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FELIX "ZERO" ERVIN: LOUISIANA NEGRO SLAVE AND EAST TEXAS FREEMAN

by JOHN N. CRAVENS

Felix Ervin was a versatile, unforgettable character belonging to an era beginning near the middle of the nineteenth century and extending into the twentieth century. He deserves the historian's attention. He was the son of Caroline Ervin, who was born a slave about 1817 in Louisiana. Felix was also born in slavery near Mansfield, Louisiana, about 1855. His only brother, Anderson Ervin, was born in Louisiana about 1848.

The writer of this paper was fortunate to hear Ervin tell many stories about his life as a slave. When he was on a wagon train moving west as a small boy, his master gave him some money to buy a box of matches when the wagons stopped at a store on their route. The storekeeper charged the young Negro twenty-five cents for the box of matches. When the slave owner heard of the high price charged, he cursed long and loud.

When Nathaniel P. Banks attacked Mansfield, Louisiana, in 1864, Ervin had already deserted his master and was hidden out in the woods near there. He said that the guns were so loud that he had to stop up his ears to keep the sound from breaking his eardrums. Shortly after the battle, Felix, his mother, his brother Anderson, his two sisters Nancy and Maggy, and other slave Negroes were freed at Mansfield.

Ervin and his family migrated to Douglass, Nacogdoches County, Texas, shortly after receiving their freedom because, according to the U.S. Census of 1870, his two younger sisters, Gambrella, aged three, and Mary, less than a year old, had been born in Texas. That same Ninth Census stated that Felix was 15 years of age; his sister Nancy was 20, and his sister Maggie was 12.⁴ Anderson Ervin, Felix's only brother, came to Angelina County about the same time.⁵

According to the U.S. Census of 1880, Felix was 22 years of age, an illiterate farm laborer living in the northern part of Angelina County and was still single.⁶ Sometime during this decade, Felix met Elnora, also an ex-slave and former resident of the Boyd neighborhood near Alto and later of Douglass. She was several years younger than Felix and had three illegitimate children. The oldest child was by a white man by the name of Boyd. Then she had two children by Thornton Morrison, colored and a native of Texas, but both his parents were born in Louisiana. Morrison was born December 8, 1856. Henry Morrison, one of the children, placed a tombstone at his father's grave after Morrison's death on February 16, 1940. It had been said that Felix lost his patience with one of Elnora's other sons and threw him over a fence where his head hit a stump. The child died soon afterwards.⁷

Felix began to work on the farm for John L. Bailey shortly after Bailey moved from Crossroads to Wells in 1887. His wife, Elnora and the children helped him with the farm work. The children of Felix and Elnora were Daisy, Eliza, Fannie, Clara, Gustavus, Eli, Bill, and Ed. The Ervin family also assisted Mrs. John L. Bailey with her housework. All of Felix's daughters, who were good cooks, always credited Mrs. Bailey with teaching them to cook. Felix and

his family cleared most of the one-hundred acre farm owned by Bailey at Wells. He also cleared land for Ben Warner, Rube Sessions, Jimmie Bowman, Will Lewis, and M. A. Chapmon, who were neighbors of Bailey. He planted an orchard of pears, apples, peaches, and other fruits for Bailey, and a few of the pear trees are living today in the writer's front yard. Although he never did public work at sawmills, on roads, or gins, he was an excellent basket maker.⁸ He made the same type of baskets found in the old pictures of slaves picking cotton.

Lawrence D. Rice explains the reason for Felix and thousands of other ex-slaves making loyal and satisfactory workers was because Texas escaped from the ravages of the Civil War, the long military occupation afterwards, and the freedom propaganda which spread over other large areas of the South. Ervin and most other freedmen of eastern Texas continued to be servile until the end of their lives.⁹ Felix never talked about civil rights or politics. Negroes of Wells voted only in general elections in November and sometimes in school board and board referendums when invited by the white people. Ervin never talked freely with white people but was ready to answer questions about his family, friends, and best ways to do menial tasks when asked.

Felix claimed to be able to conjure warts. He took an ear of corn, preferably of the yellow variety, shelled the grains from the ear. After rubbing the warts, he would name the cob Filey and throw it over his left shoulder. Then he would assure the person that the warts would be gone in a few days. Felix, who was also good at water-witching, would cut a peach tree limb into a three pronged stick. Then he would walk along holding the two prongs and the third pointing toward the ground. When the third prong would almost touch the ground in spite of the firm grip according to Felix's belief, a well could be dug and plenty of good water would be found.¹⁰

Felix was average in size and weight. He was very black and had a loose piece of skin on his neck. A little mustache grew on his upper lip and once a week he shaved himself with a straight razor. He always wore a felt hat both summer and winter. In winter he wore a coat and woolen trousers. His clothing for summer was usually thin and ragged, especially when he was working.¹¹

Sara Gilliam, a colored woman friend, said that she only saw Felix drunk one time and that was at the wedding of his granddaughter, Estilene Ervin, who was the daughter of Fannie Ervin. The wedding was at the house of Taylor Ervin, a son-in-law of Felix. Felix jumped high and danced around boasting of having such a fine granddaughter. Also he commented freely on how fortunate he was to get a new grandson by the marriage. His son-in-law, Henry Barnes, and his daughter, Daisy, put an end to his excited behavior by putting Felix to bed at Taylor's home.¹²

Felix's wife Elnora was also fond of alcoholic beverages and often got drunk. Mrs. Leona Mitchell Moten, a niece, said that Elnora went with her son, Henry Morrison, to the express office at Wells on the eighteen of June to pick up a case of whiskey for the big "Juneteenth" celebration the next day. They came to town in a wagon pulled by two small Spanish mules, and before they got back home, both mother and son were very drunk.

Elnora had a number of half-brothers and half-sisters with the same mother as Elnora but with different fathers. They were Patsy Twine Mitchell, Susie,

Phylis Thornton, Dora Lang Jones, Jim Twinc, Noah Roland, George Lane, and Wesley Lane. Elnora often came to Pollok to visit her sister Patsy, the mother of Mrs. Leona Mitchell Moten.¹³

Felix was very superstitious. He refused to walk under ladders, and believed in ghosts and other spirits. One could scare him by saying "Look behind you, Felix!" He would turn around, look and then start running away. A newspaper over one's face, or a false face, would frighten him. The writer remembers one Christmas that a young Negro put on a Santa Claus mask and walked toward Felix. Felix ran until the masked Negro caught up with him. A little scuffle took place and Felix tore up the mask. As Felix grew older he stopped attending Christmas tree parties at the Wells Chapel Baptist Church because he was so frightened by the Santa Claus mask.¹⁴

Felix attended the "Juneteenth" celebrations held around Wells. Felix said that when the festivities reached their peak, the young people would start shouting and jumping about. One of the joyful group would cry out, "Uncle Felix, why don't you dance and shout like us young folks because we're free, free, free!" Felix said that he would reply, "Hush up your silly foolishness. You don't know what freedom is. When I was a slave I never knew what hunger was. I was never embarrassed about my clothes. My master saw to it that us slaves had good regular well-cooked meals and plenty of clothes for Sunday and to work in!" On one "Juneteenth" instead of attending a celebration, Felix spent the entire day cleaning out a strawberry patch for a white family.

Felix loved to eat cheese and crackers for his lunch when he came to town. At home he loved to eat cornbread with butter and milk. He put salt in his tea and coffee when sugar was not available. Once the writer observed Felix, his daughter Daisy, her husband, Henry Barnes, and Daisy's two children Bowdiddle and Doody going to the second table for their noon meal in the home of Joe L. Cravens, after a long hard morning of setting out tomato plants in the field. Felix sat at the head of the table and when all the group were comfortably seated, the old man gave a very sensible prayer of thanks. This was followed by Felix passing the meat and other food to the other members of his family. The young white observer concluded that the second table participants excelled the whites in observation of nice manners and good behavior. Felix later told the writer that only three families in the Wells community allowed him to eat at their dining table. These were the families of John L. Bailey, Joe L. Cravens, and Ben Warner. At all other white homes of Wells, Felix was given a plate of food at the backdoor steps where he was expected to eat quietly and to notify the lady of the house when he had finished eating.

Felix had few associates in the latter part of his life. He was a loner most of the time. He would sit in one place usually under a tree for several hours at a time. Sometimes he would sit outside with some railroad track workers and their families living in quarters made out of discarded boxcars across the tracks from the depot. His closest friends were Henry Barnes and all the members of the Ervin family. Also Will McCraney, a mulatto, was a close friend of Felix's.

Felix bought on credit from Mark McWhorter a little farm of 52 acres with a little unpainted three-room house made of rough planks. The house had a wood stove, several beds, chairs, and tables. Rube Sessions bought the notes from McWhorter. Felix owned a mule and continued to plant crops of cotton and corn for a number of years. Felix was never able to pay the mortgage and

Sessions sold the property to Ben Warner.¹³ During his last years Felix worked for other people. He chopped wood, worked gardens, plowed fields, hoed, and picked corn, cotton, tomatoes, and peas. He cleaned out outdoor toilets for individuals and the Wells Public School. He cleaned out attics and cut weeds and grass for various people in the community. He helped in the killing of hogs and the curing of meat.

Felix was not a "Stepandfetchit" prototype in any way when he was around white people. He was considered a mean Negro because he would fight anybody who crossed him; he feared no one unless the person wore a false face. Tom Warner, a white man, got in a fight with him and was almost whipped. Warner said later that the Negro would have won the fight if onlookers had not spoken words of encouragement. Felix also had trouble with Ben Warner, Jesse Harrison, and several others over the amount of wages he felt ought to be paid him.¹⁴

Once Felix got into an argument with a high tempered young white housewife over his wages. The angry woman picked up a large stick of wood and moved toward the old Negro. Felix did not move out of his tracks but raised up his hands to ward off the blow. He then said to her "You might kill me but you won't eat me." The angry young woman swore that she would never employ or feed Felix again. He then walked away calmly. Several weeks later Felix returned, went to the wood pile, and cut up a high pile of kindling wood and other wood. Then he sat on the chopping block until the housewife called him in for his breakfast. Thus the feud was ended.

Felix was a member of the Baptist Church of Douglass in the late 1880's. After coming to Wells, he became affiliated with the Wells Chapel Baptist Church. In his later years he served as one of the deacons and sat up in the front in the Amen corner. When he was asked to give the opening prayer, he always ended it by singing "I'm going to stay on bended knees to serve my Lord." The congregation would join in the singing and the service would become a spirited devotion. Felix would get happy and praise God and testify about how he had been able to "come through." Sometimes he would start lifting the benches from one end and cause four or five Negroes to fall off. Then two or three of the leaders of the congregation would carry him out of the church to calm down the crowd and let the service return to normality. Felix would go to New Prospect Baptist Church near Pollok for fourth Sunday services since the Wells Church did not meet every Sunday. Felix's advice to his children and grandchildren was to go to Sunday School and church and to stay out of bad company. The old Negro urged his children and others not to join a church unless they planned to live a Christian life. A nephew, now eighty years of age, said that he never heard Felix curse in his life. When asked if he could read, Felix would say that he could only read the Bible. He always carried a Bible when going to church on Sunday. He could quote passages fairly accurately from the Bible and made some very sensible interpretations of the Scriptures. He always refused to look at a newspaper when offered one to read. His favorite religious song was the "Old One Hundred."¹⁵

In his last years Felix lived with his daughters. First he lived in the home of Daisy Barnes. Then he went to live in the home of another daughter, Eliza Rattler. Felix was sick very little during his life and took little medicine, but as he began to grow older, he was afflicted with rheumatism. His last days were spent in the home of his daughter, Clara and her husband, Taylor Ervin. Dr.

J. J. Lockhart attended the ailing colored man on August 15 and 16, 1936, and diagnosed his illness as bronchial pneumonia. Felix died at six o'clock in the morning of August 16. R. N. Rattler, a son-in-law, served as the acting undertaker.¹⁸ A local truck owned by Joe L. Cravens served as the hearse to take the body of Felix in its simple wooden casket to the New Center Prospect Baptist Church near Pollok, Angelina County, Texas, for his funeral service. The Reverend Mr. Blake presided at this last religious service for Felix.¹⁹ His casket was then carried to the nearby New Center Prospect Cemetery where Felix was buried beside his wife, Elnora, who had died a number of years before.

Today their graves are marked with a thin piece of marble bearing no inscription, each slab having been pushed in the ground by hand. Several per-simmon sprouts and clumps of tall grass and weeds mark their final resting places. Nearby are the graves of a number of their children and grandchildren and other near relatives of the old couple.

NOTES

¹U.S. Ninth Census, 1870 MSS, Returns of the Inhabitants of Douglass, Nacogdoches County, Texas, Microfilm, Midwestern University Library, Wichita Falls, Texas.

²*Ibid.*

³Interview with Jeff Spencer, a nephew of Felix Ervin, Wells, Texas, December 1, 1968.

⁴U.S. Tenth Census, 1880 MSS Returns of the Inhabitants of Beat No. 2, Angelina County, Texas, Microfilm, Midwestern University Library.

⁵Interview with Jeff Spencer, December 1, 1968.

⁶U.S. Census, 1880 MSS, Angelina County, Texas, Microfilm, Midwestern University Library.

⁷Interview with Emma Bailey McGehee Cravens, Wells, Texas, December 25, 1966; interview with Jake Green, Wells, Texas, June 5, 1967, November 11, 1967; interview with Lewis Moten, Pollok, Texas, November 27, 1968; there was no preacher available for Morrison's funeral and Lewis Moten, a deacon in the New Prospect Baptist Church, conducted the final rites; a tombstone in New Prospect Cemetery, one and two-tenths miles from Pollok, Texas, Post Office.

⁸Interview with Emma Bailey McGehee Cravens, November 11, 1967.

⁹Lawrence D. Rice, *The Negro in Texas, 1874-1900* (Baton Rouge, 1971), 5.

¹⁰Interview with Sara Gilliam, Wells, Texas, December 1, 1968.

¹¹Interview with Jeff Spencer, December 1, 1968; interview with Jake Green, January 1, 1969.

¹²Interview with Sara Gilliam, Wells, Texas, December 1, 1968.

¹³Interview with Mrs. Leona Mitchell Moten, Pollok, Texas, November 29, 1968.

¹⁴Interview with Sara Gilliam, December 1, 1968.

¹⁵Interview with Rube Sessions, Wells, Texas, December 26, 1966.

¹⁶Interview with Eugene Bailey, Wells, Texas, September 13, 1968; interview with T. J. Warner, Wells, Texas, October 26, 1968.

¹⁷Interview with Jake Green, June 5, 1967; interview with Jeff Spencer, December 1, 1968; interview with Laurie E. Clayton, Pollok, Texas, November 29, 1968; interview with Mrs. Lottie Clayton, Pollok, Texas, November 29, 1968.

¹⁸Records of Deaths, Book No. 9, Cherokee County, Texas, County Courthouse, Rusk, p. 341. Dr. J. J. Lockhart also attended the mother of the writer of this paper when he was born on February 17, 1912.

¹⁹Interview with Lewis Moten, a nephew-in-law of Elnora Ervin, Pollok, Texas, November 27, 1968.