

Jack Darden Community Center Dedicated in Palestine

by Michael G. Maness

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The Jack Darden Community Center was dedicated Saturday, July 20, in the Palestine community next to the Palestine Missionary Baptist Church, just west of the Tyler County line in Polk County.

About 350 of the Darden family and friends attended for food and festivities including a blow-up house, games, an old-fashioned tug-o-war, a mechanical bull ride, and more.

The dedication was timed to coincide with the 50th Annual Darden Family Reunion, the first one held on July 15, 1969. People continued to arrive after the 11:00 a.m. dedication, and, after all, about 350 showed up.



The first reunion in 1969 met in homes of family members until they bought a building in Barnum, Tx., which later burned down. Afterward, they met for several years in Lily Island, Tx.

Finally, the dream came true for the opening of the Community Center.

The original community was settled by former slaves. Jack Darden, a slave born in 1825, became free, and bought some land. Jack never had any children, but raised his nephew Sam, who took the Darden name. Sam married Ann, and so the legacy began. Jack became the patriarch of a large family, and eventually owned a few hundred acres around his homestead just across the street where he built a home.

In the 1940s, the uncle of Sharon Hughes, William Darden, tore down the old home, and he used the same lumber and nails to build a new home that still stands—lumber, they say, which is now almost 200 years old!

Many of Jack Darden's grandchildren and great-grandchildren were present.

Just prior to the official dedication of the center, several awards were given to those who helped and inspired. Glenn A. Darden was given a small plaque for his tireless effort in supervising much of the of construction. The property for the new center was donated by Glenn's brother, Jack Darden, and a few loaned the money for construction. Both brothers Jack



and Glenn are great-great-grandnephews of the original Jack Darden, long descendants from Sam and Ann. Further complicating—but sweet in lineage—and Glenn’s father was also named Sam, so many sharing in the namesake’s legacy.

Patricia Darden Conner, Bishop James A. Darden, Douglas Darden, and Ann Young helped facilitate the program and gathering. Special dark blue T-shirts were everywhere, on everyone, from old to young, even on the babies, that said, “DAREN FAMILY REUNION, Celebrating 50 years, Darden Community, Chester, Texas.” Chester is the closest city, just down the road.

Chester Mayor Floyd Petri was invited to say a few words and help with the ribbon cutting. He noted how the Chester Post Office, city utilities, Chester ISD, and the feed store were shared by the community.

Palestine Missionary Baptist Church Pastor J. D. Baisey gave a few inspiring words and a prayer of dedication.

Several of the leaders gathered at the door, with the large dedicatory plaque, and officially cut the ribbon. The plaque read: “Jack Darden Community Center. Bless these grounds and those who gather her. From the Roots of our Ancestors to the Seeds of our Future. Presented by the family of Sam Darden.” The plaque was presented by the family of Samuel Lewis Darden, the great-great grandson of Sam and Ann Darden. It will have an honored place inside of the center.

The fun, fellowship, and love just brimmed throughout—a fine heartwarming reunion.

