

Long Live the King!

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As long as I've done public relations for the Rose Festival, I've been asked about Rex Oregonus, the mysterious king who reigned over several of the first festivals. Many people seem to think it's strange that the festival, so well-known for its great court program – an internationally recognized program awarded over and over by the International Festivals and Events Association for its community outreach – would have once been reigned over by a king.

And for me that's always made Rex a fascinating subject!

The appeal of royalty for U.S. festivals – a country that makes a point of having severed its ties with a king more than 200 years ago – often has pundits scratching their heads. But whether or not it's appropriate for an American to bow or curtsy at the Court of St. James, this country's festivals are pretty much in accord about having some royal personage honored during their celebrations. Kings, queens, princesses, not to mention emperors and even goddesses, are parts of civic celebrations all over the country. Iconic American author Mark Twain said, "All kings is mostly rapsallions" and made no bones about his negative feelings for royalty in general. But when it comes to festivals and their kings, we have to consider the alternate definition of a rapsallion, not a scoundrel as Twain probably meant, but rather "one who is playfully mischievous."

And this was obviously the intent with our own Rex. He was clearly inspired by the concept of the carnival king -- the Mock King or Lord of Misrule or Bean King, among other names – who plays a ceremonial role in the festivities surrounding Twelfth Night or Fat Tuesday. In America's most famous such celebration, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Rex showed up in 1872 as the king of kings of all the krewes (the groups that organize the carnival events), an individual of prominent standing in the community. Ironically, legend has it that a visit by the Russian Grand Duke Alexis Romanoff was the partial inspiration for his inception. The Krewe of Rex presented the first daytime carnival parade in New Orleans and selected the signature Mardi Gras colors -- gold, purple and green.

In Mobile, Alabama's carnival, the first recorded king also showed up in 1872 – King Felix I. Mobile's carnival was coordinated for much the same reason as Portland's Rose Festival, to encourage commerce and tourism. The Mobile Carnival Association was organized in 1920, and today they still recognize a lord of misrule, King Felix III. The Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association has its own king -- Elexis I -- who made his first appearance in 1940.

Even up north festival kings often rule side by side with queens. The St. Paul Winter Carnival has selected a King Boreas and a Fire King -- now known as Rex Vulcanus -- since 1886.

In 1907, governor's daughter Carrie Lee Chamberlain was appointed Queen Flora to reign over the first Rose Festival. Rex Oregonus made his appearance at the second festival, in 1908. A prominent citizen, Rex was selected by a panel of judges and his identity was kept secret behind a bearded mask until his face was revealed at a masquerade ball. Rex reigned until 1913, and then in 1914 Thelma Hollingsworth became the first elected Rose Festival queen in an American Idol-style contest that had local merchants selling ballots for a penny apiece. Proving you can't keep a good king down, Rex reappeared in '25, '27, '28 and '29, although he then had to share the throne with the Rose Festival queen.

So Rex Oregonus has now been absent for more than 75 years. And guess what? During the Rose Festival's Centennial, he'll be making a triumphant return!

Just a few days ago we got the bill from the costumers who are fashioning Rex's elaborate garments, designed from photographs more than 90 years old. Rex Oregonus dressed a lot like Henry VIII, topped off by a crown as big as his head. He was known sometimes to ride a horse or a barge as he made his ceremonial way through Portland. In 2007, he'll ride a float in the Grand Floral Parade, and locals will have an opportunity to participate in choosing the person to assume the role of Rex.

Don't worry! Rex won't steal the spotlight from our own Rose Festival Court. We'll still be choosing 14 young women from local high schools as a prominent and important part of our Centennial celebration. But bringing back Rex will be part of the fun – as it was originally intended to be.

The Rose Festival is a volunteer-driven organization with around twenty different committees overseeing its annual planning. And this year we're adding a 'Rex Oregonus Committee' chaired by board member Cori Anderson. Watch this website for information of how you can nominate or vote for the selection of our Centennial king. And if you see a tall, bearded man around town dressed in red and purple Tudor-period clothes, it just might be Rex Oregonus!