

## Museum Around the Corner

### The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

#### Rene Cathou – Part 1 ©

This article appeared in the PeeDee Magazine in January of 2000 and eulogizes a Georgetown fixture, Rene Yves Cathou. The author is Phil Wilkinson.

“Ten days into the new millennium, Rene Yves Cathou, Jr. died in a Charleston hospital. He was 88. On the waterfront of Georgetown, he was a living legend – the last of the old guys – the Caviar King.

His headquarters were the old fish house on the Sampit River at the foot of St. James Street. Although Rene didn’t do the cooking, it was there that he hosted the daily gatherings and famous lunches that many Georgetonians remember him for.

The lunches served at Rene’s Fish House were usually noontime affairs. They were held at irregular intervals and for no apparent reason other than to celebrate a spirit of togetherness. As with any meal, it wasn’t just the food but the setting and the company that really determined the success of the affair.

Once a thriving wholesale/retail seafood business, the fish house was no longer opened for business, but was still opened for friends six days a week sharply at 9:00 a.m. by its sole proprietor, Rene Cathou. Though his name was spelled “Rene” no one ever called him that – to everyone he was “Rainey”. He began to manage the business for his father back in 1941 and ran it until, at 82, he said “he was tired of fooling with it.” He went down every day anyway, because it was a hub of activity – social activity.

There were some who came nearly every day, some pretty regular, and others from time to time, but most for the same reason: to keep in touch with ties that go way back. Way back had nothing to do with time because all ages were to be found there.

Rene, a short stocky man, was still strong after so many years, though he occasionally complained that he wasn’t so strong as he used to be. His face was weathered, but kindly, and when he smiled, everything about his face showed how he felt. His art was to summarize in just a few words what had taken someone else a while to say. Perhaps it was because he was such a good listener that so many folks gathered here.

The old fish house is on the river attached to a cluttered mooring dock that leads out towards the channel. It looks the same to me as it has since I was a boy. The only paint on the entire building, inside or out, is where someone tried to clean a paintbrush on the wall and where Rene’s friend, Ronnie Campbell – a combination of commercial fisherman, jack of all trades and even a master of some – let an electric paint mixer fall out of a five gallon can of paint and run wild, throwing paint all over the wall and door on the dockside of the building. The front door faces east and is made from six wide cypress boards. Nailed to the top is a rusty horseshoe, and at the bottom there’s a hole big enough for a large cat to walk through without breaking stride. Above the door are a rusted light fixture and a faded sign that used to be white with black letters, designating that this is a “Fish House”. The dockside door has a weathered sign over it that reads “Georgetown, S.C.” Bill Hodge, a local fisherman, found the sign somewhere and nailed it up so when the North Carolina shrimpers tied up to off-load their catch, there wasn’t any doubt where they were.

Both doors open into a large room where nothing seems organized, but neither is anything in the way. Facing the front door is an old sign that reads, "No fish cleaned after 2:00P.M." Along one wall is a series of sinks of various vintages, all looking as if an ocean of fish have been processed in them. On a rusty nail hangs a very large knife that has seen better days – its filed-down blade adorned with various sized nicks on its dull cutting edge. Further down, over the seafood wrapping table, is a yellowing calendar, eleven of its pages turned up and stuck on a nail, revealing the December page of some bygone year, a reminder that date and time are of little importance here. Almost unnoticed, the river may be glimpsed through the cracks between wide, well worn floorboards. It is a river that comes intimidatingly near the underside of the floor during big moon tides.

In the center of the room stands a tall upright heater with nine tattered, patched and unmatched chairs in a circle around it. On cool mornings, a large fluffy grayish brown feline named "Cat" often laid claim to one of the chairs nearest the heater. She was rustically beautiful and quite majestic, her coloring similar to that of a raccoon. If Ronnie was around, there at least two of his four dogs were here lying on the floor even closer to the stove than "Cat". Rebel, Pup, Dump and Blue – each had his own heart rending story of salvation from a tragic and abused life and were now plied with treats brought especially for them by some of the regulars. Rene once said of Ronnie's dogs, smilingly, "If I had a woman love me like any one of those, I'd be in serious trouble."

The second half of this article will be continued next time.