Ponchatoula's alligator mascot, Hardhide Jr., dies

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PONCHATOULA -- Unlike his predecessor, Hardhide Jr. was buried here Thursday morning with little fanfare.

The alligator mascot of this Tangipahoa Parish city died Wednesday night and was laid to rest in a "quiet, private ceremony," Mayor Julian Dufreche said.

"We tried to contact his nearest relatives, but apparently they are all in hibernation," said Dufreche.

In the past, Ponchatoula citizens have not taken alligator funerals lightly.

Hardhide Jr. had been on the job about five years, taking over in 1985 after the death of his father, Old Hardhide.

Old Hardhide's passing was marked by the city with a jazz funeral, complete with a mule-drawn hearse and a specially constructed casket to fit the alligator's 12-foot, 308-pound frame.

Old Hardhide, who died at age 21, had been the city's favorite son since he first moved into the cage in the center of downtown in 1972. His funeral drew more than 2,000 mourners.

Dufreche said Hardhide Jr., like his father, apparently died of natural causes. The mayor said he did not know Hardhide Jr.'s age or weight, but said the 'gator measured about 10 feet.

"We checked to see if he had been shot and also checked to see if he was poisoned. It appears it was natural causes," Dufreche said.

The mayor said town officials are trying to get another alligator as a permanent mascot.

In the meantime, the Alligator Campground in Hammond has loaned the town a 14-foot alligator to appease Super Bowl crowds, who are expected to descend on Ponchatoula's downtown antique shops Saturday.

"We really need a 'gator in the pen," Dufreche said. "We're certainly going to replace him as soon as we can. The alligator is Ponchatoula's official mascot as well as a major tourist attraction."

Dufreche said he hopes that, come spring, the city will be able to find one of Hardhide Jr.'s offspring to occupy the official residence permanently.

"When the alligators come out of hibernation, we'll notify Hardhide Jr.'s son that he's next in line for the succession," Dufreche said.

Ponchatoula's alligator mascot 'Ole Hardhide' is placed into the ground after his death in January 1985.