

Don Jacobs will be saluted as king of Coast tourism (The Sun Herald, Biloxi, Miss.)

By Mary Perez, The Sun Herald, Biloxi, Miss. McClatchy-Tribune Regional News

Oct. 26--BILOXI -- Fifty years after Don Jacobs founded the Biloxi Shrimp Tour Train, he will be honored Thursday for his many contributions to tourism in South Mississippi.

Mississippi Gulf Coast Attractions Association intends to name this new award for Jacobs and present it every year to someone who made a mark on Coast tourism.

Jacobs did just that. He started in 1960, working with Tom Lamerth to make the Marine Life Oceanarium a major draw. They added another attraction every year -- Biloxi Deer Ranch, Six Gun Junction, Eight Flags and more -- and filled hotel rooms almost daily in the summer.

"We did a lot of family tourism," said Jacobs, now 85 and living again in Biloxi.

"Don Jacobs was a Mississippi Gulf Coast Walt Disney," said Reed Guice, who owns an advertising agency in Biloxi. "No trip to the Coast was complete without a visit to Marine Life and Eight Flags." Tourists left with stickers from the attractions. "You'd see them all over town," Guice said. "He was a passionate promoter."

Jacobs said he was the first to use television commercials to draw tourists from the Smoky Mountains and New Orleans to South Mississippi.

"He did more for tourism, I think, than anyone on the Coast," said Pete Skrmetta, owner of Ship Island Excursions. "He did a lot of advertisement that I could not afford. He brought a lot of people down." Those tourists had to pass right by his boat to get to Jacobs' Marine Life Oceanarium.

"That was before Gulf Shores and Destin," said John Mladinich, who owned White Pillars restaurant and Trader John's Night Club in Biloxi -- where Jimmy Buffett played his first professional gig. He said Jacobs helped make the Mississippi Coast the place for family vacations.

Jacobs' life has a Forrest Gump quality to it; like the movie, he was in the right place at the right time and met many famous people along the way. Right out of college he worked at Paramount Pictures in Hollywood and met Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Robert Mitchum and Gloria Swanson, "one of the most talented people I've ever known."

From there he became a sales rep for Miller Brewing, traveling to 33 countries back when airplanes had beds and Alaska and Hawaii weren't yet states.

His dream was to own a business, and in the early 1960s he came to the Coast and got started with dolphins at Marine Life. Eventually he had marine life shows at 10 major theme parks.

"He was a good spokesman for the industry," said former Gulfport Mayor Leroy Urie, who said the attractions Jacobs built were always upscale.

"Most things I've done are a mix of innovation, some plagiarism and a 'build it and they will come' attitude," Jacobs said. He borrowed the idea for the tour train from Key West and the Deer Ranch from similar attractions in Florida and Wisconsin.

Jacobs was many Coast kids' first boss.

"One of the greatest joys of my entire life -- and I had really an interesting life -- was to watch local kids here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast become little stars, develop in ways they never thought they would or could," he said.

He built Porpoise Island in Tennessee and staffed the Polynesian park with kids from the Kamehameha School in Hawaii. The kids keep in touch on Facebook, and his colleague and friend of 50 years, Peter Rogers, said Jacobs quietly provided tuition for many of the kids to attend college.

When Hurricane Katrina destroyed his home on the beach and the Marine Life Oceanarium in Gulfport, Jacobs found the dolphins a new place to perform in the Bahamas.

"They have a happy home with a well-financed company that can afford the very best -- and they get the very best," he said.

Jacobs said he doesn't have any regrets, but does wonder about the dramatic changes he made several times in his life.

"If I hadn't done that, look at all the other things I would have missed," he said. "It's been a fabulous, wonderful trip. I can't imagine anyone having a more fun, interesting, productive life."