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 Full Name Last First Middle
 Known by any other names? (list) _____
 Date of Birth 2-17-1955

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Interview with James Simmons

Interview by Nick Doores

March 30, 2012

Biography

James Simmons was born in New Port, Arkansas. He lived in Oiltrough, Arkansas with his family of nine siblings until he went to college. During his primary school days, Mr. Simmons was a student, a basketball player, a grocery and a farmer on the family farm. Mr. Simmons narrowly escaped the draft and went on to study at the University of Arkansas. He has worked in the public school system of Arkansas as a principle for over twenty years and currently is the superintendent at Harding Academy. He is married and has two kids: Melony, who is married and living close to her parents so that they can enjoy their grandson, and Brent, who is currently a junior at Harding University. Mr. Simmons and his wife have both lived in Arkansas their whole lives despite have many career opportunities outside of the state. They have built a life here and don't ever intend on moving out of state. Mr. Simmons loves doing what many Arkansans love doing: being out in the nature of the state, enjoying it for what it's worth. Most importantly, Mr. Simmons loves to spend time with his children and his grandchild.

Nick Doores: Alright... so today is March the twenty-third two thousand and twelve, and my name is Nick Doores, and I am interviewing Mr. Simmons for Arkansas History. So I guess my first question is... how long have you lived in Arkansas?

James Simmons: Born and raised in Arkansas... fifty-seven years young. Grown up in Arkansas. I have always been an Arkansan. So I've seen a lot of changes come through the state and occur.

Nick Doores: Where have you lived in Arkansas? Like cities? Have you moved a lot?

James Simmons: Born and raised in a little bitty town with a population of about 600 or so at one time... lot smaller now than that. But a little bitty community called Oiltrough, AR, named that because at one time it was a main river port area in the state of Arkansas. Big paddleboats used to come down through the river there, the White River. It was just woodland and forest, and so the hunters would kill the bear and render the oil and put it in troughs on the boats and they would barter and trade for products that they had on the boats... sugar and sugar cane and things from other places they had taken the boats... New Orleans and places like that. So, they would trade the bear oil for the lamps on the steam boat, and so they would pull up to the docking area... so they said "this is oil trough." So they named it after the bear oil from the trough... My mascot from my old school from when I was growing up, we were the bears. And so it was kind of neat to hear all of those stories. When I started college, parents of guys that were my friends in college thought that was such a unique name of a town... a little weird... and so they would cut out articles and things and give them to me, and I still have one that I carry with me in my billfold with me that tells the history of Oiltrough that a buddy of mine from West Memphis, his mom gave it to me, had it laminated and everything. Arkansas is a very rural state. Growing up where I did, it was poor, poor poverty area now. Everyone would consider it like a lot of the places in Eastern Arkansas, that we currently see in Arkansas. Farming community: a lot of row crop things, corn, and beans. Later on, when I got up in my late teen years, farmers in that area started growing rice. And now it's predominantly rice and corn, some soybeans and a lot of wheat. But it's an agricultural community as a lot of Arkansas was at one point in time. The difference now is that a few farmers farm all that, where as when I was a kid growing up, that's what people did even if they did another job, like my dad was a carpenter and a contractor. But we also had a farm because we had ten kids in our family and all of those boys, I had six brothers, so my dad always had jobs made out for us. When I came in from school in the afternoon I went and got on the Ford tractor and drove the tractor until dark, came home, ate super, went to bed, and got up the next morning and hit it again. So, that was a little different growing up...probably good, I don't know. Looking back now, I wish I could have been from a different place, another location, but it was neat. I appreciate that background. I didn't have any choice in the matter. It was what it was. Looking back on my years as a kid growing up, I didn't realize we didn't have anything, because everyone around us was very similar. We didn't have a car. We didn't know what insurance was. We didn't have phones. I was telling somebody just recently that I got my head

split open as a second grader at school. My mother was delivered to my school in a pick-up truck by one of our neighbors, less than thirty minutes after my head was split open. I have no idea to this day how my mom got the word, and how a neighbor picked her up in a truck and brought her to school to pick me up. I never went to the doctor. My momma took me home and wrapped a rag around my head... probably what's wrong with me today. And I never saw a doctor. I went to school the next day with a bandage on my head. In twelve years of school, I missed three days of school... I was supposed to be at school. I was sick those days that I missed. I mean, you get your head split open, you would think it would take a couple at least days off. Slack time for a little bit?

Nick Doores: Was that pretty typical, like if you or your brothers or sisters had an ailment or something, it was just kinda, you didn't really go to the doctor, It was just like at your own house, whatever you had?

James Simmons: They had old home remedies. That's just what you did. You get over it. And we didn't think anything about it. My mom when I was born, the delivery process actually started at our house, is what I've been told. They still continued to take my mom to the hospital in New Port, which was the next big city, and the continuation of the delivery of this old man took place at a hospital, but didn't last much longer once we got there. I mean I don't recall all of that. I was a little too young for that at that point in time. But my mom almost died in the delivery process. Then that was the end. I was the last little puppy being born in that litter, because you know she had so many troubles with trying to give birth to a rascal like me. So I was the last little puppy in the litter at the Simmons' house. My dad and mom, both full lives, my dad was ninety-four when he passed away. He had lived almost twenty years after my mom had passed away. So, she died at about the age of seventy-four and my dad died at ninety-four, about five years ago.

Nick Doores: So, tell me a little bit about your schooling and a little bit about, as you were growing up, you said you worked on the farm, I guess you wouldn't have had another job...

James Simmons: Actually I did have another job. My junior and senior year of high school I worked as a grocery store sacker, sacking groceries on Saturdays my junior and senior year, after basketball season my junior year I got a job doing that. When I would come home at night from the grocery store, I got off the grocery store during the week at about four thirty, I would come home and get on that little old Ford tractor and go a while until whatever time it turned dark or until I couldn't see anymore to do what I needed to do. We didn't have lights on the tractor so I'd work till dark. Some nights I'd plow and do the things I needed to do. It was just one of those things we knew this is what you do to contribute to the whole of the family. My dad worked construction work and sometimes it would be six or seven o'clock before he would come home depending on where they were working at, where the job sight was. Some of their jobs we close to New Port, some of them where in you know Wynne, Arkansas or whatever. So they would have to drive there in trucks

and everything to build the building that they were working on. So, sometimes it would be late by the time he got home. We had a few cattle. In the wintertime, when I got home from school, we had an old wooden stove in our house, so I would have to get in wood. I've teased with people that I thought that until I got about the age of fifteen, I thought my name was "go get wood," because you know I'd come home and my mom would say, "you gotta get the wood in." So it wasn't, "Hi. How are you? How was your school day?" It was life goes on. It wasn't really that bad, but it seemed that way sometimes. You knew you had things to do. My school, everybody in the community supported all the kids at the school. It used to be that when I would go to a basketball game, we didn't have very many sports, we just had basketball and they started baseball for a little while, but then they dropped the program because they didn't have enough kids, school was about five hundred enrollment.

Nick Doores: and what school was this that you went to?

James Simmons: Oiltrough Public School, which no longer exists. About ten or twelve years after I graduated from high school a number of things came together in Arkansas where a near by school district was getting funding from a coal-fire energy plant that they built just across the river of Oiltrough. Newark, Arkansas was that school. They got all kinds of taxed based money from that although that plants was actually closer to Oiltrough Public Schools, you could actually see it across the river. It was nine miles to Newark, but everything on the other side of the river was in the Newark school district. So they got all of the tax base from that new industry. Well the public school funding law in Arkansas changed about two or three years after that where all those schools, those big corporate industries that moved into the state, the wealth had to be shared with all the school districts in the state, not just that one which that industry was positioned. So that was huge for public school funding, for public schools in Arkansas. Where I'm at now, we get none of that money in the private school, just to throw that in.

Nick Doores: I know; I went to a private school.

James Simmons: Dr. Klein will know that when he hears that. Anyway, we didn't have a kindergarten at that time. And when I started school, there wasn't kindergarten. It was just first through twelfth grade. I had a nephew that started the school. He was ten years younger than me, and he was the first class to have to go to kindergarten. So he started a year earlier in the kindergarten. So my tenth grade year of school, they started kindergarten. So he was in the first Oiltrough kindergarten class. Growing up in a largely agriculturally community, as I mentioned earlier, churches and people in the community all supported the school. When you would go to a ball game, the bleachers would all be full. And when the junior high team left, the gym didn't empty out. When the senior girls played, the gym didn't empty out. When the senior boys played, the gym was still packed. Now when you go games, and as soon as their child is done playing, you see a huge percentage of your parents leaving. That's common now. Nobody thinks anything about it. That used to not be the way that it was. Everybody supported all those kids.

Harding academy, as far as that culture, is kinda that same way. You do have some people that leave, but a lot of those people stay and watch those games to support those kids. So, that's kind of retro for me, to see that, in a good way. I appreciate the fact that those people want to support their child but also others too that are in that same setting. That's pretty neat. So, I like that and appreciate the fact that people want to do that. So some things transition and carry on... some things don't. Anyway, what other kind of specific questions do you have?

Nick Doores: So tell me what it was like growing up in Arkansas during the cold war and Vietnam war era... what was that like?

James Simmons: we all heard of things; for instance, we used to do training in school where we would have to get below our desks because we were told that they were going to drop a bomb on the United States, a nuclear bomb at any time. So we had drills where we would actually have to go into our classrooms and get down underneath the edges of our desks. I mean, I can remember doing the drill. Then the Vietnam War came along. There were so many people involved with that from the Oiltrough community, and I can remember one day when they came to a young man who, I used to ride a late bus coming home from that school. The bus that I rode had to make two routes. So we would stay after school for over an hour and just sit around. Sometimes there were no teachers there. We were there, just kids watching kids. You would not dream of that today in our world. But anyway, we would stay after school and play games together, come up with ideas, "what about this," "Let's do this," and we would just try to be creative with what we could do with our time. Some kids sat around and studied. Other kids played sports: basketball, kickball and different things we came up with. I can remember as a second grader remembering a man whose last name was Young. When I got to the high school, they came to the school and he had been killed, and they came to notify his brothers and sisters at the school. And I can remember that day like I was yesterday. I remember the effect that it had on everybody at our school... everybody crying and just emotionally devastating because it had touched the community because we knew that kid. We were fearful of that and seeing it on the news what things we were actually shown by the media. Now you read things and find out that a lot of things were never ever revealed to the public about the devastation and things that were involved with that. But seeing some of the footage that we saw of helicopters let off troops, stuff like you see in some of the movies today with Tom Hanks and those kind of guys. I've kind of enjoyed watching that kind of stuff like Forrest Gump, some of that footage that you see. But that was about what we saw. Some of those clips that were in that Forrest Gump movie were actually images that I remember from the national news. That's the images that we saw. We didn't see all of the blood and guts that you saw out there in the Tom Hanks movie, like where he is toting that dude over his shoulder and all that. We didn't see all of that, and we heard numbers, but not nearly as much as was later revealed that were actual casualties. Actually they had a draft system then. I remember getting my letter saying that you don't have to go; the draft has been ended and I thought "hallelujah" cause I had four older brothers that were in the military and I was not looking forward to doing that. But at the same time, I

knew that it was probably something that was going to have to happen. So a lot of those kids growing up in that community knew that one day they might have to go into the military whether I want to or not. We didn't have a volunteer army at that time. That started as I was graduating high school. I got that letter, and I was enrolled to college and I thought "wow," cause when I got that Board not I thought "oh no," cause I was worried about where I was going to school and stuff that you go through. And then I get this draft letter... that was one of the slowest envelopes ive ever opened. I remember my four older brothers and the fear that struck in me as I was thinking about how my life was going to change. Anyway, when I opened it, I was HAPPY. The war is coming to an end so therefore we were no longer going to continue with the draft. I knew then that I could go on. If I wanted to I could volunteer and I had a couple of older brothers that said that you should go on and do this. It would pay you. You could go on back and get your G.I. bill and get your college paid for. I wasn't fired up about that. I didn't want to do that. If I would have been made to do that, if the draft had continued on, I would have been a loyal trooper like anybody else. But I was not fired up to do that.

Nick Doores: what did the war effort look like in your particular community. Like in World War I and II, nationally people were having to give up metal and rubber and things like that. Was there any of that kind of support?

James Simmons: No. It was more of a cultural thing that were people knew that the war was going on, but our country over all was opposed to that. I don't know that it was ever declared a war. It was a bad conflict. And so people thought "we are just being used as a pawn or toy here. And here we are a country that's given up a lot of lives for who?" we were not appreciated and then that same thing happened when those troops came home... "who are they?" There were no big grand parades and stuff that you hear about now when people come home from Afghanistan or wherever else. It was "you never should have been over there anyway." People looked down on Vietnam Vets who had no choice in going on over there. They were drafted by the government. So it wasn't like they were the occupied troops that are out there now; They are choosing to do that. The young men and women that were fighting for our country then didn't have a choice. They had no say so. It was "here are your orders; Get over there and get to it." So I always hear the conversation that they feel that they were not respected or celebrated when they came home, and its true. It didn't happen. The government wanted to keep it was quiet as they could because they didn't want to be there either. But some political people used it to be pawns to be reelected. I mean that's what it appeared like, and there was a bad sentiment in the United States of America, not just Arkansas that "we don't need to be there." I don't know what the polls would have reflected at that time if they had done a poll of American citizens asking, "How many of you think we should be in Vietnam?" That number would have been very very few. So that's what I recall, and a number of kids from that community, not just the young man whose last name was Young, were killed in the Vietnam War.

Nick Doores: Tell what it has been like raising a family in Arkansas.

James Simmons: I have a son and a daughter. I have a son, Brent, who is at the university now. And I have a daughter, Melony, who is older than Brent. We could have raised our kids pretty much anywhere... my wife and I are both from Arkansas, born and raised Arkansans. We had opportunities to go to other states and work and chose not to. I was offered a job in Virginia to work in a professional capacity, in Alexandria, Virginia, when my son was about two years old. I went there and was shown the whole nine yards of what they wanted me to do, and I had no idea that that was what they wanted me to come up and talk to them about. So that was kind of a special thing. But they said "Let us know within twenty-four hours." And I said "I can let you know right now... this is an amazing opportunity that you are giving to me, and one day I'll probably think 'Man why did I do that?' but right now I'm a native born Arkansan, my roots run deep in that state, and I appreciate this very much but I'm going to have to say no." I don't regret that. I think it was the right thing to do. It would have been a tremendously different experience for my son, cause my daughter was already getting ready to graduate high school. But it would have been a majorly different life for Brent and us too. Its just one of those decisions you make along the way of life to do whatever. We chose to stay here, and I don't regret it. It has been good.

Nick Doores: Final question... and this is my own what I want to know. What would you say that separates Arkansas from any other state? Like I'm from Tennessee. what do you hold special to Arkansas, other than you have grown up here? Is there something particular, like the fishing is so great you would never leave it? What is that one thing?

James Simmons: Its kind of neat that you're coming over to ask me about this because when I was an elementary school principle in the earlier decades of my life, I started this thing at my school called Arkansas Day. All of our kids did things related to Arkansas. I had people to come to the school dressed up in old bonnets and over-alls and we did kind of Arkansas dress. Old women in flowery dresses and we had a big dinner on the ground. I had a gentleman with horses and wagons come to the school and bring those so that parents, faculty and staff could ride them. We had a school of about six hundred students, and that day we had over two thousand people at that school on that day every year for the dinner on the ground. I had groups come play old Arkansas guitars and banjos and that kind of stuff for the kids. We set up a big stage for them and they would play during the time that we had fried chicken on the ground. That community bit into it and loved it, and they all marked their calendars after that. The governor of Arkansas started coming to the event. It was a big deal. And who would have ever dreamed that a little bitty thing that I wanted to do to showcase "lets be all about Arkansas!" It grew into Arkansas week. Our music teacher found a song that was "Arkansas, You Run Deep In Me," and it was wonderful. Every kid in that school could sing that song. They could quote that song frontwards and backwards, and they loved it. You could go up and down the halls and the kids would be singing it on their way to classes. They got into that, and I never dreamed that it would be that special. They still have that event every

year at the school. I was invited to go back there last year, and I had all kinds of things going on here and I couldn't get away. A lot of the lessons and things that our teachers did there went into conversations where they are now requiring all kids to take Arkansas History. They were contacting our school to get information about what kind of things do you do. I had a teacher that was selected to serve on that committee on the state level because they heard about that stuff we were doing over there at that little school in Mountain Home, Arkansas. I have a great appreciation for the state of Arkansas. I don't know all the things that made it what it is. Some of those names that I have heard that are key people like the Rockefellers that changed the complexity of the state. When we lived in Mountain Home, they had just about 10 years before we got there, built bridges that connect that community to the state of Missouri and it flooded with people. People wanted to be apart of that fishing you were talking about. It was a major tourism drawl, not only to that area but to the state. People from all over the States come to fish in the lakes. And go out there during the summer time and it's not anything to see three, four, five, six hundred boats out there on the lakes. So all of those people are bringing money into that economy. So it's been huge for that community to have those nice clean lakes, and then you drive by and it's like a post card. So I have a lot of things that I have grown to appreciate about the state. It has continued to grow. I think it can do a whole lot more for the citizens probably than it does. But that is just an opinion. I have loved my experience growing up in a southern state. People want to be in Arkansas, and as a general rule, people here are considerate. Anyway, it's been neat to be an Arkansan in a lot of ways. There is a lot of great things about every other state. We live in a great country, and Arkansas is just another one of those great states to be a part of.