



By: Kat Bergeron

When the Croatian immigrant Nicholas Skrmetta jumped ship in New Orleans and headed to Biloxi in the late 1890s, he set into motion the Mississippi Coast's longest-running attraction for locals and tourists.

Tens of thousands excursionists each year experience playful dolphins on their boat ride to pristine Ship Island and its Civil War-era Fort Massachusetts, because the Skrmettas who have followed in Nicholas' footsteps never lost the Croatian hard-work ethic.

Through hurricanes, financial depressions and changing entertainment attitudes, their Ship Island Excursions has persevered, ferrying passengers from Easter to Labor Day and with special charters throughout the year.



MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST COMMUNITY COLLEGE DIXIE PRESS COLLECTION The Pan American Clipper had a full load of passengers in the 1945 photograph. The Skrmetta family still owns and occasionally uses the wooden boat built in 1937.

“It’s unprecedented and unequaled what the Skrmettas have done for Coast tourism by continuing to run the island boats for 78 years,” said historian Charles L. Sullivan, professor emeritus and archivist for Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College.

“In the sailing boat days, captains ran excursions to our barrier islands, but there was never a regular route until 1926 when Capt. Pete Skrmetta began.”

That work ethic initially brought more Skrmettas to the Coast. The family story is that Nick was waiting one day for a trolley when he met Laz Lopez, a Biloxi seafood cannery pioneer. Skrmetta’s English was poor but Lopez recognized the accent.

Skrmetta went to work for Lopez, who was so impressed he asked the Croatian to send more like him to Biloxi. Among the first was a nephew, Peter Skrmetta, in 1903.

This was the beginning of the early “Yugoslavonians” who helped turn Biloxi into the Seafood Capital of the World. Most sent for their parents and siblings. They settled on

Biloxi's Point Cadet, close to factories where women picked shrimp, and men shucked oysters or ran the boats.

Fast-forward to 1926. Capt. Pete, who captained fishing boats, realized he needed to make money in the off seasons. The Roaring '20s brought opportunity to the booming Coast, which discovered a way around illegal mainland drinking and gambling.

Several Biloxi entrepreneurs created a Monte Carlo of the South on an island known as Dog Keys — renamed Isle of Caprice. They needed a way to transport the partiers there, and that's where Capt. Pete came in. He and others used their fishing schooners to ferry gamblers, dancers and salt water bathers.

A combination of environmental erosion, a fire and the Great Depression caused premature death of the resort, and the Isle of Caprice, as it had done before, disappeared into the sea.

Undaunted, Capt. Pete in 1933 bought land on east Ship Island and ran a concession to which he ferried passengers. He had cut the bow sprit off his schooner, elongated the boat and called it the Pan American.

The next year the Joe Graham post of the American Legion persuaded Capt. Pete to forgo his concession to run theirs. The Legionnaires had purchased the historic Fort Massachusetts land, constructed dormitories for World War I veterans and guests and built a dance hall, complete with gambling and booze.

The lifestyle suited the high-energy Capt. Pete, known for living life to the fullest. His family recalls he could “speak in seven languages and curse in 10.”



Another family story has him losing the Pan American in a dice game and winning it back that same night.

“I’ve been doing two trips a day for 29 years,” Capt. Pete proudly told a radio interviewer in 1954 in a WVMI segment of “Down South Magazine Of The Air.” The recently rediscovered interview, now part of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College’s C.C. “Tex” Hamill Down South Magazine collection, is a rare opportunity to listen to the Croatian accent once prevalent on Biloxi’s Point.

The radio sound bite, backed by vintage photos, is now on an updated DVD, “Captain Pete & Son: The Ship Island Story,” first released this summer by the Skrmetta family.

The DVD’s executive producer is Kevin Buckel, who began working with the Skrmettas 14 years ago and now does marketing for them. The video highlights two Capt. Petes, the 1903 arrival who died in 1963 and his son, now the 79-year-old patriarch of the business.

The stories include the tale of a whale beached on the island and the family's role in saving the historic fort. "Whenever I was in the wheelhouse with Capt. Pete, I'd hear the stories and realized they needed to be preserved," Buckel said.

From 1926 until today, minus time out in World War II for government duty, Skrmetta excursion boats have brought island delight to more than two million excursionists. Family members pilot the boats, and work the summer island concession and the gift shop at the Gulfport Small Craft Harbor.

Since 1971, when Ship Island became part of Gulf Islands National Seashore, the Skrmettas have continued, under contract, to do what they've done for years, minus the jukebox on the ferry, and, of course, gambling.

The Capt. Pete of today is a markedly different personality from his father, less thrill seeking, always the family man but as hardworking as his immigrant father.

"I was raised up on the boat with my father and began working on the Pam American, probably swabbing decks, when I was 7 and dredged oysters for him when I was a young man," said this Capt. Pete. "It was the only kind of work I knew."

He still helps run the boats, which now total three, including the Pan American Clipper — a traditional wooden Biloxi lugger built in 1937 to replace the original Pan American.

The others are the 110-foot Gulf Islander and the 105-foot Capt. Pete, bought in 2003. Often behind the wheel these days is Capt. Lewis Skrmetta, one his sons.

"You can't run a seasonal business like this if you have to hire new people and train them every year," said Capt. Lewis. That's why this remains a family business.

"It's hard work and it's seasonal work and you never know if it's going to be a bad season because of weather or economy. We're still recovering from Katrina, but it gets better every year.

“We continue doing this because it is gratifying to offer something people really enjoy — an affordable boat ride to Ship Island and all the enchantment and history of the island.”

