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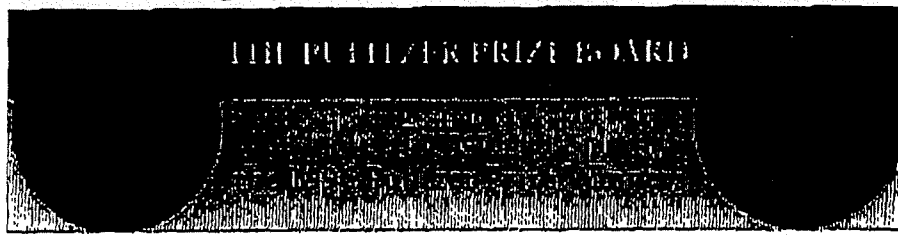
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Another Battle of New Orleans: Mardi Gras

By Rick Bragg

NEW ORLEANS, Feb. 18

The little shotgun house is peeling and the Oldsmobile in front is missing a rear bumper, but Larry Bannock can glimpse glory through the eye of his needle. For almost a year he has hunkered over his sewing table, joining beads, velvet, rhinestones, sequins, feathers and ostrich plumes into a Mardi Gras costume that is part African, part Native American.

"I'm pretty," said Mr. Bannock, who is 6 feet tall and weighs 300 pounds. "And baby, when I walk out that door there ain't nothing cheap on me."

Most days, this 46-year-old black man is a carpenter, welder and

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handyman, but on Mardi Gras morning he is a Big Chief, one of the celebrated -- if incongruous -- black Indians of Carnival. He is an important man.

Sometime around 11 A.M. on Feb. 28, Mr. Bannock will step from his house in a resplendent, flamboyant turquoise costume complete with a towering headdress, and people in the largely black and poor 16th and 17th Wards, the area known as Gert Town, will shout, cheer and follow him through the streets, dancing, drumming and singing.

"That's my glory," he said. Like the other Big Chiefs, he calls it his "mornin' glory."

He is one of the standard-bearers of a uniquely New Orleans tradition. The Big Chiefs dance, sing and stage mock battles -- wars of words and rhymes -- to honor American Indians who once gave sanctuary to escaped slaves. It is an intense but elegant posturing, a street theater that some black men devote a lifetime to.

But this ceremony is also self-affirmation, the way poor blacks in New Orleans honor their own culture in a Carnival season that might otherwise pass them by, said the Big Chiefs who carry on the tradition, and the academics who study it.

These Indians march mostly in neighborhoods where the tourists do not go, ride on the hoods of dented Chevrolets instead of floats, and face off on street corners where poverty and violence grip the people most of the rest of the year. The escape is temporary, but it is escape.

"They say Rex is ruler," said Mr. Bannock, referring to the honorary title given to the king of Carnival, often a celebrity, who will glide through crowds of tourists and local revelers astride an elaborate float. "But not in the 17th Ward. 'Cause I'm the king here. This is our thing.

"The drums will be beating and everybody will be hollering and" -- he paused to stab the needle through a mosaic of beads and canvas -- "and it sounds like all my people's walking straight through hell."

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A man does not need an Oldsmobile, with or without a bumper, if he can walk on air. Lifted there by the spirit of his neighborhood, it is his duty to face down the other Big Chiefs, to cut them down with words instead of bullets and straight razors, the way the Indians used to settle their disagreements in Mardi Gras in the early 1900s. Mr. Bannock, shot in the thigh by a jealous old chief in 1981, appears to be the last to have been wounded in battle.

"I forgave him," Mr. Bannock said.

The tribes have names like the Yellow Pocahontas, White Eagles, the Golden Star Hunters and the Wild Magnolias. The Big Chiefs are not born, but work their way up through the ranks. Only the best sewers and singers become Big Chiefs.

By tradition, the chiefs must sew their own costumes, and must do a new costume from scratch each year. Mr. Bannock's fingers are scarred from a lifetime of it. His right index finger is a mass of old punctures. Some men cripple themselves, through puncture wounds or repetitive motion, and have to retire. The costumes can cost \$5,000 or more, a lot of cash in Gert Town.

The rhythms of their celebration, despite their feathered headdresses, seem more West African or Haitian than Indian, and the words are from the bad streets of the Deep South. Mr. Bannock said that no matter what the ceremony's origins, it belongs to New Orleans now. The battle chants have made their way into popular New Orleans music. The costumes hang in museums.

"Maybe it don't make no sense, and it ain't worth anything," said Mr. Bannock. But one day a year he leads his neighborhood on a hard, forced march to respect, doing battle at every turn with other chiefs who are out trying to do the same.

Jimmy Ricks is a 34-year-old concrete finisher most of the year, but on Mardi Gras morning he is a Spy Boy, the man who goes out ahead of the Big Chief searching for other chiefs. He is in love with the

tradition, he said, because of what it means to people here.

"It still amazes me," he said, how on Mardi Gras mornings the people from the neighborhood drift over to Mr. Bannock's little house on Edinburgh Street and wait for a handyman to lead them.

"To understand it, you got to let your heart wander," said Mr. Bannock, who leads the Golden Star Hunters. "All I got to do is peek through my needle."

*I'm 52 inches across my chest
And I don't bow to nothin'
'Cept God and death
-- from a battle chant by Larry Bannock*

The more exclusive party within the party -- the grand balls and societies that underlie the reeling, alcohol-soaked celebration that is Carnival -- have always been By Invitation Only.

The origins of Carnival, which climaxes with Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, are found in the Christian season of celebration before Lent. In New Orleans the celebration reaches back more than 150 years, to loosely organized parades in the 1830s. One of the oldest Carnival organizations, the Mystick Krewe of Comus, staged the first organized parade. Today, Mardi Gras is not one parade but several, including that of the traditional Zulus, a black organization. But Comus, on Fat Tuesday, is still king.

The krewes were -- some still are -- secret societies. The wealthier whites and Creoles, many of whom are descendants of people of color who were free generations before the Civil War, had balls and parades, while poorer black men and women cooked the food and parked the cars.

Mardi Gras had no other place for them, said Dr. Frederick Stielow, director of Tulane University's Amistad Research Center, the largest minority archive in the nation. And many of these poorer blacks still are not part of the party, he said.

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