

Mardi Gras goes back to the '50s

■ Festivities kick off with 'Happy Days' Coronation Party on Feb. 23

WOONSOCKET — Go back to the 1950s at the "Happy Days of Mardi Gras," the festivities surrounding the crowning of the city's Mardi Gras queen.

This year, Mardi Gras will be celebrated March 1 with four balls taking place simultaneously at sites throughout the city. There also will be a children's ball during the day.

The celebrating, however, officially gets started with the "Happy Days" coronation event on Feb. 23 from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Elks Hall, 380 Social St.

The event will begin with a sundae bar catered by Uncle Ronnie's Fine Catering of Manville. Members of Theatre Works, a community theater group, will portray performers from the 1950s, led by Connie Anderson who was a Mardi Gras princess in 2002.

Jeff Gamache, known for his impersonations of music artists, will serve as the master of ceremonies, and members of the coronation committee will dress in 1950s styles, provided by Marlene Gagnon of Harlequins Costume.

The coronation will be the highlight. The queen and two princesses will be named from the seven candidates currently selling Mardi Gras raffle tickets and admission tickets. They are Maureen Asselin, Diane Cournoyer, Jessica Cousineau, Jennifer Gurney, Stacey McCutcheon, Jodi Robinson and Nicole Wethey.



CONVERTIBLES, SADDLE SHOES and full skirts set the theme for the Mardi Gras Queen's Coronation party. Getting in the mood are Mardi Gras committee members, from left, Monique St. Jean; Susan Tessier Mackenzie, committee chairperson; 'car hop' Brenda Rivet and, at the wheel, Marlene Gagnon.

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The candidate who raises the most money gets the title, as well as a collection of prizes, and will preside with the princesses, over the March 1 balls.

Party-goers also can see displays of memorabilia from the Mardi Gras celebrations of the 1950s. Committee member Monique Jean has collected the

artifacts and welcomes additional items. Anyone with something to contribute

See MARDI GRAS — Page B-4

Mardi Gras

Continued from Page B-6

can call her at (508) 883-1247 or Susan Tessier MacKenzie, committee chairperson, at (401) 762-6564.

The Northern Rhode Island Council of the Arts (NRICA), which sponsors Mardi Gras, chose the 1950s theme for the coronation party because that decade was the heyday of the original Woonsocket Mardi Gras celebrations.

From 1954 to 1959, the city was home to the Mardi Gras of the North, drawing thousands of revelers. The first queen was Pauline Nadeau, and her crowning, by King Jace, played that year by Arthur A. Pomfret, kicked off five days of celebrating.

Nadeau's reign was followed by those of Maureen E. Mazarella in 1955, Beverly Ann DeCesare in 1956, Pauline Gagnon in 1957, Rita Laliberte in 1958 and Claire Paul in 1959.

Since the NRICA organized 30 years ago, there had been talk of reviving Mardi Gras in Woonsocket, but it wasn't until 1995 that a group, under the direction of Jack Lawhead, turned the talk into reality. Since then, the celebration has expanded each year to feature food and entertainment with a New Orleans theme.

Tickets to the coronation are \$10. Patrons are encouraged to wear costumes, and the best one will win a prize. For tickets and information, contact any of the queen contestants or call MacKenzie at the number mentioned above, or Gagnon at (401) 766-0788.