

## Ben Fletcher Simmons 1860-1939

*Memories of grandson Ben Simmons Jones and others  
Transcribed and extended 16 June 2010 Filed as Bio-SimmonsBenF*

Who was Ben Fletcher Simmons? We know the basic facts of his life, marriages, children and so forth, but who was Papa? That was the name the family called him, others called Mr. Ben, Mr. Simmons, Uncle Ben, and I am sure he was called other names as well. But, one thing for sure, if you passed him, you better speak to him whether you knew him or not. OR risk being hooked by the walking stick. Some things in his life have been documented to a degree while other searches have been un-remarkable. He owned many acres of land in his early years, was in politics, like to hunt, liked to gamble and drink.

For all practical purposes, he was my Father and Ma Pete, his second wife, was my Mother for the first almost 12 years of my life, therefore, things that I relate here are said to no disrespect or to speak ill of the passed.

Memories begin with the pleasant one and the best of these were his birthdays. That was the one time when ALL would come and it seemed to me that he was most happy at that time because he always getting ready a week in advance, building the table across the back yard, digging the pit to barbecue the goat and pig, and having "Uncle Tom" come the day before to prepare the wash tub full of sauce. Ma Pete and I could never be in the kitchen when "Tom" was doing his thing. I don't remember many gifts being bought, but Papa was always happy on his birthday. Of all his birthdays, I can remember three, especially the last one. I had a pony and all the Cousins wanted to ride, especially Sybil, who often refused to get off, so I spooked Teddy, Sybil fell off, broke her arm, and I slept on my stomach for the next few nights.

Papa was known for his "colorful" language, not the usual four letter words we hear today but just as bad. GDSOB was his usual when describing some one that had done something he did not like or if he just didn't like the person. Being with him a lot of the time, I learned his favorite. And one day in school a horsefly came in through the window, the AC was not working that day, and other kids were trying to shoo it out but without much luck, so I stood up and said, "I'll get that GDSOB." Mrs Browning, the teacher was so taken aback she sent us all home. Years later she told me she didn't know whether to laugh or cry when it happened, so she just dismissed us.

Some will say that Papa was a GOOD man, and others will say he was MEAN and in a lot of respects, he was a lot of both. In addition to hooking you with the cane if you didn't speak to him, if you were a woman, you best give him a wide birth or else the cane would lift your dress up over your head. I remember one husband that took exception and wound up with a split scalp and I am sure a big headache, plus a piece of advice from another man to forget it or risk being killed. This took place in Wynne. What we were doing there I do not know. Papa used to always say the two people he hated the most were liars and a thief. He and Alcorn Minor worked out a deal for Papa to clear a 5 acre thicket on Alcorns property, which we undertook. We chopped brush, piled and burned, then Papa expected Alcorn to pay, but Alcorn had other ideas and told Papa that the deal was for the land to be Plow ready, ie stumps removed. Papa told him he was a lair and that he was going to get his gun, which he did, needless to say Mr. Minor put his horse in a hard gallop away, but Papa fired off two shots after him. Mr. Minor told me years later he heard the crack of bullets going by. I often wondered if Papa was really trying to hit him, anyone that can hunt and kill bear, still hunt squirrels in his 70s I think was a better shot.

To stray a little at this point. One of the best at squirrel hunting was Uncle Lon. Papa sent me with him on two occasions to learn and Uncle Lon taught me a lot, then I could either hunt on my own or with Papa, I could see the squirrels movements when he could not, bout once pointed to where they were he could still bring them down. Papa had two .32 cal Winchester rifles, where they went I do no know. You can see one in the picture of him bear hunting in Mississippi. The other one the barrel had been cut at the magazine. He said he had it cut off after on of his hunting trips, in the cane breaks he was riding after the dogs with the rifle across the saddle when it caught on a cane, raked him off his horse, stunned and sitting on the ground to hear a grunt and a rustle in the cane, then have the bear appear. Fortunately, the dogs were hot on its tail so it didn't stop. When returned home the first thing he did was have the barrel cut. At one time I heard that Rolland Mann had the guns, but I could never find Rolland.

While still in this mode, Papa used to tell a couple of stories over and over. One about Uncle Felix. Papa said he was the only man alive that could eat a buffalo fish without picking out the bones until after he had swallowed the bite. (*alternate version is he claimed that Felix would eat the whole fish and spit out the bones afterward*)

The other story involved Uncle Will. All the boys were in the field, chopping cotton, and Uncle Will picked up his hoe and started for the house, the others asked where he was going, and he said today is my birthday and I am not going to work on my birthday. The others said you'll be back with you "backside" on fire. But he did not go back that day. These were the only two that I can recall. Looking back, the rapport between Papa and his children never seemed "close." Again unsubstantiated info is that he was a HARD taskmaster. I can't remember Ben Jr ever coming.

As said in the beginning, some called him mean and some would say he was GOOD, I know of maybe a dozen or more that would call him good. Many I knew before Papas' death and the occasion to talk to afterwards, sometime years later, and have them tell me that Papa helped them when they were down. None of them are alive now but some have children and other family members, unfortunately were they are now would be hard to contact to see if they could add something. Papa called them "waifes" and he never, nor did the ones I heard from, say how he helped.

None of us at this point knew "Gran", Papas' first wife, but I think we all remember "Ma Pete". I asked her once and she said his children did not want to call her mother and since her "nickname" was Pete, she became "Ma Pete". How true this is I do not know, but it is logical. But then I wondered how she got the nickname "Pete." No one seemed to know until I contacted my cousin Marvin West, son of her sister. He related that their father wanted BOYS, and when he got a girl they were given a boys name, except here, she was named Lula, but her sisters, Lewis, Jimmie, and Bernice (close) (*Another version of this story from her sister Jimmie is that she was stubborn as a mule, so they called her Pete for her father's mule.*)

Times were bad, but as a kid, I never knew how bad, Papa and Ma Pete never talked about things that I could understand, so I didn't know how things were. I knew we didn't have as much stock as we did at one time, and that after the twister hit the side of the house and too the roof off the barn, he didn't get it repaired. Then one day (*in 1933*) he left early in the morning and when he came home late in the afternoon, he told Ma Pete, and I was there, "THEY TOOK MY HOUSE AND LAND." He then went to the front porch, sat down in the rocker, told me to bring him a drink of cool water, and when I went to bed that night he was still sitting on the porch. I don't know how long Papa sat on the porch, I guess he was reflecting what he had lost because of his gambling and his drinking. I continued going to school at Simmons Switch, except about a week later, Ma Pete told me when school was out today, that would come to Goodrich where we would be living now. She told me how to get there. It was some time later that I learned that the house and the land that Papa would be farming belonged to Uncle Sax. Where Papa would have gone if Uncle Sax had not come forth, I do not know. Maybe Uncle Sax was returning to Papa what he had received. Being too young to know the reasons, Uncle Sax and Aunt Lucy lived with Papa and Ma Pete for a period of time, I do remember it was cold because Aunt Lucy would back up to the fire place to warm her behind and if Papa was in the room, he ALWAYS got up and moved away. About the only times that I saw Uncle Sax during this time was on a Sunday. He was always gone when I got up in the morning and I was usually in bed when he came back.

Papa like to drink and gamble and even after losing everything, he still like to do both and if so at every opportunity. I never knew the bootlegger(s) in Tupelo, but he sure did and thought he could not afford the hard liquor he would always get wine and one bottle would be gone before we got back to Goodrich. This was just about once a month, because that is how often we would go to Tupelo, Papa went to bed with the chickens or not long after the sun sent down, then wake up EARLY in the morning, wake Ma Pete, and they would play pitch until it was time to eat breakfast, do chores, then go to school or work in the field. He could not just play cards, there would have to be a wager, her cow against his pig, or whatever. Always had to be a wager.

Papa like to read the paper and most of the time he some how managed to subscribe, but at one time he could not and when the local train stopped at Goodrich, he asked the brakeman to give him the paper they read the day before. We didn't get a lot of mail, mostly the paper when he could afford it, but the RFD mail stopped at Simmons Switch(Overcup) which was a few miles from Goodrich, needless to say whose job it was to get the mail, rain, snow, or what. Papa thought that all of the people south of Simmons Switch should have their mail delivered to their door just like Alcorn Ferguson did, so he had all the neighbors sign a letter requesting mail delivery be extended to Goodrich. Believe it or not the postal service accepted his request, but would only provide every other day service. Bill Morris was quite unhappy and would not bring any mail for the people below Simmons Switch except every other day, until Papa confronted Bill. Bill did not like this even more, but he did bring Papa's mail

every day from then on. At least I didn't have to make that walk or pony ride but every other day.

Papas last day.. here ended Ben Jones written account and begins his verbal to me on Friday evening June 11, 2010. ----- 1 May 1939 was a Monday. Ben Jones has a clear memory of the things he was doing leading up to the death of Ben F Simmons on 1 May 1939. Ben Jones was 11 years and 7 months old and had gone with the local baseball team to play in Swifton that weekend. His father, Earl Jones lived in Newport and went with the baseball team on a bus. Returning home, the bus stopped in Newport to drop off Earl Jones and others, Ben went to the restroom and was left behind when the bus left.

Apparently getting left behind wasn't a major thing, he stayed overnight with his father and rode an early bus to school Monday morning---or it may have been that he went to school in Newport. Whichever the case, after school on Monday, Ben returned to his grandfather's home in Goodrich and did his routine chores before going to the house.

Grandfather Ben was on the front porch along with Ma Pete and daughter-in-law Dollie. Ben Jones knew something was wrong and that grandfather Ben wasn't well, but didn't grasp what was actually happening. As the sun was getting low on the horizon, just about one diameter above the horizon, Grandfather Ben said to them "When the sun goes down behind the earth, I'll be with it." Soon after, he turned to Ma Pete and said "Let's go in now" and the two of them went into the house. Before the sun was completely down, he died. His age calculates to 78 years, 11 months, 29 days.

Ben Jones description of his grandfather as "mean" is consistent with several of the other grandchild that were about the same age as Ben. Jane and Sybil both used "mean" when they described Grandfather Ben, Wilma added that she was afraid of him.

**Grandson Billy Bowie who was about 15 years older than those above, had this to say in his notes for the 1980 family reunion at Tupelo:**

My grandfather, Benjamin Fletcher Simmons, was a strong man both physical and mentally. He sired 11 children of his own, and fed and help raise 27 strays (as he called them). His second favorite pastime was slinging the bull and recounting some of his deals.

His concept of life is still sound: "By Scotts. You never learn a darn thing the second time you are kicked by a mule. And, By Scotts, Them that can brag without lying, let them brag."

A man in Woodruff County, named House, love to tell of his experience with Ben F. Mr. House had arranged to trade a wagon load of corn for two pea-cocks. He said Ben F. had missed his calling. When he drove his wagon up to Ben's home, Granddaddy approached him, took a cud of tobacco from his mouth, threw it and hit him in his ear, and over 100 feet away. Great ball player.

Mr House unloaded his wagon of corn. Was given two peacocks. one dead. Then, as always, he was taken into the house and fed. This was a memorable experience, too.

Ben F. often said he was put on earth to feed the hungry, and he reckoned he fed a million of them. My Daddy got to figuring and he said: Human and livestock the figure was way over 5 million... The only understatement Ben F ever made.

He and his two brothers built a large friendship and a statewide bit of political clout. They owned or controlled a sizable acreage of ground, three gins, and three saloons. From my association with him, I would judge him a happy man, even with his ups and downs.

Granddaddy had his faults, too. The worst to me was when he awoke, he awoke everyone. I hated that gourd full of cold water after sleeping in bed with Ben Rowe and Ralph King, who always wet the bed. Sad life.

Ben F. would grab me by an ear, so I always obeyed. I learned to drive a delivery truck very early in life so I was his chauffeur when he came to Newport. When he visited our home in Newport, he would stalk in, seat himself at the table and demand cat-fish. At certain times of the year cat-fish were hard to come by. My Mother inherited a bit of his shrewdness. She kept a bowl of congealed mush in her ice-box. She would slice, meal, and fry in her fish-grease...a few drops of lemon...Granddaddy would eat a triple portion and declare "Best fish ever ate." This made us kids giggle.

During his later years, he would grab me by an ear, and have me drive him to visit his friends in Walnut Grove Cemetery. He would walk to a tombstone and talk to it... *George A Hillhouse (1869-1929, Lawyer, see wedding announcement below)* passed as lunatic on bear hunt. Dr (Lemuel E.) Willis, (1862-1919) good old man but poor poker player. He even showed them his four letters. One from President F.D.R. and the three (handwritten from Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.) This impressed me, I asked Daddy if he had ever seen them. He answered only a thousand times.

On one of his last visits with us in Augusta, He removed his teeth.. Said he himself liked to talk without his teeth, and talked, and shook his finger at me.. Later I asked my Daddy what he had said and was told, "He told you to tell everyone", that means all of you here today, "By Scotts; Love Folks, love. For love is the flight of the soul towards God, the great, the beautiful, the sub-bliss and the sublime."

#### **Earlier Newspaper reports from earlier put him in a different light:**

##### **1903 wedding announcement**

Mr Ben F Simmons and Miss Lula E. Taylor were married Wednesday afternoon at the home of the bride's parents, Mr and Mrs. Bud Taylor of Tupelo. The officiating minister was Rev Mr. Toombs, pastor of the Methodist Church of Tupelo.

Following the wedding, a reception was tendered **over a hundred friends** of the contracting parties at the home of the groom, hours from five to eight o'clock. All seasonable delicacies were embraced in the dinner, the boards fairly groaning with the good things that made up this elaborate spread, to which the invited did ample justice.

Those in attendance upon the wedding and reception from Newport were Messrs. E.L. Boyce, Alcorn Ferguson, **G.A. Hillhouse**, Henry Owen and Park Deaderick.

**Jackson county hardly contains a more popular man than Mr Ben Simmons**, who has just retired from the office of assessor. The bride is said to be a very pretty and charming young lady and we congratulate the groom and wish the newly married a roseate pathway through life.

##### **1906 Newspaper report of accidental shooting**

Thursday, February 15, 1906 - Ben F Simmons, ex-assessor, and **one of Jackson County's most prominent and substantial citizens**, who lived near Tupelo, in Breckenridge township, lies in St. Vincent's Infirmary in a very low condition, with little hope of recovery, as a result of a wound from a pistol accidentally discharged while Mr. Simmons was in route to Little Rock on an Iron Mountain Train. ....

..... When they left the wounded man, to whom the hopes and sympathy of out people go out to, he was conscious there was some chance of his full recovery. He is 48 years of age and has always enjoyed rugged health.

**William Faulkner** (1897to1962) published a short story "**The Bear Hunt**" in **The Saturday Evening Post**, **Feb 10, 1934**. He had several short stories about hunting including "The Bear" published as a collection in "The Big Woods, The Hunting Stories" There a several interesting parallels to our Ben Simmons and his family --- including introduction memo to "Saxe Commins" and hunter knocked from his horse--- and a **"mean" bear called "Old Ben."** Lots of possible connections beginning with Ben's father Felix who did do some bear hunting and Faulkner's father and grandfather who were right age to associate with Ben and/or Felix on hunts. If nothing else, reading "The Big Woods" gives a pretty good idea of what Ben's bear hunting trips were.

I have seen listings of business owners and leaders in Tupelo in early 1900s, maybe late 1890s, that showed Ben Simmons and Miss Jimmies half brother Lucius Jerome Taylor together in many differ businesses or ventures. I don't clearly remember but seems like gin, incorporation of Town of Tupelo, and maybe a bank. I'm unable to locate the article that had this info, seems that title was something like History of Tupelo.