

Adapting to Carnival



Adapting to Carnival was difficult for me. Growing up as a Lutheran Texan, I'd heard only vaguely of the loud, wild, colorful Mardi Gras celebrations next door (well, a thousand miles away) in New Orleans.

Several culture shocks later, I found myself married to the love of my life, who turned out to be a German Roman Catholic from the city of Düsseldorf in the Rhineland. If you can believe there are such people as laid-back Germans, you will find them in the Rhineland. They celebrate every milestone occasion (big birthdays and anniversaries, start of school, First Communion), have something of a live-and-let-live attitude, an every-fool-is-different tolerance, a good sense of humor and much inner playfulness.

My first Carnival experience was in 1970, when we were invited by one of my husband's school friends to his elder brother's apartment on the market square opposite Düsseldorf City Hall. The view was perfect from there, and inside the apartment the energy kept building up. Our host, a young, larger-than-life entrepreneur, danced me around so wildly that I flew out of his arms and landed on the floor!

Being disguised in costume and consuming large amounts of alcohol both aid in lowering those inhibitions which are firmly in place during the rest of the year. The Carnival season begins on the Thursday before the Three Wild Days of the Carnival weekend. On

that Thursday, Wild Dame's Day or *Altweiber*, women congregate on the market square and take over City Hall, kissing and cutting off the neckties of all the men they encounter. Our saying "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" applies here. On Ash Wednesday everything drops back to normal with a sobering thud. But many Rhenish babies celebrate their birthdays in November.

My difficulties with Carnival were: being in a celebratory mood in the freezing cold, drinking alcohol in great quantities out of doors during the daytime, and my Protestant difficulty with letting down all barriers on command and then taking them up again with the proper remorse, while fully intending to repeat the experience for every year to come.

This prissy attitude persisted until our children became old enough to put on disguises, make a lot of noise without being fussed at, and eat as much candy as they could collect. It reminded me of Halloween in Texas. Seeing how happy this made them in the context of their otherwise rather restricted lives made me happy too. At first they always wanted to be cowboys. Then they could have a cap pistol and be loud. One year our daughter's kindergarten issued a ban on (boring?) cowboys by announcing the creative Carnival theme „post office.“ Our 5 year-old daughter plopped on her red cowboy hat, strapped on her six-shooter, and mounted her stick horse to bring the mail as a Pony Express rider.

As do most families in the Rhineland, we have a

"Karnivalskiste," a box filled with costumes collected over the years. In my husband's family of five children whose births spanned twelve years, that was quite a big box and a treasure trove of clown costumes in all sizes. Our son graduated from being an — astonishingly convincing — little donkey in kindergarten to Graf Dracula in middle school. I sewed him a red-lined black cape that is much too nice to sit unused in the carnival costume box, but our grandson is only six, lives in France, and is more into Batman at the moment.

Season 2017

Hoppeditz' Erwachen
11.Nov.2016, 11.11 hrs

Altweiberfastnacht
23.Feb.2017

Carnival Sunday - Street
carnival on Königsallee
26.Feb.2017

Rose Monday Parade -
Carnival Monday on
Königsallee
27.Feb.2017

One last aspect of Carnival I've come to appreciate takes place on the Day of Wild Dames, that Thursday mentioned before. Tame women like me, instead of storming City Hall, smooching, and cutting off neckties, put on their costumes, or at least a red nose, and meet up in the afternoon for coffee, cake, champagne and shenanigans at someone's house in the neighborhood. It's a wonderful feeling to ride my bike back home in the evening, relaxed and happy in my cowboy costume.

- **Mary Susan Westhoff**