

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Simmons, Barbara Lett, 1927-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons,
Dates:	September 28, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:54:06).
Abstract:	Education administrator The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons (1927 - 2012) was one of the first African American teachers to integrate the Montgomery County, Maryland, public school system; she went on to serve as education coordinator for the Washington, D.C., Poverty Program. Simmons later worked for the Department of Education, training instructors to teach adult students, before forming BLS and Associates and being elected to the Washington, D.C., Board of Education. Simmons was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 28, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_183
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Barbara Lett Simmons was born on June 4, 1927, in Battlecreek, Michigan; she was raised in a traditional Seventh Day Adventist household, her mother working as a homemaker and her father was a lumberjack and coal contractor. In 1945, Simmons earned her high school diploma from Battlecreek Central High School, where she was a member of the volleyball, basketball, and debate teams; active in the Spanish and yearbook clubs; and worked on the school newspaper.

In 1949, Simmons earned her bachelor's of art degree in sociology and education from Western Michigan University. While at WMU, Simmons was a member of the debate team, International Relations Club, and vice president of her senior class. From 1949 until 1962, Simmons taught in Detroit, Michigan, public schools, until her family relocated to Washington, D.C. From 1962 until 1965, Simmons taught in Montgomery County, Maryland (a Washington, DC suburb), public schools and was one of the first African American teachers to integrate its public school system. From 1967 until 1968 Simmons served as education coordinator for the Washington, D.C., Poverty Program. From there, Simmons worked for the Department of Education, training instructors to teach adult students until 1972; her work would become a national training module for fourteen states.

In 1972, Simmons formed BLS and Associates, a staff development and training consulting firm; the following year she was elected to the Washington, D.C. Board of Education, where she served until 1986. As a school board member, Simmons vigorously fought for the rights of poor and disabled students. In 1977 Simmons created and hosted a cable television and radio program entitled Educationally Speaking.

Active in the political process as well, during the 2000 presidential race Simmons made headlines when she, as a Democratic elector from the District of Columbia, abstained from voting for Al Gore in the Electoral College, going against expectations; this act was in protest of the District's lack of a voting representative in Congress. In 2004, Simmons led an unsuccessful effort to recall Washington, D.C., mayor Anthony Williams. Simmons was the recipient of numerous awards and honors for her civic leadership and work in education.

Barbra Lett Simmons passed away on December 22, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on September 28, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Education administrator The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons (1927 - 2012) was one of the first African American teachers to integrate the Montgomery County, Maryland, public school system; she went on to serve as education coordinator for the Washington, D.C., Poverty Program. Simmons later worked for the Department of Education, training instructors to teach adult students, before forming BLS and Associates and being elected to the Washington, D.C., Board of Education.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Simmons, Barbara Lett, 1927-2012

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Simmons, Barbara Lett, 1927-2012--Interviews

African American women educators--Interviews

Educational consultants--Interviews

Community activists--Interviews

African American political activists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Education Administrator

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons, September 28, 2004. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons, Section A2004_183_001_001, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons was born June 4, 1927 in Battle Creek, Michigan. Her mother, Jessie Proctor Lett, was born in 1888 in Lebanon, Tennessee. Her family relocated to Battle Creek in her early childhood. Simmons' maternal grandmother was a barber at Battle Creek Sanitarium while her mother attended a private Seventh-day Adventist school. Simmons' paternal grandmother was Methodist. He could have passed as white, but chose not to. Her father, Benjamin Lett, was born in 1888 in rural Mecosta County, Michigan where his family farmed cash crops and he received a limited education. When he turned eighteen, he moved to Battle Creek where he bought a home, married Simmons' mother and ran a coal business. As her mother and father were only children, Simmons grew up with a relatively small extended family. Merze Tate, the first African American graduate of Western State Normal School in Kalamazoo, Michigan, was her cousin. Her family regularly attended early settlers' reunions in Mecosta County.

African American women educators--Interviews.

Educational consultants--Interviews.

Community activists--Interviews.

African American political activists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons, Section A2004_183_001_002, TRT: 0:31:22 ?

The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons was the fourth youngest of eleven siblings. Her childhood household revolved around the family's Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and practices, including reading the Bible together, adhering to strict dietary practices and observing the Sabbath. On Saturday nights, Simmons' mother cooked hamburgers and made fudge as a treat for her children. Simmons' childhood home in Battle Creek, Michigan had a large yard with apple and pear trees. She also fished and swam in the nearby Battle Creek River. Simmons attended Franklin School, which had few African American students. She earned excellent grades, motivated in part by her father's high standards. A strong athlete, she enjoyed playing baseball and was a marbles champion. When Simmons was in high school, her mother argued for the creation of a local African American church since job opportunities were given exclusively to white youths. One of Simmons' sisters had to travel out of state to attend nursing school.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons, Section A2004_183_001_003, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons initially aspired to be a medical

missionary. She had a contentious relationship with her strict and proud father: he insisted on being his family's sole provider and was angry when Simmons mistakenly accepted charity while accompanying a friend to the welfare office. He also disapproved of her pursuing a career in social work. Simmons and her family were the only African Americans in their community, and her father forbade socializing with blacks from nearby cities. At Southwestern Junior High School in Battle Creek, Michigan, Simmons participated on multiple sports teams. She attended Battle Creek Central High School where, in addition to sports, she was on the school newspaper, yearbook and the debate team. She received a full scholarship to Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo where she studied social work and education and was one of forty African American students. While traveling to a meet in Indiana, Simmons and her college debate team were refused service.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons, Section A2004_183_001_004, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons and her husband agitated for civil rights in Michigan during the 1940s. Simmons attended Western Michigan College of Education in Kalamazoo. There, she socialized with a small community of African American students and provided childcare for a local family. After graduating, she taught in Battle Creek for a year while her husband finished his social work program in Jackson, Michigan. They relocated to Detroit where she taught at Russell School and encountered poverty and racism in stark contrast to her hometown. She experienced prejudice firsthand when she was denied credit. In the early 1960s, Simmons moved to Washington, D.C. when her husband was recruited to work for the Kennedy administration. Simmons was then hired to teach in the recently-integrated school system of Montgomery County, Maryland. In 1967, Simmons became education coordinator for D.C.'s United Planning Program. She also facilitated adult education teacher training for the U.S. Department of Education.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons, Section A2004_183_001_005, TRT: 0:29:02 ?

The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons started her own business, BLS and Associates, in 1972. Its focus was staff development and training to help teachers maximize their students' educational productivity. When her firm facilitated the head hunt for the director of the Washington, D.C. Urban League, she selected HistoryMaker John E. Jacob to fill the position. She also assisted in recruiting HistoryMaker Barbara A. Sizemore to become superintendent of Washington, D.C.'s school system. In 1973, she was elected to the Washington, D.C. Board of Education. Simmons describes the impact of the Manpower Development Training Act of 1962, and considers the impact of changes to vocational programs in Washington, D.C. public schools. She also shares her criticism of Mayor Anthony A. Williams. Simmons reflects upon her life and legacy and describes how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons, Section A2004_183_001_006, TRT: 0:22:30 ?

The Honorable Barbara Lett Simmons narrates her photographs.