

Serving the Industry: Sterling Jenkins

Words and Deeds

by Bettina Cohen

Sterling Jenkins loves his work. The 78-year-old gentleman from Baton Rouge, LA, began driving a taxi in San Francisco in February of 1969 and continues to drive four or five nights a week for Yellow Cab Cooperative.

Even after more than 37 years, Jenkins is always happy to meet the 40 or so people who get into his cab each shift.

A great conversationalist, Jenkins has had out-of-town visitors remember him from a previous visit as long ago as 10 years. He remembers them too, once they call up the details of the conversation they'd had. Call it the gift of gab, but he has helped some of his fares cheer up simply by talking.

"Sometimes they'll be depressed, but by the time we get to the end of the trip, they come around, and they thank me for the conversation," Jenkins said.

Jenkins has done more for the SF taxi industry than provide convivial colloquy. In 1976, instead of investing \$48,000 in a 12-unit rental building, he invested his money in three taxi medallions.

That was a critical year in the San Francisco taxi industry. In April of 1976, the Yellow Cab Company, then a conglomerate-owned, multi-city operation, filed for bankruptcy.

The result was a major disruption of taxi service in San Francisco, with some 500 taxis parked in the company lot, going nowhere for almost a year while negotiations dragged on.

"Yellow Cab was a chain at the time and was owned by a big fleet that went belly-up," Jenkins related. "We made a deal with the banker to buy this company here in San Francisco."

Jenkins forked over \$48,000, along with the money of other investors at the time, to put the Yellow fleet back on the road as the company reorganized under new ownership.

Each of his medallions cost Jenkins \$16,000.

It was, "\$1,000 down, and \$15,000 for each medallion and a membership. At that time, you were buying a car and a share of the property over on 8th Street," he said. Jenkins and all other owners at the

time saw the resale value of their medallions vanish with the passage of Prop K in 1978, when they were forced to surrender their medallions to the City of San Francisco. The City then re-issued the taxi permits back to them as the property of the City and County of San Francisco.

As a result, while Jenkins continues to hold three medallions and stock in Yellow Cab, he is not being held to a so-called driving requirement, and he does not have a saleable asset to leave to his family.

Back when Jenkins started driving, the flag drop was 45 cents, and a fare to San Francisco International Airport from downtown cost \$7. He had already started the Jenkins Trucking Business, which consisted of two moving vans and during those years he ran trucks by day and cabs by night.

"I had some other trades I could have done if I hadn't liked cabs," Jenkins said. He graduated from chef school, and also attended tailoring school. After serving in the U. S. Army from 1946-'48, as a quartermaster for the trucking division in Japan, he worked as a union machinist building airplanes in San Diego.

"I did have a choice. But the cab business, I fell in love with it," Jenkins said. "I meet people from a lot of different places. They find that San Francisco cab drivers are very friendly."

Jenkins recently bought a guitar and began taking lessons in memory of his late wife, Lula Mae. When the day comes that he finally retires, Jenkins will have the companionship of his three daughters, four sons, 19 grandchildren, and ten great-grandchildren. 🚗

