

The Martin County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Wednesday, November 14, 2018 at 7:00 p.m. in the Martin County Governmental Center, Commissioners' Boardroom at 305 East Main Street, Williamston, North Carolina. One item on the itinerary was to recognize the loss of The Cypress Grill Restaurant at Jamesville, NC and unveil a print of a black pen and ink drawing of the Cypress Grill by area artist Bailey Phelps which will hang in the Martin County Governmental Center.

## **Cypress Grill Print Presentation**

County Manager Bone presented the following information regarding the history of "The Cypress Grill":

The Cypress Grill, a restaurant on the banks of the Roanoke River in Jamesville and one of the last authentic "fish shacks", burned to the ground on July 22, 2018. It was a total loss. The restaurant was a Martin County institution and landmark for over 70 years. It was most known for its fried herring, a fish with an important local history dating back to Native Americans in the region. Some of the history of The Cypress Grill includes the following:

- It began as a "cook-up shack" in the 1930s where men would gather to cook, play poker and take a drink or two.
- After the first shack burned down, a holding pond for catfish occupied the space.
- Later, the pond was filled-in, and a second structure was built. That later became the Cypress Grill.
- While ownership of the land and building passed down through the family of Ransom Roberson— Ransom & Mae to son Alva (Red) and wife Mamie Roberson and most recently to their daughters Deane Phelps and Amy Hardison – two local families operated the restaurant for long periods, making it the well-known attraction that it became.
- Ellsworth Holliday (brother of Mamie Roberson) and Oscar Davenport ran the restaurant together early on. A recently found "business card" says that they offered lobster and other delicacies and would cater parties, as well.
- After that, the Williams family operated the restaurant for over two decades.
- Leslie Gardner and his late wife, Sallie, had the longest run by far with over 40 years of operating the Grill. Their daughter, Kathy Davis, took over the restaurant in 2012, and "Miss Sally" continued making her famous pies for the restaurant until her death on July 28, 2017.
- The Grill also served as one of few local employment opportunities for many young people in Jamesville.

Herring fishing was a big part of the economy in the Roanoke, Chowan and other rivers. Visitors would crowd the banks of the Roanoke at Jamesville each Easter Monday and watch as the huge seine (net) hauled in thousands of herring. A "fishing machine" often could be seen across the river from the Grill.

The Cypress Grill was open seasonally, from January to April, when the herring moved up-river to spawn. The families who ran the restaurant were often tobacco farmers, as well. The annual herring run began in the dead of winter and helped carry families through until time to “set out” tobacco in the spring.

The restaurant was well known for its food, and its primitive atmosphere was just as much of an attraction. Located at the bottom of the “river hill,” it could be quite exciting just to drive down and park! The simple architecture of the building changed little over the years. In fact, you could still see the outdoors through cracks in the siding. People came from all over the state and beyond to take in the whole experience.

The Cypress Grill garnered attention with articles in *The New York Times*, *Southern Living* and *The Smithsonian*, as well as being covered on a radio segment of NPR’s *The Splendid Table*, to name a few. Even nationally known watercolor artist Mary Whyte spent time at the Grill to paint Sally, Leslie and the crew. Two of her paintings—one of “Mr. Leslie” carrying cleaned herring to the kitchen and another of “Miss Sally” breaching the fish for the frying pan—were included in her national show “The Working South.”

In a July 23, 2018 *Raleigh News & Observer* article, Raleigh insurance agent John Grimes was quoted, “For those of us who grew up in Eastern North Carolina, our lifeblood is the Roanoke, the Tar, the Pamlico. It’s our soul. The smell of the Roanoke River mixing with the smell of fried herring – that smell will forever be in my brain.”

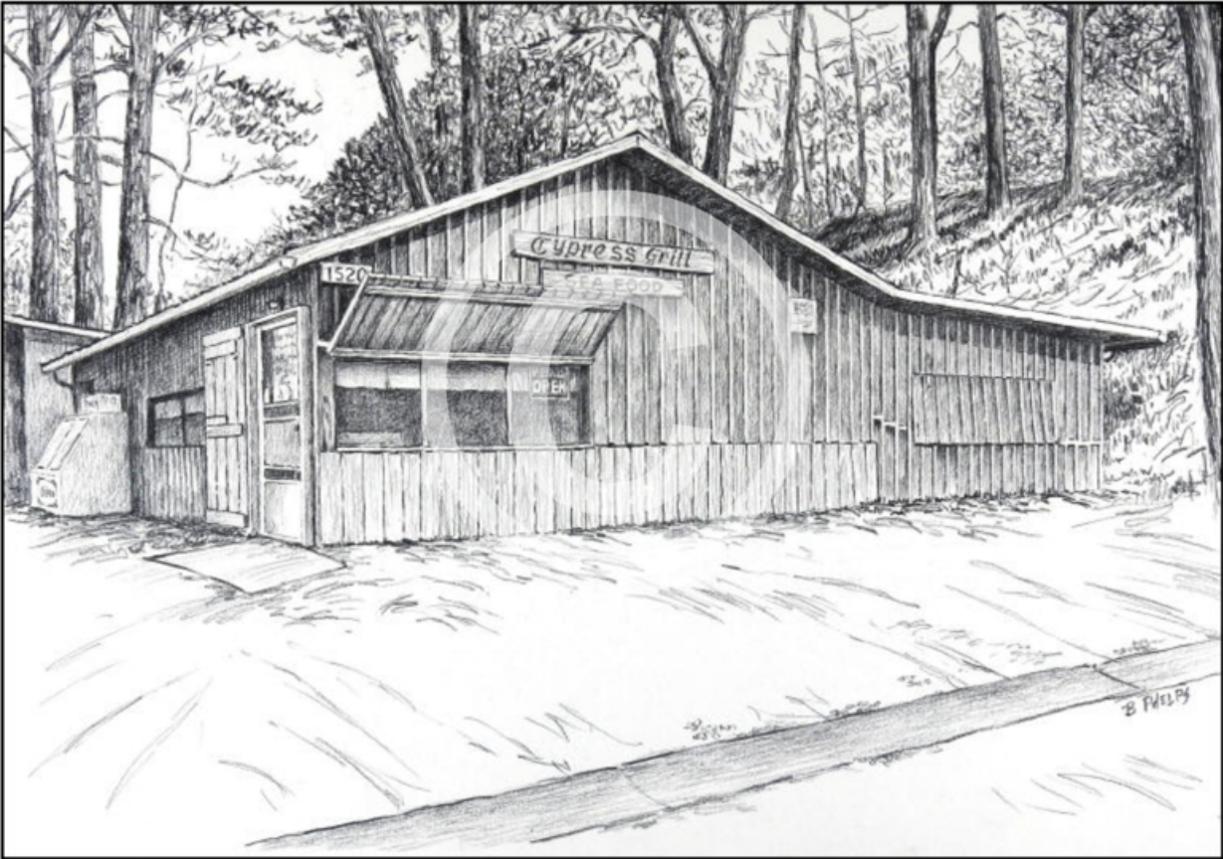
To commemorate the history of the Cypress Grill and its contributions to our community, Martin County purchased a print of a black pen and ink drawing of the Cypress Grill by area artist Bailey Phelps (also the husband of one of the current property owners) for display in the Martin County Governmental Center. The new print will join a series of Martin County scenes by Phelps, which have been displayed in the building since 1982.

The print of the Cypress Grill was unveiled and hung in the Board of Commissioners Meeting Room. The print will join various other prints by Mr. Bailey Phelps that have been displayed since 1982 in the Martin County Governmental Center.

Recent operators of the Grill, Leslie Gardner and Kathy Davis, and property owners Amy Hardison and Deane Phelps, along with Artist Bailey Phelps, were invited to attend the meeting. Mr. Leslie Gardner was unable to attend due to his health. Mr. Bailey Phelps presented a print of the Cypress Grill to Ms. Kathy Davis to thank her for all of her help and dedication over the years to the restaurant, and had one to be given to Mr. Leslie Gardner as well.

Each Commissioner gave remarks regarding the loss of the Cypress Grill, and appreciation for the owners’ and operators’ efforts over the years, and the well-known history of the restaurant. The Commissioners took photos with Mr. Phelps and Ms. Davis, as well as Ms. Amy Hardison and Ms. Deane Phelps.

Actual 10" x 14.25" prints of the Mr. Phelps drawing may be purchased online at the following link  
– <http://www.baileyphelps.com>.



*Cypress Grill 1937 - 2018*