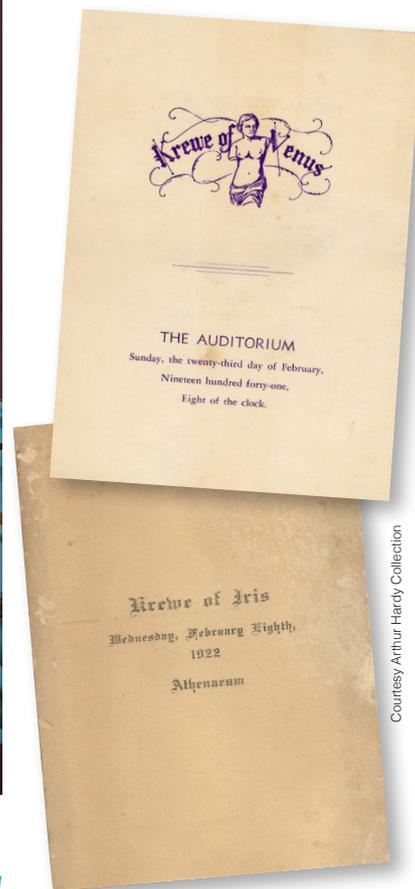


Aminthe Laudumiey Nungesser, founder and Captain of the Krewe of Iris (1917) and Venus (1941)



Photo by David Grunfield



Courtesy Arthur Hardy Collection

# Carnival's First Lady

## A Granddaughter's Tribute

BY SANDY FURANO

The Nungesser family name is well-known in Louisiana, being that of popular Lieutenant Governor Billy Nungesser. In the world of Mardi Gras, however, Billy's aunt, Aminthe Laudumiey Nungesser is an unsung heroine.

My grandmother's contributions to the history of Mardi Gras and the empowerment of women in New Orleans are profound and enduring. Born in 1899 into a Creole family, she was more than a mother of three children with five grandchildren; she was a pioneer, a visionary, and a trailblazer who helped reshape the cultural landscape of her city.

At the advent of World War I, at just 18 years old, my grandmother, whose family was in the funeral home business, founded the Krewe of Iris in 1917, marking a pivotal moment in the history of Carnival. This was not merely the birth of a new women's krewe; it was also a bold statement in a time when women were largely confined to domestic roles. Her decision to create a space for women in the male-dominated world of Mardi Gras was revolutionary, challenging the societal norms of her day. It's likely that the more than 10,000 women who belong to women's Mardi Gras krewes today are unaware of the obstacles she faced at a time when women couldn't vote, drive, or even smoke in public. Yet, she dared to carve out a place for them in the vibrant, colorful world of Mardi Gras, igniting a movement that would grow in strength and influence over the decades.

But Aminthe's contributions didn't stop there. In 1941, against the backdrop of World War II, she founded the Krewe of Venus, making history again when the first all-femi-



Photo by David Grunfield

Aminthe's granddaughter, Sandy Furano, fondly recalls her grandmother's legacy.

Courtesy Arthur Hardy Collection



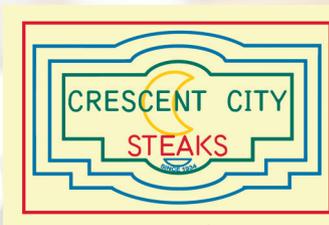
*Captain Aminthe Nungesser escorts King Roger Joseph Barba Sr. at the 1949 Iris ball.*

nine pageant rolled down St. Charles to Canal Street on Sunday February 23, 1941, with the theme of Goddesses. Many charter members were wives of the men-only Hermes and Babylon krewes. For more than 30 years, floats for the Venus parades were rented from the Knights of Babylon. This arrangement was unique and allowed the new krewe to parade without the expense of owning a den and constructing its own floats.

The creation of Venus was nothing short of audacious—a woman not only leading but expanding her influence in the realm of Mardi Gras, all while balancing the demands of raising a family. For 12 years, she managed both krewes, a feat that would be challenging even by today's standards. But in 1952, when my sister and I were just babies and living in the apartment attached to my grandmother's home on Baronne Street behind Pascal's Manale, our grandmother realized she could not oversee both Iris and Venus and be the grandmother she wanted to be. So Aminthe decided to keep Venus and handed over Iris to Irma Strode, who had been the queen of Venus. Irma did a phenomenal job, and without her commitment and leadership, Iris would not have developed into the club that it is today—the largest krewe in Mardi Gras, boasting nearly 4,000 members—a living legacy of Aminthe's vision and leadership.

My brother and three sisters knew that our grandmother never sought recognition or fame. But she would be proud to learn that her life will be the subject of an exhibit at the Louisiana State Museum at the Presbytere in the Spring.

Aminthe was not just a captain of krewes; she was a captain of change, navigating the uncharted waters of gender equality in a society steeped in tradition. In the grand tapestry of Mardi Gras, Aminthe Nungesser's thread may not be the most visible, but it is undeniably one of the strongest. Woven with determination, love, and the indomitable spirit of New Orleans, her legacy is a powerful reminder of what one woman's vision can do. ❧



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