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Student filmmakers head South of the Border

By Ken Burger
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For better or worse, Pedro is the patron saint of South Carolina.

If you've driven through the Palmetto State on Interstate 95, you're familiar with the ubiquitous billboards that lead tourists into the trap known as South of the Border.

Born in the fertile mind of entrepreneur Alan Schafer, this roadside menagerie was the payoff behind hundreds of wacky signs (PEDRO SEZ: CHILI TONIGHT, BUT UNCERTAIN TAMALES!) that caused millions to take the exit just south of the state line.

Sixty years later, beneath the giant sombrero and amid rumors of everything from dirty politics to highway robbery, the story of Alan Schafer is brought forth in a documentary film produced by two College of Charleston students.

Classmates Jesse Berger and Nate Mallard will premiere their effort, "S.O.B. And The Legend Of Alan Schafer," at the Charleston International Film Festival at 12:30 p.m. Saturday at the Terrace Theatre on James Island.

Armed with a \$1,000 grant and an eye for the curious, they have captured what's left of one of South Carolina's most sensational sideshows.

Political power



File/AP

Pedro welcomes visitors to South of the Border, the Interstate 95 attraction that has drawn tourists off the roads since about 1950 when it began as a beer stand.

"I kept passing it while driving to a film festival in Durham," said Berger, a senior from Indianapolis majoring in Urban Studies. "After talking it over, my friend Nate and I decided it would make an interesting film."

A native of Rock Hill, Mallard saw the landmark as an eyesore until he learned more about it.

Turns out Schafer, a beer baron, created the Pedro character and hokey advertising campaign against all odds in this rural setting near the small town of Dillon.

"People still swear he used his political power to get I-95 to run right past South of the Border," said Mallard, a senior in marketing. "Actually, nobody knows for sure, but absolutely everybody believes it."

Partly because Schafer was so active in politics, the state Democratic Party held its meetings under the giant sombrero.

"But despite his being convicted and serving time for voter fraud, you won't find anybody who says anything bad about Alan Schafer," Berger said.

Alter ego

The students' documentary is heavy on interviews with longtime employees who have seen the attraction in good times and bad.

At its peak, Schafer made millions with the perfect trifecta of video poker, traffic and fireworks.

"Now the place is kind of a relic," Mallard said. "But Alan Schafer was larger than life."

And yet his alter ego appeared to be the saucy little Mexican character named Pedro who made tourists laugh at his horrible puns (Pedro Sez, You never SAUSAGE a place; It's a real

Wiener!)

"I think he enjoyed his role as the man behind the curtain," Mallard said.

His serious side, however, showed through when he battled the Ku Klux Klan over integrating the state Democratic primaries.

"Schafer paid his entire workforce in two-dollar bills," Berger said. "That quickly showed how far and wide his influence was."

But nothing's been quite the same at Pedro's place since Schafer's death in 2001 at age 87. The stark footage of skimpy foot traffic seems to foretell a sad future.

"Since Alan Schafer died, South of the Border has been like a chicken with its head cut off," Mallard said. "There's a power vacuum that hasn't been filled."

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