By The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — A white alligator, the prize attraction for the city of New Orleans and the Aquarium of the Americas, died after choking on a coin tossed into his tank by a visitor, an aquarium official said.

The 10-year-old alligator, which was brought to the aquarium to greet visitors for its grand opening on Labor Day 1990, measured 8 feet and weighed about 230 pounds. It died Wednesday.

Paleface, the alligator's aquarium-given name, gained national fame from its appearances on CNN and numerous other television shows including the "Tonight Show With David Letterman" and the "Today Show" on NBC, aquarium spokeswoman Melissa Lee said Thursday.

The alligator was found in 1987 on land owned by Louisiana Land & Exploration in Houma along with his brothers and sisters, who live at the Audubon Zoo.

All 18 are not technically albinos as many people think, Lee said. Though they have white skin, their bluish-gray eyes — the result of a gene mutation — made it leucistic, an even rarer form of the famous white alligators.

Aquarium veterinarians gave Paleface, who lived in the Mississippi River gallery focusing on local wildlife, a routine physical examination just two weeks ago and all vital signs were there, Lee said. "He was in really good health. That's why it came as such a surprise to us. We expected to have him for a lot longer."

The aquaria has volunteers standing next to the exhibit to watch for vandals, but apparently they did not see the coin tosser.

"We make every effort to warn people from throwing things into the exhibit," Lee said.

"We're very saddened to lose this beloved animal who has delighted so many aquarium visitors," said Ron Forman, president and CEO of the Audubon Institute.

While Paleface's death cast a touch of sadness on this holiday weekend for aquarium volunteers and personnel, Lee said the aquarium hopes to get one of his brothers or sisters sometime in January from the exhibit at the Audubon Zoo.

Still, it will take a while for his replacement to win the esteem Paleface acquired over the years. This past summer, the 10-millionth visitor walked by and gawked at the celebrity alligator.