade. The Paraders spent \$3,500 on four high school bands.

Truck bands: One of the more peculiar institutions of the Mardi Gras parades is the so-called truck band. It's usually a garage band riding on a trailer with amplifiers powered by a generator.

The Paraders went to one agent, who got four truck bands for the group's parade at a cost of \$2,100.

Permit: The city's parade permit costs a mere \$250.

Other parade units: Maybe it's Shriners or maybe it's a motorcycle club, but there are a number of groups out there that offer them-