



History of the Annual National Shrimp Festival

The story of the Annual National Shrimp Festival traces back to 1970 when Lillian Bemis, a local real estate agent from Gulf Shores, took a trip with her husband to nearby Bayou La Batre, Alabama. Inspired by the city's Blessing of Shrimp Boat Fleet and the crowd it drew, Bemis envisioned a similar celebration in Gulf Shores and set out to make it a reality, teaming up with area business leaders. It was Bill Prime, then director of the Gulf Shores Tourist Association, who pitched the idea of a Shrimp Festival.

The inaugural festival in 1971 drew a crowd of approximately 500 to 1,500 attendees. The focal point of the event was an Alabama seafood cook-off, where area restaurants & businesses competed in leased booth spaces to showcase their finest seafood dishes. The event also featured activities like a sand castle building contest, a beauty pageant, a dance party, live music, and a fireworks display.

From then on, the Shrimp Festival became a Gulf Coast tradition, expanding to four days, held every second full weekend of October. The festival's growing popularity has been backed by impressive numbers, as a 2016 study by the University of South Alabama estimated the annual attendance to be between 250,000 and 300,000 people, resulting in a \$46 million economic boost to the area - a welcomed change during what is typically considered a slower time of the year.

While the festival has evolved and expanded over the years, it has managed to preserve its roots by continuing on traditions held at the very first event. The sand sculpture contest, now managed by Sand Castle University's Janel Hawkins, is still held on the beach, while the cooking contest has become the "Best of the Fest" award. The tradition

of live music continues on as well, with local & national acts performing on two different stages all four days the festival is held. The event has seen performers like Miranda Lambert, Molly Hatchet, Eddie Money, & Joe Diffie grace its stages.

New traditions have also emerged to enrich the festival's offerings. The Singing for Scholarships competition gives a stage to local high school students to showcase their talents, while the Ron Arnold Memorial Youth for Art Show provides students of all ages an opportunity to display their artistic prowess. Additionally, the Children's Activity Village ensures a fun experience for the festival's youngest visitors.

The festival's success wouldn't be possible without the dedication and passion of a team of volunteers and organizers. Currently a committee of approximately 70 community leaders, business owners, and volunteers spearhead the event, with a chosen chairman leading the charge and rotating out every few years. The support from the community is evident in the approximately 600 on-site volunteers who lend their time to ensure the festival's smooth operation.

Set against the backdrop of Gulf Shores' white sand beaches and the Gulf of Mexico, the Annual National Shrimp Festival has become more than just a local event; it's a celebration that showcases musicians, artists, vendors, students, & the Gulf Coast community, drawing in visitors nationwide.