Foreword *by Maxine Johnston*

Larry Jene Fisher was legendary in the Southeast Texas of the 1930s and 1940s. His legend has diminished somewhat with time, but this extraordinary work by two perceptive interpreters like Thad Sitton and C. E. Hunt should remedy that.

Everything that Larry Jene did attracted friends and attention. He was an accomplished organist—even if he played pieces often foreign to Saratoga ears. He was a pilot with the Civil Air Patrol. In his Saratoga years, his camera was part of his habitual appearance, and he was a superb photographer. He was interested in virtually everything that people did for their livelihoods or for their amusement, and he seemed compelled to record every living thing that grew.

His sidekick was Lance Rosier, “Mr. Big Thicket.” Can anyone cite a more advantageous combination of talents?

I only met Larry Jene once—when Alice Cashen and I were mowing the grass and clipping around gravestones at Guedry Cemetery near Batson, Texas. That was also my first look at Lance Rosier. The date doesn’t matter, and I’ve forgotten anyway—I was probably around 18 or 20 years old.

On that occasion at Guedry Cemetery, Larry Jene bounced out of an old battered car, acknowledged my introduction, and turned to Alice. He and Lance were looking for a flower that supposedly grew on Batson Prairie. While Larry and Alice talked, Lance put me through a battery of questions: Where was I from? I didn’t sound like an East Texan. Was I married, etc., etc.?

That may have been the first face-to-face meeting, but I had already heard and read stories about both men. While I was Alice’s English student at South Park High School in Beaumont, she suggested I write a paper on the Big Thicket. I read my way through numerous articles about Lance and about R. E. Jackson of the East Texas Big Thicket Association, and I was captivated by some of Larry Jene’s feature stories in

the *Beaumont Enterprise*. That study had a profound influence. I began collecting Big Thicket stories by “Ab” Abernethy, Milton Turner, Donald Streater, Louis Hofferbert, Sig Byrd, Frank X. Tolbert, and others. And I started inviting myself on field trips with professors from what was then Lamar State College of Technology—often led by Lance.

In the 1930s R. E. Jackson, president of the East Texas Big Thicket Association, had recruited Fisher to serve as “official photographer” for the Association. The Biological Survey of the East Texas Big Thicket Area (Parks, et al. 1938) is illustrated with his pictures. The ETBTA letterhead identified Fisher as secretary-treasurer and carried his photo logo, the “Lone Monarch,” a longleaf pine towering over the forest. The importance of Jackson’s and Fisher’s efforts to save 435,000 acres of the Big Thicket cannot be overestimated.

Fisher left the Thicket shortly after I met him, but Lance never tired of talking about him. A lot of Thicket folks shared that affection—people like Harold Nicholas, another Thicket naturalist and artist; Juanita Martin, an English teacher who kept a scrapbook about Larry; and Batson native Alice Cashen. Of course, no one ever lacks an enemy or two, and during World War II one of Larry Jene’s accused him of being a German spy. This allegation was debunked in a delightful tongue-in-cheek article by Donald Streater in the *Beaumont Enterprise*.

Around 1968, Lance Rosier mentioned to me the Fisher albums and negatives and asked what I thought he should do with them. They were stored in a shed near his house, subject to all manner of heat, humidity, and insects. After looking at them with Lance, I recommended placing them in a library and special collections. At the time Lamar’s library didn’t have such facilities, but Lois Parker and I were collecting Big Thicket material, and this would be an incentive—indeed, a “coup.”

The transfer was not immediate. Lance died on March 12, 1970, and his nephew, James Elmo Rosier, presented the collection to Lamar on his behalf. In April the Library issued a news release about the gift and opened an exhibit of selected photographs.

Over the years, the negatives were used a few times, including in the Thicket Explorer, a festschrift honoring Lance. George Hardy, a descendant of R. E. Jackson, used Fisher photographs in exhibits for the observance of R. E. Jackson Week in 1997.

Although my acquaintance with Fisher is mostly secondhand, one comes to know others by working personally with their legacy—in this case Larry Jene’s photos, plays, and research. He is one of my Thicket icons, and thanks to Sitton and Hunt, Fisher will now be introduced to new audiences in perpetuity through his incomparable images of Big Thicket people and environments.

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