

Jenkins a walking book of history

By **NANCY GASTON**
Citizen Staff

DICKINSON — Felix Jenkin's resume reads like the history of the Bay Area.

The 95-year-old was one of very few black men serving in World War I. He came to the area to live in 1929 and was hired to clear off lots that later became Clear Lake Forest and El Lago. He hunted with rancher Jim West on the 33,000-acre West Ranch. He was a cook at Ellington Field after

World War II and was later known around town for his fantastic barbeque.

His story is one of the trials of a black man in an area of few blacks, of the acceptance of him by local whites and the changes in attitudes since. Natalie Ong and George Walraven from the El Lago Historical Society interviewed Jenkins at his home in Dickinson a while back for part of their collection of oral histories.

Jenkins came to the Clear Lake area in 1929 from Clay, Texas. He

lived near where the county boys home is for a year and later moved to what is now El Lago near the present location of the Lester Moore home on Lakeshore Circle and then to a lot about 50 yards behind the Circle K store.

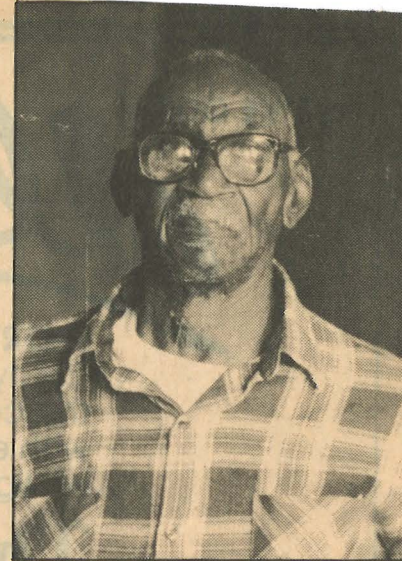
He was caretaker for Peden family of Peden Iron & Steel Co. of Houston and worked part-time driving black school children from the area to the La Porte School District. The black children couldn't go to the white schools in Seabrook and Webster until much

later. He remembered a sign on the wall of the train depot in Seabrook that said, "Nigger, if you can't read, you better run anyhow."

"They didn't allow no colored people there until Jim Wiley, and Mr. Kirby (John H. Kirby, who originally owned the West Ranch) had Mr. Wiley to come out there," Jenkins said.

He said a young teacher begged him to let his children come to the Seabrook school because the Seabrook district had to pay the La

See JENKINS, page 3A



FELIX JENKINS

JENKINS

Continued from page 1

Porte district to educate the black kids. He eventually allowed it.

Jenkins fed his family from a large garden and all of the wild game he was able to put on the table — fish, ducks, geese, deer, raccoons and possums. He went to work for Wiley helping out on the ranch doing yard work and cleaning off brush. His brother Oliver milked the cows and the milk was then taken to the Borden plant in Houston.

He then went to work for the Pedens, milking and doing the yardwork. On weekends, he would cook for big parties thrown by Peden's sons at their house on the lake. The house was later torn down when Dr. C. Paul Harris bought the property.

Jenkins remembers when Lakeshore Drive was just a dirt road and there were only three houses between El Lago and Webster.

"And when you'd be going to Galveston, on this side of the causeway, the roads would be a dead road," he said. "When I come down in here, it was nothing. It wasn't, I'd say, 150 houses from the causeway to Houston, a house here and yonder and a house there. Texas City was a little bitty old place."

Jenkins developed an unheard of friendship with rancher Jim West.

"I was the only black man allowed to go with all the whites," he said. "They would, see the white people around there, they'd come and you wouldn't talk to them, huh-uh. And he (West) just heard about me over there at the doctor's because I had a squirrel dog and he sent for me."

He said he had few problems being one of only a few blacks in an all-white area because he stayed in his place. But that wasn't true in all parts of Texas. He remembered a trip with a hispanic man named

Ellis to haul bedding up to a hunting lease for Bill Crawford and a Mr. Blackstone. Ellis and Jenkins had car trouble in Pearsall, Tx. and tried to get it fixed. But when they waited and waited and the mechanic didn't start the repair work, Jenkins got out of the truck to find out why. Ellis told him to get back in the truck quick.

"They said they're going to take you down there — wait until dark. They're going to take you way down somewhere where there's nothing but varmints down there and they're going to chain you to a tree and they going — them varmints going to eat you up," Ellis told him.

Jenkins said he got back in the truck and Ellis told the white mechanics, "Now, I'm going to tell you one — you-all white people — one thing: If you-all go ahead and carry him down there, you-all ain't going to have no Pearsall. I'll tell you that right now."

When the mechanics saw that he meant what he said, they fixed the car and let them go. When Blackstone and the others got to the hunting lease a few days later, they told them what had happened in Pearsall. The men loaded up the guns and put Jenkins in the car and drove to Pearsall. They told Jenkins to go around to every place in the town asking for a drink or anything.

"We going to make a Christian out of Pearsall," Blackstone told Jenkins.

All of them had guns and made Jenkins go in every store in town to buy something. He didn't have any trouble.

Jenkins seemed to have a knack for making money, all through hard work. He was the low bidder on jobs to clear off land that later became Timbercove and El Lago.

He used only an axe and a saw, and occasionally, with some huge trees, a big wrecker.

Jenkins did some work for Walraven, who was amazed that he had an uncanny ability to fell trees and know exactly where they would land.

"The reason I knowed about that, I used to, me and my brother, whenever we was small in that Trinity River bottom, them trees is tall in that bottom. And we would be coon hunting. And me and him would cut that tree nearly down, We had a little dog about that tall named Caesar. I would go out there and take my lantern and go way out and set it down where that tree couldn't hit it," he said.

"And he would sit there by that lantern by that tree. When that tree hit the ground, he had that coon. He's just that fast. So, that's the way I had learnt how to," Jenkins said. "That little dog, it never did hit him. Never did go to him. And he wasn't going to move until tree hit the ground. And when that tree hit the ground, he had that coon."

The friendship between Jenkins and Walraven has lasted through the years.

"Mr. Walraven was the first white man to let me sit at his table and eat," Jenkins said. "I wanted to eat out there in the garage. And he said, 'Oh, you come on in here and eat. You don't have to eat out there in the garage.'"

During World War II, Jenkins worked at a refinery, but when the war ended, he said, all the blacks were fired.

"They didn't allow colored to work there now no how, but we worked there until the time that come, they let us out," he said.



Felix Jenkins has seen plenty of change in the Bay Area and in the world over the last 95 years. Most of

it, he believes, has been a change for the better.

Citizen photo by Ronnie Holland

He then went to work as a cook and butcher at Ellington Field. That's when his reputation as a good cook came. He has cooked barbeque at local events in years past. But now, he stays at his home in Dickinson with his wife Savan-

nah. But they're not alone — they had three daughters and nine sons, 40 grandchildren and 55 great grandchildren.