

## BEFORE THE DRIVE-IN'S

# There were the Air Domes!



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They're all gone now. The Do. The Don. The Beach. And the Moonlight. For those of us who grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, those names conjure up memories of our Drive-in theaters. How can you forget going to the submarine races or the passion pit? Remember the little green citronella coil? You'd light one up to ward off those pesky summer mosquitos and then choke to death on the smoke! Remember the cutesy intermission music and the cartoonish hot-dogs and popcorn boxes that danced across the screen, tempting you to visit the refreshment counter? What about those chunky gray speakers, with dubious sound quality? Remember Five-dollar-a-carload-night, the car's trunk usually full to the brim with additional teenagers?

Most, if not all, of the Coastal Drive-ins were gone by the late '70s, victims of changing tastes and times and the elements. Pass Christian's Moonlight Drive-in, located on Hwy 90 where Walmart is now located, was destroyed in 1969 by Hurricane Camille. In a bit of irony, *Gone With The Wind* was its upcoming attraction. But before Drive-in's dotted the landscape, another form of entertainment tempted Coastal residents—the Air Dome. An April 3, 1909, Daily Herald article stated, "During all of last summer, a form of amusement enterprise known as the Air Dome became very popular in the cities, large and small, in the North and some parts of

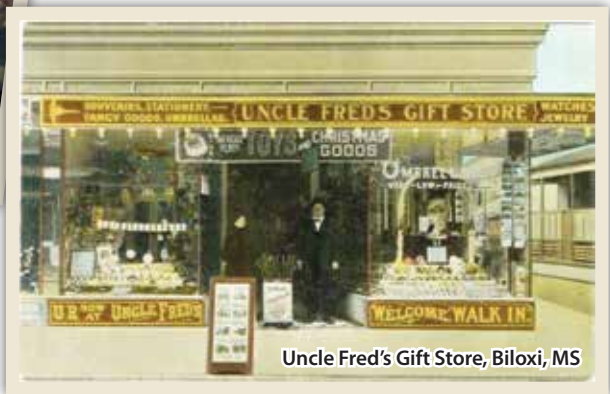
the South. Of course, an Air Dome means an outdoor theater, a theater the dome of which is the star-studded sky."

Biloxi and Gulfport each had an Air Dome, both of which boasted a stage for vaudeville acts and political speeches, a movie screen for silent films, and chairs and benches for seats. Gulfport's Air Dome was located on the north-east corner of 31st Avenue and 16th Street. Biloxi's Air Dome was located on Howard Avenue, east of the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Both Air Domes were managed by Fred Abley.

Mr. Abley was a Coastal business man at the beginning of the 20th Century. Before cementing his position as a well-known theatrical manager, Abley dabbled in everything from hardware to seafood, eventually being appointed Deputy Oyster Inspector. The 1909 article also stated, "The work of enclosing it (the Biloxi Air Dome) with a high board fence has commenced. A covered stage will be erected and benches and chairs provided for the audience. Mr. Abley says he will be able to accommodate 1,500 people. Picture shows (silent movies with piano accompaniment) will constitute the program. The admission fee will be ten cents, but a part of the seats will be reserved and an extra fee will probably be charged for these."

Abley must have quickly sharpened his managerial skills because just two years after the Biloxi Air Dome opened, the Gulfport Air Dome's prices had skyrocketed. A 1911 Daily Herald article stated, "Admission: Adults, Reserved chairs 20 cents, Other seats fifteen cents, Children 5 cents." The Air Dome was not only profitable, it was popular as well. According to the Herald, it was "The Fashionable Show Place of Gulfport."

So what fashionable entertainment might one have seen at either Air Dome in those days? Milo and Milo, acrobats, were featured in 1909. According to the Herald, "These two young men are wonderfully strong and agile and beautiful specimens of physical manhood. Some of their feats are almost unbelievable, and unlike many acrobats they are as graceful and smooth in their movements as two tigers."



Uncle Fred's Gift Store, Biloxi, MS

The movie, *The Life of Moses*, was featured in 1910. It was long, over two and a half hours. Imagine sitting on a hard chair or bench for that length of time! The Herald stated, "Pulpit and Press have unanimously put the stamp of approval on this picture; it is biblically correct, and every man, woman, and child ought to see it. Appropriate music will be rendered."



prevalent along Howard Avenue. Notice that small structure behind the fence on the right side of the postcard? The one with the slanted roof? That's the Air Dome's state of the art sanitary arrangement—an outhouse.

Eventually, Air Domes were replaced by advancements in the movie industry. The gilded movie palaces of the 1920s—like Biloxi's

Other movies included *Shotgun Jones*. "It is a strange and fascinating picture of the early days in the West. Shotgun Jones is one of those queer characters, whole-hearted but with a besetting weakness for liquor." Norma Talmadge, who became one of Hollywood's most famous silent film stars of the 1920s, reigned supreme as the quintessential poor girl in *The Secret of the Storm Country*. In it she falls in love with a wealthy landowner who marries her, gets her pregnant, then reveals he's already married.

Both those movies presented mighty heady stuff for the early 20th Century. It did not go unnoticed by some of the locals. Fred Abley was twice dragged into court for showing movies on Sunday nights, which was against the local Blue Laws. At his second court appearance, he pleaded guilty. He was fined ten dollars and court costs, but the judge promptly suspended both. One can't help but wonder if the judge, along with most of the locals, was generally apathetic to the so-called Blue Laws.

The postcard of the Biloxi Air Dome gives an idea of what it looked like in its early days. Over its years the Dome was enlarged and embellished. In 1910 the Herald reported that "E.E. Sheeley of Chicago, a scene painter, well-known by theatrical men throughout the United States, is in Biloxi... for the purpose of painting local theatrical scenes." Sheeley must have been good at what he did. He went on to fame and fortune in Hollywood, becoming the art director of the classic, 1925 horror movie, *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Other items of interest indicated on the postcard are the local businesses that bought space on the stage's proscenium: Lund's 5 and 10 Cent Store, Uncle Fred's Gift Store, E. Barrie Grocery, and Roy Chinn Insurance. One can't help but wonder if Chinn was the agent for the Biloxi Air Dome when it burned in 1914. The cause? Burning grass, according to the insurance records. It should be remembered that over a hundred years ago, grassy open areas were still

Saenger Theater—ushered in a new era of theatrical comfort and enjoyment. Today's multiplexes and IMAX theaters were also instrumental in sealing the fate of the old Drive-in's. But back in the day, Air Domes and Drive-in's were all the rage, even if a torrential rainstorm might stop the show, or mosquitos and smoky citronella coils might make watching a movie most unpleasant.

I'd like to thank Charnell Inglis Sommers for her invaluable assistance in writing this article.

*Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless you and keep a song in your heart.*



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**About the Author**

Anthony W. Kalberg was born and reared on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and has a background in the arts and stage performance. A Gulfport resident, he had front-row seats for Hurricanes Betsy, Camille, and Katrina and survived them all. Those life-changing storms have had a major impact on both his writing and his life. *A Chasing of the Wind* is his first novel.

If you enjoy Kal's Kaleidoscope, you might enjoy his first novel, *A Chasing of the Wind*, which was released in October, 2014.

You can read the Prologue at his website, [www.anthonyskalberg.com](http://www.anthonyskalberg.com).

*Book can be purchased at the Gulfport Galleria, the Southern Bound Book Store or directly from the author via his website.*

