

Island Merchants Preserve History With Wall Art

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When Alison and Blaine Dry began to renovate the building for their then new Cip's Place restaurant in 2010, they were surprised at the number one request. Locals and Sanibel lovers pleaded – you're not going to tear out the ferry boat or paint over the faces, are you?

The concern centered on wall murals at the restaurant that date to 2007. The murals depict the old Sanibel ferry and of famous islanders and visits over the generations. The murals, to the Drys, were living history and deserved a place of honor – and updates. Looking back, the pair have not regretted the decision to keep the work intact. The faces are of historical figures like Teddy Roosevelt and Thomas Edison, but also locals like the merchant Bailey family.

Patrons have applauded the decision to keep the artwork, Alison Dry said, adding that store staff have immersed themselves in the history of the work.

“Our staff learned – with lots of enthusiasm – about the faces on the wall and their Sanibel stories,” said Alison Dry. “We were always asking customers for their memories and recollections, too.”

The wall murals date to the former Mermaid Kitchen and owner Katie Gardenia. Tim Macko, a local artist known for wall murals and trompe l'oeil, was commissioned to design and paint the murals. According to Macko, Gardenia chose 60 people whom she considered at that time notable, famous, or influential Sanibel locals or island visitors.

“I was handed a folder of old pictures, newspapers, photos and drawings to paint the wall,” Macko said. “I had carte blanche from that point



Mural features famous locals and visitors.

to completion. I am used to taking on challenges, and I do my best to create it.”

The work took three months to complete; he was assisted by another artist, Jill Baugher. Macko's vision included interlaced gardenia (for Katie Gardenia), which would hold the composition together, compelling the observer's eye over the large space. The garland also helped support the 60 painted faces, so they weren't floating in mural space, he said.

Katie's restaurant closed and subsequently several business/ restaurants opened. But Macko had wondered whether his work had been preserved. To his surprise, Blaine and Alison Dry contacted him. He was pleased they had chosen to save the artwork.

“They asked me to add two more faces, repair some damaged places, and I finally got to add my signature,” he said. “I am happy that so many people enjoy it.”

Macko still paints and stays busy with commissions for portraits, trompe l'oeil's and murals.

“I am glad,” he said, “to have done something so public and would love to do more public sites, since most of my present day work is in private homes and seen by so few.”

The history of the faces preserved on the Cip's Place wall is an interesting sidebar. Anne Cimato Kearns was the mother of well-known islanders, Joe and John Cimato. They own the property where Cip's is located and also the Forever Green Ace Hardware. Anne poured her love for Sanibel and her family into preserving the stories behind the mural faces, family said. For 45 years she saved, assembled and cherished the history and memories of

these important Sanibelians. Each face is captured in super-sized binders that hold newspaper clippings, photos, letters and other details. Cip's customers asking questions about mural faces are given a handout that shares details.

“Visitors and locals want to know their names and their stories and, thanks to Anne, we have them,” Alison Dry said. “People are always super-inspired with the mural.”

Another sidebar involves long-time Cip's worker David Sobnosky, who has embraced the wall in living history. What a treasure to see and hear him bring the wall to life with words. His imitation of President Teddy Roosevelt is mesmerizing. Alison Dry couldn't recall when the transformation began, but remembers one day Sobnosky in full Teddy wardrobe.

Of course, David loves it when those enshrined on the Cip's wall visit. The only signature on the mural is of Francis Bailey of the Bailey's General Store. David recalls the most asked question about the mural prior to Mr. Bailey's visit was about the donkey the Bailey boys are depicted sitting on and what was the donkey's name?

Francis Bailey corrected David – referring to “Pete” as a mule not a donkey – as Francis informed David that a donkey couldn't take Florida heat or the mosquitoes but Pete the mule could.

The second most asked question David says is: Why is Dick Kearns thumbing his nose to the crowd? The answer: His displeasure with the upcoming Sanibel Causeway. Ironically, the Cip's namesake is at the top of the wall; Jimmy Cipriani is remembered for his good-natured welcoming and Sanibel attitude. ●



Tim Macko