

Paul Jenkins

Interview with Paul Jenkins, 70 years old

18 Belser's Alley, Columbia, S.C.

—*Stiles M. Scruggs, Columbia, S.C.*

SON OF A SLAVE TELLS OF HIS FATHER'S POLITICAL EXPERIENCES

Paul Jenkins, age seventy, living at 18 Belser's Alley, Columbia, S.C., is a son of Paul Jenkins, a former slave, who decided to endure the burdens he had in Colleton County, South Carolina, after he was set free in 1865, rather than to fly to other places he knew nothing of. There he won the respect of the white folks and Negroes alike, was repeatedly elected to office, and lived there happily to the end of his life.

Here the present Paul Jenkins takes up the story, with:

"I was born in Colleton County in 1867. My daddy was in office when I begin to recall things, and he keep in office, by the will of the people, until I was nearly grown. My mammy, too, was a slave, when she and daddy marry. She die when I was 'bout twelve years old, and my only brother, Edgar, was goin' on ten. My daddy never marry again.

"One day some white men come to see daddy long after mammy was gone, and they say to daddy: 'Paul, when you gwine to jump the broomstick again?' My daddy was the only one who not laugh when they say that. He reply: 'I has no women in view and no weddin' dream in the back of my head. I has decided a wicked woman am a big bother and a good woman am a bore. To my way of thinkin', that is the only difference between them.' The white folks not smile, but say: 'You'll see! Just wait 'til the right girl come along.'

"Daddy just seem to make friends of all the people 'bout him, and our house, close to Smoak, was a big meetin' place most of the time. Sometimes the visitors are all white men. But at other days the niggers come and talk, tell funny tales, and laugh. Most of the meetin's at the house was late at night, 'cause my daddy always go to his office at Walterboro, on week days. People comin' and goin' there, all the time. Daddy was sho' popular with the people, generally speakin'.

"The biggest crowd I ever seen up to that time, was when General M.C. Butler come to Walterboro in 1882, to speak. He had been United States Senator since 1876, and was a candidate for re-election. General Butler much pleased, that day, when many white leaders and daddy call at his hotel and tell him that daddy had been asked by his neighbors to introduce him. He say: 'Well, from what I hears, Paul Jenkins can do that job as well as anybody in the State.' Then he pat daddy on the shoulder.

"At the speakin', daddy gets up, and the big crowd claps its hands for joy, and laughs, too. Daddy not laugh much, just smile. Then he throw back his shoulders and say:

General Butler, lak Moses, led us forth at last,

The barren wilderness he pass'd

Did on the very border stand

Of the bless'd Promise Land,

And from the misty mountain tops of his exalted wit,

Saw it himself and showed us it!

"That's why we am sendin' him back—'. That was all I hear. Daddy not allowed to finish. The people riot with pleasure, and General Butler say the tribute am de finest he ever hear, and smile at daddy sittin' there on the platform with the other big folks. At another time, daddy has a nigger lawyer runnin' 'gainst him for County Commissioner. The lawyer's name was Amphibious Mclver. They begin the campaign at Cottageville. Mclver speak first. Daddy follow, and begin with:

A bullfrog tied by its tail to a stump,

It rear and it croak, but it couldn't make a jump!

"The white folks and the niggers clap, stamp, throw hats, and laugh; finally, marchin' up to the table to grab daddy and carry him up the street on their shoulders. He keep sayin': 'Boys, why don't you let me finish my speech?' They would laugh and say: 'Paul, you done made de best speech in de world!' Daddy win at the 'lection, in a big way.

"My daddy learn to read, write, and cipher while he was a slave. The Jenkins family help him, he say, 'cause he always keep the peace, and work as he was told to do. When he's set free, that white family help him get settled and loaned him books. He go to Charleston 'bout 1868 and buy an armful of books and studied at night or whenever he had the chance. That is why he was able to make the political races which he make and profit by. He send me and my brother, Edgar, to school, so that we learn a good deal in books. Edgar, he fidgitty lak, and decide he go to Pennsylvania and make a fortune!

"Edgar got work in a steel mill at Johnstown, soon after he got there, and had considerable money, when he was sent to the hospital with pneumonia. He pull through that sickness and go back to his job, but the big flood come (May 31, 1889) and the girl he was to marry was among the 2,000 unknown people who was drowned, and he never has married—peculiar lak our daddy, don't you think? I just been married to one. She is 68 and I's 70 and I may say we's through, too!

"I specialized on bridge-buildin'. I has helped build a sight of bridges in my time, travelin' as far as Memphis, Tenn., in that work. I has made oodles of money, but my dollars always has wings and, one way or the other, they get away from me. Still me and my old woman not sufferin' much and we hopes, when we goes away for good, we goes together.