

Quick! Who is the most famous Biloxian?

The words of our friend Police Chief John Miller occupied this space last month, an eloquent and inspirational tribute to fallen officer Robert McKeithen. The heartfelt ode was actually an amplification of the chief's eulogy from the officer's funeral.

Robert McKeithen was an everyday hero, Chief Miller noted, and we should also look

inward and strive to be such a hero.

We were delighted to have Chief Miller's words on this page, and, coincidentally, we'd been considering


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(“coagulating” in “FoFo” speak) a similarly thought-provoking pursuit.

Alas, our discourse is far from lofty or cerebral. Instead, we'd envisioned a discussion sparked by the question: “Who is the most famous person in Biloxi's history?”

An easy, convenient answer could be Pierre Le Moynes, Sieur d'Iberville, the French explorer who, while charged with locating the mouth of the Mississippi River, landed an expedition of 14 men on Feb. 13, 1699 on present-day Biloxi, guided, some say, by the street lights at Edgewater Mall.

Edward Barq, the French educated and New Orleans-born chemist who moved to Biloxi in 1898, purchased the Biloxi Artesian Bottling Works, and a few years later, introduced Biloxi and the world to Barq's Root Beer, “a cultural favorite.” And, yes, “It's good.”

Certainly, those two come to mind as having made their marks, but, as Fire Chief and Biloxi-lore lover Joe Boney quickly noted, “How could you top going to the moon?”

Yes, Fred Haise, the Back Bay-born, Biloxi-educated youngster who would become one of 24 people in the world to have gone to the moon. His heroic endeavors on Apollo 13 – NASA's most successful failure – captivated the world at the time and decades later in an excellent Ron Howard film.

Fred, of course, went on to work in the early days of the space shuttle program, had a career in the aviation industry, and today continues to be popular on the speaking circuit, usually promoting the Infinity Space Center in Hancock County or advocating STEM courses in classrooms.

While Fred's achievements were on an out-of-this-world stage, we've seen a healthy stream of notables in our midst, from way back when to today.

“Our little city, with its French colonial roots,” according to one cherished city video vignette, “has always been home to dreamers, artists,



visionaries and other independent souls.”

“Biloxi's Builders and Visionaries,” one of the collection of high-quality videos the city produced for the Biloxi Visitors Center and now on BTV, notes that Jefferson Davis was a Biloxi resident when he penned “The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy,” a century later, Dr. Gilbert R. Mason established himself as a Civil Rights icon for his efforts in desegregating Biloxi beaches and Biloxi Public Schools. Dr. Mason, of course, became legendary in Biloxi, to the point of having a section of U.S. 90 in his memory. (Which makes us wonder: Whatever happened to the Fred Haise Boulevard designation on a portion of U.S. 90?)

Typically, you don't have to look far to spot the famous names of Biloxi's past and present. Streets and other landmarks calls attention to individuals who made tremendous impacts on the Biloxi we know today: Lopez, Gorenflo, Howard, Caillavet, Reynoir, Elder, and on and on. Need more? Check out the names on the base of the modern-day Golden Fisherman at the Maritime & Seafood Industry Museum.

Then there's George Ohr, “sufficiently inspired to proclaim himself as the greatest potter who

ever lived,” modernist painter Dusti Bonge, and, what about artist Joe Moran?

No such conversation about famous Biloxians should overlook modern-day suggestions. World War II ace, businessman, politician and philanthropist Jerry O'Keefe should certainly be included. How about A.J. Holloway, football player turned long-term mayor? Or those individuals from the private sector who helped advocate legalized dockside gaming, and, of course, those tested political waters a year before with cruises to nowhere.

It could easily be a voluminous list, this compilation of famous individuals in Biloxi's history. For that matter, consider the fun of an infamous list – you know, “better than famous.”

It's fertile ground, this Biloxi of ours, an area that some say was once called “the great state of Biloxi because it insisted on going its own way.”

Adds Visions and Builders of our little city: “The intoxicating, natural world, combined with the broad ethnic mix of cultures and people help make Biloxi different from other cities. It's a magical and seductive place.” And who are we to argue, famous or infamous.

The nom de plume Nick L. Shrimp is a homage to the late Walter Fountain, original olde crab, longtime editor of the Biloxi-D'Iberville Press, and longtime Biloxi Chamber of Commerce manager.