

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Rene Cathou Part II ©

We continue the article written by Phil Wilkinson for PeeDee Magazine in January of 2000 about one of Georgetown's most colorful characters, Rene Yves Cathou, Jr. Last week we explored the ambience of Rene's Fish House located at the end of St. James Street on the Sampit River. This week the traditional lunches served there and their significance is described.

"Tucked neatly out of the way at the end of a row of sinks [inside Rene's Fish House] was stored a rustic homemade stove fired by two gas tobacco barn burners. On lunch days, Hodge situated his stove near the front door away from the gathering around the heater. His usual menus were creations that contained either wild game or fish, always accompanied by rice. The rice was included partly because of tradition; there was a time when more rice was grown along the rivers of this area than anywhere in the colonies.

News that Hodge was cooking usually spread by word of mouth, and no one ever seemed to be forgotten. The crowd began to gather like small waves. The regulars came early, around 10:00 a.m. to help if needed, but really just to be together. The next wave arrived around 11:30, and began to share the newest joke, latest gossip, and other news. At times, a single storyteller held the attention of everyone, and at other times the crowd settled into smaller groups, each focusing on its own special interests. At noon, the final wave came in almost all at once.

The group consisted of characters from various walks of life: different religions, educations, occupations, incomes and interests. Some came dressed in expensive suits, others in worn jeans and white rubber boots. To an outsider the crowd would seem an odd combination, given the setting and mixture of attire, but many have known this place and been friends since childhood. They know each other's families, sometimes even to their grandparents, and though their life journeys may have followed different paths, those paths still cross, interweave like the twine used to repair the old netting hanging in the fish house loft above their heads. There was a knowing, an acceptance that transcends differences, and together they could be themselves, if only for a little while.

When the meal was ready, Rainey would call on someone to give a blessing. As usual, there was thanks for the fellowship and the bounty given to us, and a request to be caring of the needy who were not so well blessed. Plates were served with heaping helpings and eaten with subdued conversation or in silence. Everyone had his fill and duly complimented the chef. They lingered for a little while longer, but all too soon it always ended – a reminder that, to some, time did matter, calling them to hurry back to the orderly schedule of their lives. The dogs and "Cat" finished off the leftovers.

Looking back on those lunches, I always think, "What wonderful meals!" though I can hardly remember what we ate. It was so much more than the food. It was the smell of the fish house, the knowledge that old boats, the dock, all the little memories about the place were still okay and that "Rainey" still reigned. It was also the sounds of familiar laughter and voices of old friends – friends like Joe, now with both hips and knees replaced, who sat across the aisle from me in first grade; and Glennie, who when we were

eight or nine, used to row his little bateau out to the big ship channel marker and dive from its very top into swirling water where the PeeDee, Waccamaw, Black and Sampit rivers merge into Winyah Bay. Later we roomed together for a year in college, and I ran his family business awhile when he was in the Navy.

There was Ingell, whose father – once the only realtor in the area – used to tell us about Myrtle Beach and how he remembered it as a lot of sorry farms with dirt so poor you couldn't raise hell on them with a single barrel shotgun and a gallon of homemade whiskey. Also, Gene, whose beautiful bride and mine were best friends; and others like Rainey's friend Ronnie, whose survival depends upon a knowledge of wild things and how to catch them for economic gain. At times we've found ourselves on opposite sides of the law because of my knowledge of those same wild things and the responsibility for helping them survive in a rapidly changing world. Ronnie's dependence upon those wild things changes little, but laws to protect them do, and therein lies our dilemma. I've known Ronnie for many years and our views of this topsy-turvy world are almost the same, perhaps because we have both been nurtured, though in different ways, by the same creatures and places.

But Rainey is dead, and a padlock hangs on the fish house door. The regulars have not yet digested this twin catastrophe. In a gesture containing both hope and denial, they turn up almost every day at the fish house door. They stand there, looking at the lock, and then they go."