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It's Like a Living Thing To Me: An oral history of the Jenkins House, Durrell, Twillingate

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The Jenkins House, located in Blow Me Down, Durrell, Twillingate, is a very small one-and-a-half storey, gable-roofed outport home (fig. 001). It sits facing the ocean, surrounded by grassy fields and vegetable gardens (figs. 002-003).

The footprint of the house is roughly only 18' by 18'. However, while it is a small dwelling, the house is packed with history. At least five generations of the Jenkins family have owned and occupied the home, and continue to do so today. On May 14, 2011, the property was designated as a Registered Heritage Structure by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador [HFNL] and was subsequently restored.

The building was owned historically by the Jenkins family, and is currently owned by Corey Sharpe, whose grandmother Leah Sharpe was originally a Jenkins (fig. 004). Like many vernacular buildings in the province, its history was never recorded in written form, and so we are dependent on the oral tradition for much of what is known about the structure. On May 14, 2014, Dale Jarvis conducted two oral history interviews, the first with owner Corey Sharpe, and the second with Corey's father, Winston Adolphus Sharpe. This report is based primarily on those interviews, with additional information provided through the designation files held by HFNL, and by supplemental research.

Early History and Ownership

The construction date and original owner is unknown, though it is estimated that the property was built sometime by the mid 1800s. Local oral tradition holds that the property was constructed elsewhere, and dragged to its current location early in its history.

The first identified owner was Reuben Jenkins, who passed away in 1902. It is assumed, however, that his father William Jenkins may have been the original owner of the home. Reuben and Hannah Jenkins had two sons, Elijah born 1873 and Adolphus born 1884, both birthed in the home. Elijah lived in the home until he married Susan Simms on November 27, 1901. Adolphus took ownership of the home when his father Ruben passed and raised his own family between those four small walls.

Adolphus Jenkins [1884 - 1939] married Lucretia Spencer [1885 - 1944] around 1906. The two had ten children together, seven daughters and three sons. Tuberculosis was rampant at the time and it was not unusual for families to lose young children; daughter Edith passed away as a baby and very little information is recorded of her. Two other daughters, Verbena Gladys [1916 - 1922] and Hannah Lily [1911 - 1922?], also passed away at a young age. Their other children, William John [1907 - 1934], Eli (Elijah) John [1913 - 1994], Amelia "Gertie" Gertrude [1919 - 2010], Harvey Stewart [1922 - 2010], Leah Pearl [1925 - present], and Hazel Maude [1927 - 2012] all lived to be adults. Leah Pearl Jenkins is the last remaining sibling (figs. 005-006).

"Nan [Leah Jenkins Sharpe] had a real fondness for her father who was very kind. She said he would even knit clothes for them, make clothes for them. He would do rugs. He did man things, and he did not-so-man things at that time. But he did whatever it took to keep the family together and provide them with what he could." - Corey Sharpe

Stewart Jenkins took ownership of the home when his father Adolphus passed in 1939 and was the last occupant of the home, living there until around 2000. Stewart married Florence and had a son named Harvey, and daughters Jean and Eileen. Corey Sharpe has fond memories of visiting his great uncle Stewart at the home as a child, while it was small, there was always room for family to gather in the kitchen, have a snack, and listen to the CB radio. At one point it is said that there were about sixteen people living in the house. Lilian, Stewart's sister, moved in with her three young children while her husband was working away in the lumber camps and their brother Eli moved in with his wife and three children while they were building their own home. The home was cramped but the family made do, sleeping in twos and threes and setting up camp in closets and corners.

Corey Sharpe, a sixth generation descendant of the Jenkins and grandson of Leah Jenkins, is the current owner of the home.

The House and Property

The Jenkins House is believed to have been built in the mid-1800s, though it is difficult to assign an exact construction date. According to the oral history of Stewart Jenkins, the house was located near Spillars Cove and was relocated 'across the marsh' closer to Blow Me Down beach so the family could be closer to the fishery. The house is of the First Settlers style and is a one-and-a-half storey home, roughly 18' by 18'. Corey Sharpe describes the house as;

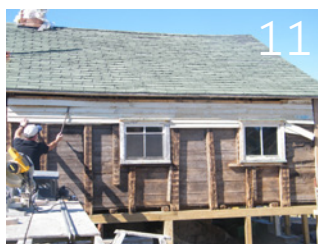
... saltbox style house. So there's your kitchen in the biggest room downstairs. So... your kitchen is the biggest room downstairs. There's a full – what I would call a porch – on the back of the house. There's a small pantry back there, one-bedroom, a very tiny stairwell that goes upstairs to – believe it or not – three rooms. I haven't been able to pinpoint what influence it was for the people who built it or what part of England – we're pretty sure somewhere in England – it came from, the design or whatnot. There's mortise and tenon joins of the studs going into the main beams below the house (fig. 007). So there are some little quirks about the house that would probably pin down where the house was constructed or what influence the people had. The windows are pretty unique. There are nine-pane windows that slip into the wall."

Corey takes great pride in not only the historic structure of the home but also the family history it symbolizes.

"This place is not just a structure to me. The structure alone, to me, I think it's a national treasure – just that alone it would appeal to me. But having that family connection ... I spent nights just very concerned about the house, wondering what was going to happen to it. Even if I didn't get it I was hoping that it would go to somebody who had the same passion I



(1) Jenkins House, prior to restoration, front view facing ocean; (2) exterior view showing part of the beach; (3) view from house; (4) (Jenkins) Hamlyn and her sister Leah (Jenkins) Sharpe, most likely early 1930s; (5) Jenkins family, (l to r) Willie Jenkins, Rueben Jenkins, Lucretia Jenkins, and Lillian Jenkins; (6) Jenkins family, (l to r) Eli Jenkins and Stewart Jenkins; (7) mortise and tenon work on the original sills; (8) hole in floor where Lucretia Jenkins viewed the wake of her husband Adolphus; (9-13) restoration work underway on the house.





(14-17) The process of taking down and rebuilding the chimney; (18) stairhead window, uncovered during the restoration; (19) scorch marks on the boards around the chimney; (20) view of the upstairs landing; (21) scraped window sash, showing the earlier yellow ochre colouring; (22-24) exterior restoration work; (25) rear view, before roof shingles; (26) front roof, with wood shingles half installed; (27) exterior view, close to completion of project; (28) view of the completely restored Jenkins House Registered Heritage Structure.



had. So the house means ... words can't even describe. It's like a living thing to me. It's an extension of our family. And just knowing the history, and my grandmother is so fond of it and all her siblings were so fond of the house, and I had spent time there with them."

The Jenkins House has a rich social history, as generations of the family have grown up between its four walls. Winston and Corey Sharpe both have stories of sitting in the kitchen and listening to people perform music through the CB radio on a Friday night, of how hot the house would get in the summer months, and warm memories of the family spending the holidays together in the small house.

One of the most interesting stories the two shared was of Adolphus and Lucretia Jenkins. According to oral history, Lucretia contracted tuberculosis and suffered in the home for many years with the disease. She was confined to her bedroom while her daughter Leah Jenkins cared for her, surprisingly Leah never contracted the disease herself. While Lucretia was sick her husband Adolphus passed away. Adolphus was waked in the home, which was tradition at the time. Bedridden and unable to leave the upstairs of the house, Lucretia still wanted to see her husband one last time. The family decided, instead of trying to bring her downstairs they would saw a hole in the floor by the side of her bed so she could rest and still be able to see her husband, so that is what they did. Today, the cut in the floor is still recognizable by the newer boards that fill where the hole once was (fig. 008). Corey remembers his Grandmother Leah recounting the story;

"Well, I tell you about that now. I never told anybody about it before. When father passed away, they waked him downstairs. So Lucretia was bed ridden upstairs with TB and separated from the family. She wanted to see her husband while they had him waked. So what they did, instead of bring her downstairs, they cut a hole in the floor so she could look down from her bed and see him. So the floors are to stay like that."

The Restoration Project

With assistance from the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, the exterior of the house was completely restored. The building was jacked up and levelled, and a new concrete footing was poured, with some of the sills being replaced (figs. 009-013). Skirting, clapboard, corner boards, trim work, and wooden roof shingles were repaired or replaced, and the chimney was restored from the ridge upwards using bricks matching the size, colour, and texture of the originals (figs. 014-017). The original multi-paned windows were repaired where possible, and three new replica windows were made. This included a stairhead window to fit an opening that was uncovered when the siding was removed, and which had been missing prior to living memory (fig. 018).

While the restoration process has revitalized the house, Corey was very careful to retain its integrity. Corey said, "I didn't want to change it in any way. I wanted to keep the heartbeat of that house. I wanted to keep it going, we'll say." The home has never had indoor plumbing and electricity was not installed until the 1970s. The windows are unique in that they slide up and into the wall of the house, instead of swinging in or out. The original chimney has a slight taper and during the restoration of the house Corey found there to be scorch marks on the boards surrounding the chimney, likely caused from small fires (fig. 019).

One characteristic of the house that truly shows its history are its worn floorboards. The boards had been covered over the years with different layers of canvas flooring (fig. 020), however, when the house was being restored the many layers of canvas were removed to reveal the very worn floorboards in the main traffic areas of the house.

"Like the floorboards going into the porch, I mean they're worn right down. And the knots are probably almost half an inch above the floor itself 'cause it's never been replaced. I mean it's like a path that's been trodden, and there's only the rocks that's left." - Winston Sharpe

Here, owner Corey talks about how he selected the colour for the house, in consultation with George Chalker, HFNL's Executive Director:

So colour was another thing. What are we going to put on it for colour? I can remember it always being white. So I said, "I'm not a big fan of white. White's everywhere. It's not even a colour, in my opinion. But anyway, it did look nice on the house and stuff." So I said ... I spoke to George Chalker, and he said, "Well, take a look at those heritage colours that we had Templeton's do for us." I said, "Yeah, I'll do that."

So I picked out a colour. I think it was Dory Buff or something like that. Am I going to drastically change the colour of the house, or what am I going to do? So the siding, the local siding, had been replaced on the house in different places on the house over time. It was never all stripped and replaced. They could do one side one year, then 15, 20 years later they probably did a patch on the other side, whatever. So anyway, I got down to a patch that was original to the house. It had the cut nails, and I said, "What colours were on that house?" So I slowly scraped the paint down. When I got down to the last colour, apart from say the red ocher-ish stain that they had on it, that was the colour (fig. 021). It was almost exact. That just made up my mind right there. So that's the colour we painted the house.

Designation and Heritage Value

In 2011, Corey Sharpe applied to the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador to have the building designated as a Registered Heritage Structure. On May 14th of that year, the board of HFNL designated the Jenkins House due to its aesthetic and historic value, and approved a grant for the restoration project (figs. 022-026).

The designation of the Jenkins House is confined to the footprint of the building (fig. 027). The building's Statement of Significance, listed on the Canadian Register of Historic Places, notes:

"Jenkins House has aesthetic value as a good example of a typical fisherman's property common to rural Newfoundland in the mid-nineteenth century. Modest in scale and design, this house is a variant of the Saltbox architectural style. The front façade is symmetrical, featuring three 9-pane pocket windows, and the roofline tapers back on the rear façade to a height of one storey. A unique feature of the house is the use of 9-paned and 4-paned pocket windows throughout, as this type of window is rare in Newfoundland and Labrador. Built using local materials, the exterior walls are clad in narrow wooden clapboard and the overall exterior decoration is quite simple and clean."

Jenkins House has historic value due to its age and because it is representative of an earlier way of life. Built in the mid 1800s, Jenkins House is a good example of the type of house built by inshore fishermen in the nineteenth century. These modest structures were home to large fishing families - families who worked cooperatively to harvest the ocean, grow subsistence gardens and raise animals for their own use. This way of life sustained generations of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians until the evolution of fishing methods in the 20th century."

Conclusion

The restoration of the Jenkins House has been a labour of love for the family, but is a source of pride for the entire community (fig. 028). In his final report to HFNL, Corey Sharpe wrote,

"Jenkins House has caused quite a stir in the community of Twillingate. The town considers it an asset to its charm. They have deemed it a municipal heritage structure, presenting me with a document to display on the inside of the house. Countless interested persons have posed questions and fascination on the house, initially interested in its design, then impressed with its history. Tourists are taking photos of the house on a daily basis, approaching with questions, and even purchase offers, to which I always respond, some things are not for sale."