

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

VELMA SIMMONS

NOVEMBER 21, 1985

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY PAM SMOOT

ORAL HISTORY #1985-8

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #3086-3087

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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ABSTRACT

A native of Independence, Velma (James) Simmons was asked to work for Bess Truman in 1980. In the sixteen months that she worked, Simmons was the companion, nurse, and cook two days per week when Valeria LaMere was off duty. Simmons recalls the visit of Jimmy Carter, the day-to-day routine of caring for Mrs. Truman, other staff members, and her interpretation of Bess Truman as a person.

Persons mentioned: Valeria LaMere, Jimmy Carter, Trudy (Worden) Johnson, Henrietta Allen, May Wallace, Ardis Haukenberry, Bess W. Truman, Robert Lockwood, Rufus Burrus, Louis "Polly" Compton, Margaret Truman Daniel, Henry Talge, E. Clifton Daniel, and Agatha Christie.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

VELMA SIMMONS

HSTR INTERVIEW #1985-8

STEVE HARRISON: This is an interview being conducted November 21, 1985, as part of the oral history project at Harry S Truman National Historic Site. Tonight we'll be interviewing Velma James Simmons of Independence, who was a nurse with Mrs. Truman in 1980 and 1981. Conducting the interview is Pam Smoot, historian with the National Park Service in the Midwest Regional Office, Omaha, Nebraska. My name is Steve Harrison. I'll be your announcer tonight. I am also operating the tape recording equipment.

PAM SMOOT: Velma, if you please, I need for you to sign this. This is saying that you're giving us this information as a gift. [pause] Thank you.

HARRISON: Let's see, Valeria LaMere had the same photo with President Carter [see appendix, item 1].

VELMA SIMMONS: Okay, this is me and there's Valeria. And the others now, I don't know. This lady may be around. Her name was Henrietta, but I don't remember her last name. She worked nights. She worked two or three years, too. She probably had some experiences that I don't know about.

HARRISON: You don't remember her last name, though?

SIMMONS: No, I don't.

HARRISON: I wonder if Trudy [Johnson] would remember.

SIMMONS: I might be able to think of it. I don't remember if she was here when Trudy was

here or not. Trudy was here just a short time, and it might have been when Henrietta was gone. She left and came back, but I can't remember her last name. You know, if I think of it, why, I can let you know.

HARRISON: Who took this photo?

SIMMONS: The White House.

HARRISON: That's what I was wondering. Oh, gosh, they must go nuts, because they probably sent everybody in the picture a photo, right?

SIMMONS: Yes.

HARRISON: Oh, man. I can imagine how many stops they make and how many people have their pictures taken. Oh, gosh!

SIMMONS: [chuckling] Yes, they had photographers right with them. And Mrs. Truman declined having her picture taken with them, so I don't have any other . . . I never brought a camera up here. Trudy did and Valeria did, and the pictures I have are ones that they had.

SMOOT: Can you identify any of these other people in this photograph?

SIMMONS: All I remember is first names. Shirley, and I don't remember this one's name. She wasn't here very long. This one went by . . .

HARRISON: She wasn't here very long either, according to Valeria. [laughter]

SIMMONS: No, she went by "Peaches." That's all I know.

SMOOT: Oh, is that Peaches? Yes, we've been hearing Peaches's name, but we didn't know who she was.

SIMMONS: [chuckling] Well, that's Peaches. And this little lady cleaned the house for Mrs. Truman. I don't know if she's still living or not. She may be. She may be in a nursing home. [pause] It was an experience.

HARRISON: Yes, I'll bet. Well, what happened when Carter came to visit, do you recall?

SIMMONS: Oh, yes. [chuckling] When he came in the front door, we were standing in the foyer out here, and he waved and gave a big smile, one of his big smiles. He came in and then Valeria introduced each of us to him, and he shook our hands and repeated our name, you know. Then he walked in here, and we stayed in there, and [he] talked with Mrs. Truman. One thing, he asked Mrs. Truman if she was behaving and listening to what the doctors told her to do. And she thought for a minute and sat there and she said, “No, I’m not.” And he just laughed. [chuckling] So they visited for a short time. She didn’t speak very well at that time. It was difficult for her to speak and make people understand her, so he did most of the talking. Then, when he . . . The photographer, I believe, took the picture after he had his visit with Mrs. Truman, I’m pretty sure. Then he went out on the porch and waved goodbye and left. He wasn’t here very long, but it was quite an experience.

HARRISON: Where was he sitting when he was in here? Where was he and where was Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: They were sitting right over here.

HARRISON: Was she in the . . .

SIMMONS: No, she was in her wheelchair, I believe. I believe they had her in a wheelchair. And I think he sat in this chair, only it was over, moved over in front of the coffee table.

HARRISON: Okay.

SIMMONS: But I believe she was in her wheelchair. I don’t think they took her out of her wheelchair.

HARRISON: Well, I’m going to stay out now. I’m here to run the tape recorder. You guys just visit. [chuckling]

SIMMONS: Okay.

SMOOT: So we had a very interesting interview with Trudy Johnson the other day.

SIMMONS: Yes, she was a neat person. When did she work? Did she give you the dates of when and how long she was here? Because I don't remember how long she was here. I was here about sixteen months, I believe it was.

SMOOT: Would you give me your correct address and your full name and your birth date, please?

SIMMONS: Okay. Velma . . . James was my name at the time. It's Simmons now. 707 West 28th Street North, Independence, Missouri. And my age?

SMOOT: Birth date.

SIMMONS: Birth date's all right? [chuckling] April 19, 1942.

SMOOT: Are you a native of Independence?

SIMMONS: Yes.

SMOOT: How long have you lived here?

SIMMONS: Since my birth. [chuckling]

SMOOT: What was your association with Bess Truman?

SIMMONS: A nurse/companion.

SMOOT: And what were your responsibilities?

SIMMONS: Well, just to do nursing duties, caring for her, cooking for her the hours I was here, and I read to her. Basically that's all. I'd never had any experience in this line before. I was asked by . . . Mrs. May Wallace, the sister-in-law of Mrs. Truman, had talked to Ardis Haukenberry across the street and was looking for someone to work part-time two days a week. And I had done some sewing for this lady across the street, and she asked if I'd be interested, and I said, "I've never had experience, but I'd like to try." And that's when I decided that

I wanted to go into the field of nursing, and I'm now in school.

SMOOT: How would you describe Bess Truman?

SIMMONS: Oh, she was just a very ordinary person. She had a great sense of humor, a darling sense of humor. Nothing really unusual about her, you know, in my mind. She loved to read. I used to read to her. I'd read until I'd go to sleep, and then I'd drop a sentence or so and she'd look at me and grin when I'd wake up. [chuckling] But I took her blood pressure one time, and I hadn't been here but a couple of days. And I didn't know a whole lot about how to take blood pressure—Valeria had showed me—and I was getting ready to take her blood pressure and was kind of nervous about it anyway. I put the cuff on her arm, put the stethoscope around my neck, and I pumped it up and put the stethoscope on her arm, and I listened and I didn't hear anything. And she looked at me kind of funny and then looked the other way. I didn't put the stethoscope in my ears. And when she saw that I noticed that, she just roared.

[chuckling]

SMOOT: So when did you first begin working for Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: It was in June of 1980. I don't know the exact date.

SMOOT: And who hired you?

SIMMONS: Valeria and Mrs. Truman together. Valeria set up the interview and I came over and went to the back porch where Mrs. Truman was sitting. And she asked me a few questions. I answered her questions. She asked me how many children I had, I told her I had six, and I asked if she'd like to see the pictures. I do that to a lot of people. [chuckling] She looked at their pictures one-by-one and said they were very nice looking. And Valeria looked at her and said, "Mrs. Truman, what do you think?" and she says, "I'm satisfied," and I was

hired.

SMOOT: Can you give me some examples of some of the other questions that she asked you, other than about your family?

SIMMONS: Well, she asked me—Valeria did most of the talking. I think—she asked me if I had done any nursing before, if I thought I could . . . You know, she explained to me what my duties would be, wondered if I thought I could handle it. I told her I'd like to try. That's basically about all she asked me.

SMOOT: And how soon after the interview did you come to work?

SIMMONS: I believe it was two days, two or three days later.

SMOOT: And what was your work schedule?

SIMMONS: At first, I don't remember how many months, I worked eleven hours a day. I believe I came in at 7:00 and worked till whatever eleven hours was. [chuckling] I fixed her breakfast and I fixed her noon meal, which was a big meal for her. And then it wasn't . . . a few months after that we went to eight-hour shifts around the clock. I worked a few nights, not very often. I think three or four times maybe I worked nights, but mostly it was two days a week.

SMOOT: What kind of breakfast foods did you cook for Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: She liked bran flakes. She ate a good breakfast. Half-and-half she had to have on it; she didn't like milk. She would drink her coffee while I was getting the rest of her breakfast ready. When she rang her buzzer, I'd take her coffee in. She ate toast, cereal, and then sometimes she would eat pancakes, once, maybe twice a week. She ate a pretty good breakfast.

SMOOT: And what sort of lunches did you cook for her?

SIMMONS: Oh, all sorts of things. I liked to . . . Oh, gosh, chicken cordon bleu I fixed. I fixed a lot of . . . because it was just so neat to work in that kitchen, you know,

and I liked . . . In the mornings she read her paper and went through her mail, so you know, I didn't stay in the room with her most of the time in the mornings.

And I like to cook, so I just tried all sorts of things, and she seemed to enjoy them. She was used to kind of simple food. And then I made her custard a lot.

Her sister-in-law used to bring custard. And I'd make custard for her, and I'd make angel food cakes and just all sorts of things. [chuckling]

SMOOT: You mentioned earlier that you would take her coffee in to her. Where did you take the coffee?

SIMMONS: Into this room here.

SMOOT: This downstairs bedroom?

SIMMONS: Yes.

SMOOT: Have you ever spent the night here in the Truman home?

SIMMONS: Yes.

SMOOT: How often?

SIMMONS: Two or three times during the time I was here, I think.

SMOOT: And where did you sleep?

SIMMONS: I slept upstairs in a bedroom. I don't know what bedroom it would be called.

There were two twin beds in there and a wash, a sink, a basin in there, and the buzzer was hooked up up there. So I laid awake listening for the buzzer.

[chuckling]

SMOOT: What bed did Mrs. Truman sleep in when she slept down here in the bedroom?

SIMMONS: She slept in the bed closest to the bathroom.

SMOOT: What type of beds were in this room?

SIMMONS: Twin beds.

SMOOT: Twin beds? When you cooked for Mrs. Truman, what time were her meals

served?

SIMMONS: Her breakfast was just whenever she woke up, and sometimes it would be 7:00, sometimes it wouldn't be till 8:30. Her afternoon meal was usually 12:00 or 12:30, I believe. I don't remember exactly.

SMOOT: Did you eat along with Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: No.

SMOOT: Where did you eat your meals?

SIMMONS: Oh, I ate here, but I didn't usually eat with her.

SMOOT: Where did you eat?

SIMMONS: In the kitchen.

SMOOT: Did you ever prepare meals for anyone other than Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: No. And in the summer, now, she would eat her meals on the porch; except her breakfast, she would always eat on the porch.

SMOOT: On which porch?

SIMMONS: This back porch. She spent most of her days out there until late, late evening.

SMOOT: Do you know if Mrs. Truman took naps during the day?

SIMMONS: No, she didn't want to go back to bed. She would sometimes nod off in the chair, but other than that, no.

SMOOT: Did you ever try to wake her up when she nodded off in the chair and suggest that she go to bed?

SIMMONS: No. [chuckling]

SMOOT: Why not?

SIMMONS: Well, it just didn't seem safe to do. [chuckling]

SMOOT: What type of activities was Mrs. Truman involved in during the day?

SIMMONS: Well, she would read her paper in the morning. She went through it you know,

page by page, just went through the whole paper. Then her mail, when her mail came in I'd take her mail in. This was when she was, you know, a little bit, when she wasn't quite so bad. After she broke her hip, then she didn't do so much of this. And the mail, it looked to me like it had been opened probably at the library and replies written, and then she just went through the mail and she would sign it when she was able to sign it, and would read . . . appeared to read all the letters and all the replies that were in her little folder, and then we'd send it back to the library.

SMOOT: Did she ever talk to you about any of the mail that she had gotten?

SIMMONS: No, she really didn't discuss it.

SMOOT: Did you all talk a lot?

SIMMONS: Not a lot, because it was difficult to understand her, difficult for me to understand her, and it was frustrating for her when you couldn't understand her. She would make cute little remarks once in a while or something, but other than that . . . She liked to listen to, liked for me to read the *Reader's Digest* jokes. She loved the jokes in the *Reader's Digest*.

SMOOT: Can you give me an example of some of the cute little remarks that Mrs. Truman used to make?

SIMMONS: [chuckling] I knew you were going to ask me that. I can't remember any right offhand.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever watch television while you were working?

SIMMONS: There was something on that she watched. Well, when Margaret was on, I think once she did watch it. The one time I remember her watching it was the World Series in 1980 when the [Kansas City] Royals played. We went into the parlor where the piano is and watched the World Series game, and she got the

biggest kick out of the umpires when they would get real angry. Why, she'd just laugh. She just loved to watch ball games. She was, Mr. Lockwood came in and said that he had tickets if she would like to go to the game, but she didn't think she was up to going to the game.

SMOOT: Did she ever get really excited if the Royals made a great play or something?

SIMMONS: When she did, mostly what she did was laugh. You know, when she was excited about something, she would laugh.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever listen to any music?

SIMMONS: No, not that I remember. It was very quiet. Well, now, except one time when I brought a tape of my son's voice recitals. [chuckling] She listened to that.

SMOOT: What did she think of it?

SIMMONS: She said he had a very nice voice and a lot of volume. And then my daughter played piano for her on the piano, and she seemed to enjoy that. I don't know why the radio was never played.

SMOOT: So did your daughter come over and play on a frequent basis?

SIMMONS: No, no, just once.

SMOOT: Just once?

SIMMONS: Just once. She was ten years old at the time.

SMOOT: Did you ever take Mrs. Truman out for a stroll?

SIMMONS: No, I accompanied her to the doctor one time and to the beauty parlor one time, and that was the only times I had ever been out with her.

SMOOT: And how did you get to the beauty parlor?

SIMMONS: The Secret Service took us up there.

SMOOT: At the time, was Mrs. Truman in a wheelchair?

SIMMONS: Yes, in the wheelchair until we got to the car, and then we lifted her into the car

and back out into the wheelchair.

SMOOT: Where did she sit in the car?

SIMMONS: On the right-hand side in the back seat.

SMOOT: And where did you sit?

SIMMONS: I sat on the left-hand side.

SMOOT: And which car were you riding in when you went to the beauty parlor?

SIMMONS: Well, when we went to the beauty parlor, I believe it was her car, a Chrysler New Yorker. I don't know what year it is. Well, it's in the garage.

SMOOT: How many Secret Service agents accompanied the two of you to the beauty parlor?

SIMMONS: Usually one. Or, at that time, it was one.

SMOOT: And did he sit out in the car and wait for you and Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: I believe he did. Yes, I believe he did.

SMOOT: When Mrs. Truman would sit on the back porch, what did she do? Did she just sit there?

SIMMONS: She read or . . . Well, usually when I took her out there in the morning, she would read her paper there and go through her mail there. Then, when she couldn't see very well as she got older, she just sat there most of the time. But then I would read to her all afternoon, usually.

SMOOT: In the mornings when Mrs. Truman would get up, what were your responsibilities, other than cooking her breakfast?

SIMMONS: Okay, I would wash her and dress her and just sit her in the chair.

SMOOT: When you would dress her in the morning, who decided what she was going to wear?

SIMMONS: I believe the clothes were probably already laid out. I believe Valeria had them

laid out when I came on for my two days. Or she may have left me a note. It seems like she might have left me notes to what to put on her.

SMOOT: Do you know if Mrs. Truman had a favorite color?

SIMMONS: I believe it was blue. I'm not real sure, but it would surprise me if it wasn't because of her beautiful blue eyes. [chuckling]

SMOOT: I have a favorite nightgown that I like to wear, and I was just wondering, you know, sometimes we all have a favorite something that we really care for. I was wondering if maybe Mrs. Truman had a particular nightgown that she especially liked.

SIMMONS: I don't remember her expressing any particular . . .

SMOOT: During the time that you worked here, did Mrs. Truman ever go upstairs?

SIMMONS: No.

SMOOT: Do you remember when the hospital bed was brought in?

SIMMONS: No, there was no hospital bed when I was here, just the two twin beds. I don't believe it was a hospital bed; I never really looked at it. Oh, you mean her bed? She had one?

SMOOT: I'm asking.

SIMMONS: [chuckling] I don't believe it was a hospital bed when I took care of her. No, I know when the agency came and took care of her, I was still here but I did cooking at that time, and I believe that's when they had the hospital bed, after she had broken her hip.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman have any other visitors in the home while you were working, other than President Carter?

SIMMONS: Mr. Burrus, Rufus Burrus came, I believe every week, I think every Saturday. I usually wasn't here, because I don't believe I worked on Saturdays a lot. She

had a personal friend, I can't remember her name, that came once in a great while, but I don't remember her name. And Polly Compton, who lives down the street, he used to bring her homemade ice cream every Saturday, or every week, and he was a very, very nice man. He would never ask to see her. He would just say, "Tell her I say hello." And she loved that ice cream. He brought her homemade ice cream every week.

SMOOT: During your presence, did Mrs. Truman ever make any telephone calls?

SIMMONS: Well, she called Margaret, I believe, one or two times maybe. None other that I remember.

SMOOT: Do you know if she received any telephone calls on a regular basis during the time that you were working?

SIMMONS: There was a gentleman that used to call and send over baked chicken every week. Henry Talge, I believe was his name. I think he was a friend of Mr. Truman's at one time. And he would call and ask how she was and ask if she needed anything, but he never asked to speak to her.

SMOOT: Were you ever in the Truman home for any special occasions?

SIMMONS: For one birthday party and a Christmas party that she had.

SMOOT: Okay, which birthday party? Do you remember how old Mrs. Truman was?

SIMMONS: Oh, my . . . [chuckling] It would have been February of '81, I think.

SMOOT: And who was at the birthday party, do you remember?

SIMMONS: Just the staff and May Wallace, her sister-in-law. I believe May Wallace was at that. I'm not real certain. She may have just been to the Christmas party.

SMOOT: And what kind of things went on at the birthday party?

SIMMONS: Well, I really don't remember. We had a cake and she opened her packages. Just your usual birthday party.

SMOOT: Did you sing "Happy Birthday"?

SIMMONS: Yes. [chuckling]

SMOOT: Were there any tears?

SIMMONS: I don't believe so. I don't remember there being.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman appear to be happy?

SIMMONS: Yes. Yes, she was very happy.

SMOOT: Do you remember the names of some of the employees who were working here?

SIMMONS: Mary Lightsinger, who was a registered nurse, worked here at one time, and Trudy . . . So many came and went, you know, that I don't remember their . . . And then, of course, Henrietta. Her last name may have been Allen. It might have been Henrietta Allen.

SMOOT: How do you feel about having been employed by a former first lady?

SIMMONS: Very lucky. [chuckling] Just quite awed by the whole thing. It just was really quite a surprise.

SMOOT: Where did Mrs. Truman read her newspaper?

SIMMONS: In the bedroom. Or, if it was warm, she would go to the back porch and read the paper.

SMOOT: Where did she sit when she was in the bedroom reading the newspaper?

SIMMONS: Her chair was right next to the door here on this wall.

SMOOT: Do you remember what color the chair was?

SIMMONS: I believe it had flowers on it, but I'm not real certain. I think there was a spread over it, so I'm not really certain.

SMOOT: Were there any other nurses on duty while you were working?

SIMMONS: Not when I first started working, no. I was here by myself, and then after she

fell and broke her hip, of course, I just came in and cooked. I would sometimes read to her or something, but usually Valeria was here. At that time, when I came in and just did the cooking, I was here every day—well, five days a week—for like two hours in the morning and that was all.

SMOOT: And then someone else would warm Mrs. Truman's meals up and serve them to her?

SIMMONS: In the evening, uh-huh. I don't know who fed her her breakfast, but usually I wasn't here, I don't believe, at that time. I don't believe I fixed her breakfast; I think someone else did.

HARRISON: Well, I'll tell you what, there's not too much tape on here, so let me just sit here and visit and then I'll put a new tape on and we can walk around the first floor a little bit.

SMOOT: Okay.

HARRISON: How long were you here after the Upjohn nurses started?

SIMMONS: I believe . . . was it in May that she broke her hip? I'm not certain when she broke her hip. I think I stayed until October. And at that time, I'm not real sure, but I think they sometime in there put a feeding tube down her because it was so difficult. She choked so easily that it was getting difficult to feed her. They pureed her food when I cooked it there the last couple of months.

HARRISON: Were there any changes, I guess in the house or in the household or anything, during that time before she broke her hip and after she broke her hip?

SIMMONS: Just when they hired the agency, that was all. The only change that I remember is the nurses. Professional nurses were taking care of her.

SMOOT: Were there any changes in the furniture?

SIMMONS: Oh, no, not that I remember.

HARRISON: Was there any change in kind of the atmosphere of the house that you recall?

SIMMONS: I don't remember any change in the atmosphere, no.

HARRISON: I was just wondering if it was more . . . I don't want to put any words in your mouth, but I just wonder if it was a little bit more . . . I don't know what, impersonal or anything like that.

SIMMONS: No, it didn't seem to be, because the nurses that worked with her were just as . . . I mean, they weren't just professional. I mean, they had a very warm relationship with her, just as we did.

HARRISON: Can you tell us anything about the Secret Service while you were here?

SIMMONS: Not, I know they spent the night in that little study; otherwise you really didn't see them that often. They would bring the mail over. I remember one time one of them brought the mail over and laid the gas bill on top and said, "Here, you show it to Mrs. Truman." And I said, "No, you show it to Mrs. Truman." We argued about who was going to show her the gas bill, because I guess she was quite frugal. [chuckling] So I ended up showing her the gas bill.

SMOOT: And what was her reaction?

SIMMONS: Just a look of surprise, you know, just shock. [chuckling]

[End #3086; Begin #3087]

SIMMONS: I remember one time one of the Secret Service men that drove her car came over and said, told me that the car needed shock absorbers really bad, it was just dragging terribly in the back, and he went up and got an estimate on it, and he said, "You show her how much it's . . ." You know, "You give her the bill and show it to her and let me know what she wants to do about it." Well, she just said, "Absolutely not!" Just as plain as I could say it. [chuckling]

SMOOT: So did the car get fixed?

SIMMONS: No. [chuckling]

HARRISON: Are there any other stories like that about . . . ?

SIMMONS: I don't remember any right offhand.

SMOOT: We're going to take you on a tour, an after-hours tour of the Truman home.
[chuckling]

HARRISON: You've been through on one of the park service tours, haven't you?

SIMMONS: Yes.

SMOOT: So did Mrs. Truman have a favorite object here in the living room?

SIMMONS: Not that I remember. She really never sat in here, that I can remember; you know, just went through. Where do you want me to . . . just walk on in?

SMOOT: We'll go in the bedroom.

SIMMONS: I was trying to remember if that was the chair she sat in, but I don't believe so. I think that chair sat over here. Now, that was the bed that she slept in when I was here, or when I cared for her before they put the hospital bed in. I believe it was against the wall. I'm not certain, but it may not have been.

HARRISON: Do you remember anything about this other bed?

SIMMONS: No, it usually had books piled on it, and papers and things like that, usually in stacks. The room looks pretty much the same, from what I can remember.

HARRISON: Do you recall her getting any objects or gifts or anything like that while you were here?

SIMMONS: Oh, she received a lot of gifts at Christmas time and a lot of flowers. A lot of food, you know, hams and turkeys and cookies and all sorts of things that people sent her from all over. And I don't remember any particular thing. I wish I'd written some things down, and didn't. [chuckling]

SMOOT: Why don't we go into the music parlor.

SIMMONS: This was the piano that my daughter played. Mrs. Truman sat here in her wheelchair, and there's where we watched the World Series game.

HARRISON: Did you sit in here with her while she watched it?

SIMMONS: Yes.

HARRISON: Where did you sit?

SIMMONS: I believe on the couch there; either that or I might have had a chair up there. But I don't think I did. I think I just sat on the couch.

HARRISON: Do you remember if that clock worked?

SMOOT: Here on the mantel.

SIMMONS: I don't recall whether it worked or not.

HARRISON: You know, these detailed questions. We're asking these. We don't expect you to have the answers for all these, you know. Relax. If you have the answer . . .

SIMMONS: [chuckling] Okay.

HARRISON: I'm going to have to move the tape recorder, so wait right there.

SIMMONS: Okay.

SMOOT: Has anything on this piano changed? [tape is turned off]

HARRISON: Okay, we're in the study now.

SMOOT: So, Velma, you can take a walk around and see if anything in here brings back any really good memories.

SIMMONS: I used to come in here in the mornings, waiting for her buzzer to ring sometimes, and sit in this chair or look at the books, just to kind of look around.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever sit here and study in her wheelchair?

SIMMONS: No, not while I was here.

HARRISON: So you'd sit in the chair here nearest the hi-fi?

SIMMONS: Yes.

HARRISON: With the floral design. So that would be when you first came on duty, and she would still . . .

SIMMONS: She was still sleeping, yes.

HARRISON: . . . was still asleep. So, when she woke up, then she would . . . ?

SIMMONS: Then usually I was either in her room or in the kitchen, you know, after that, but sometimes I would come in here and just kind of look at the books and things like that.

HARRISON: So she would push her little button then when she woke up?

SIMMONS: Yes, to let me know that she was ready to get up.

HARRISON: Did she ever ask to have you bring anything to her from other parts of the house?

SIMMONS: Not that I recall. She may have and I just don't remember.

SMOOT: Has this room changed at all in any form or fashion from the way it used to look when you used to sit in here?

SIMMONS: I don't believe so. It looks the same. Other than the glass that's over the . . . I don't remember that.

HARRISON: We put that up. [chuckling] That's plexiglas. We didn't want people taking souvenirs home with them. And now we're in the dining room.

SMOOT: When Mrs. Truman had her birthday party in 1981, where did she sit?

SIMMONS: I believe she sat in her wheelchair right over in this area, I believe.

HARRISON: Kind of between the . . . Let me just describe so it will be on the tape. Between the buffet and the north end of the table, or the head of the table.

SIMMONS: Right.

HARRISON: Do you remember anything that was on the table, other than when you were

having a party in here?

SIMMONS: I believe there was a lace tablecloth, but I'm not real sure. It may not have been there all the time. I don't remember any centerpiece or anything. There may have been one and I just don't remember it.

HARRISON: Do you remember that silver piece, the epergne?

SIMMONS: Yes, that was there. Everything, I believe, that's sitting around on the buffet, I think everything was there.

SMOOT: We'll go into the kitchen now.

SIMMONS: The stove was usually lit. [chuckling] This looks pretty much the same.

HARRISON: Where would you prepare food?

SIMMONS: Usually on this table here.

HARRISON: On the red-topped table?

SIMMONS: Yes, this table.

HARRISON: Did you have to do the dishes?

SIMMONS: Yes, I did the dishes.

SMOOT: Since you cooked and did the dishes, did you do the grocery shopping, too?

SIMMONS: A few times I did. She gave me the keys to her car, and I drove her car to the grocery store. [chuckling]

HARRISON: Did she have an account at a store or . . . ?

SIMMONS: No. No, I believe she gave me the money for it. I'm sure she did, because I never remember charging anything. And she would tell me what to write on the list; either that, or Valeria would have a list made out and tell me to go. But usually Valeria did the grocery shopping. If she couldn't go or something, why, she'd leave the list for me.

HARRISON: Where did they keep the food? I mean, other than things that were in the

refrigerator?

SIMMONS: There was a freezer downstairs, and then in the pantry in there was the cereal and flour, things like that. I remember Mr. and Mrs. Daniel when they were here and I came into work one morning. They were sitting here eating their breakfast. She with a little night cap on and a robe, just looked like an ordinary person, and he was sitting there with a robe on. [chuckling]

HARRISON: Were they surprised to see you?

SIMMONS: No, they were quite relaxed.

SMOOT: They were? They continued to do what they were doing?

SIMMONS: Oh, yes. They knew someone was coming, and yes, they were quite relaxed.

HARRISON: Were there any certain dishes that you used or would serve Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: Usually this patterned dish here with the grapes.

HARRISON: That's the Wedgwood "Old Vine" pattern. Would you take her things on . . .
How would you take her food?

SIMMONS: I had a tray. I don't remember what it looked like, but I had it all on a tray, and then she had a little TV tray that she sat in front of her that we put the tray on.

SMOOT: In most cases, did she have a big appetite?

SIMMONS: Ordinarily, yes.

HARRISON: Was this the tray maybe? [chuckling]

SIMMONS: I don't believe it is. I don't think so. Now, we did use place mats. Valeria told me to always put a place mat on the tray.

SMOOT: What kind of place mats?

SIMMONS: Well, that was one of them there, just little cotton ones.

SMOOT: Were they all made of cotton?

SIMMONS: I believe so, yes, the ones that I used.

HARRISON: Did most of the dishes come from the pantry, or anything from the butler's pantry?

SIMMONS: No, the dishes were right in the cabinet above the heater there, was where I got the dishes that I used for her.

HARRISON: Let me move this again back into the living room. [tape is turned off, then a pause]

SMOOT: Velma, what were the names of some of the books that you read to Mrs. Truman?

SIMMONS: I read Margaret Truman Daniel's book *Souvenir* two or three times—I think she enjoyed that one the most—and *Murder in the White House*, that Mrs. Daniel wrote. Several Agatha Christie mysteries. That's what she seemed to enjoy, too, was the mysteries. People would send her books a lot. She would receive books in the mail, and she'd want me to read one of her new books.

SMOOT: Did she ever tell you, when you were reading her a book, that she didn't like the book? Did you always read the books all the way through?

SIMMONS: There was one we didn't finish. I don't remember what the name of it was, but she didn't want me to finish it. It was a mystery and it wasn't a real good one. [chuckling] She was kind of bored with it. I believe I read—I don't remember if I read it all, I think I did—*Backstairs at the White House*, I think I read to her. I think there was a movie made about it later.

HARRISON: How many times did Margaret come to visit while you were here?

SIMMONS: Twice, I believe. I saw her by herself one time, she came alone, and the other time she came with her husband.

SMOOT: Did her sons ever accompany her?

SIMMONS: No, not while I was here. I remember when I was getting ready to leave one

time one of my children had called me and told me that . . . We had gerbils at the time and one had gotten out and gotten away. And I told her . . . I was getting ready to leave and I said I had to go home and see if I could find this gerbil. And she said, “Oh, we had those one time.” And she said, “What you need to do is get you some record albums and put over the top of the aquarium and put some bricks on top of it.” [chuckling] And it just amazed me that, wow, this lady lives just like I do.

SMOOT: When Margaret was here visiting in the home, did the atmosphere change at all?

SIMMONS: Not that I noticed, no. Her mother seemed always really happy to see her.

SMOOT: What about the nursing staff?

SIMMONS: No, I didn't notice any change at all. Of course, you didn't usually see her until around noon, and then she would leave sometimes. I didn't see her for very long periods of time at a time.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever give you a Christmas present or a birthday present?

SIMMONS: No.

HARRISON: Do you feel like you were working for Mrs. Truman pretty much, or more Valeria?

SIMMONS: Well, I probably, I took my orders from Valeria. I don't know, I guess maybe I feel I was working for both of them, but I think Valeria had Mrs. Truman's interests in mind. But she would leave me notes, you know, on what to do and what to put on Mrs. Truman and things like that. But I still felt like I was working for Mrs. Truman, too, but I pretty much took my orders from Valeria.

HARRISON: You mentioned Mrs. Wallace bringing over custard?

SIMMONS: Yes.

HARRISON: Did she do that often?

SIMMONS: Not too often. Mrs. Truman enjoyed it quite a bit, but then she got so she couldn't eat too well, so Mrs. Wallace stopped bringing it. Then I started making it and giving it to her when we could get her to eat it. Her appetite just kind of declined. I think it was mainly because she had so much problem swallowing. But she did, oh, three or four times, I guess, the time that I was working with her.

HARRISON: Did Mrs. Wallace come over at other times?

SIMMONS: Once in a while she would come over and visit with her, not too often, didn't seem to.

SMOOT: So does that sort of mean that she would come over maybe once every two weeks or once every three weeks?

SIMMONS: No, probably in the time I was here she probably came over three or four times.

HARRISON: But that was during your shift, essentially.

SIMMONS: But then I was just here two days a week, so, you know, hard to say. And then she did have a visitor on Fridays, usually. I don't believe it was every Friday. I usually wasn't here. I don't know if he came after I left at 3:00 or what it was, but it was the Reverend Hart from the Episcopal church. He would come and visit with her.

HARRISON: How did you get paid while you were working?

SIMMONS: It was Mrs. Truman's account that had her name and Margaret's name on the checks. Mrs. Truman signed the checks for quite a while, and then Margaret signed a couple of them, I believe, when she was here, and then Valeria signed them later when Mrs. Truman could no longer write.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman give you your check?

SIMMONS: At first she did, yes. The first few months, yes.

SMOOT: And what happened after that?

SIMMONS: She would just hand me an envelope with my check in it and I'd thank her. That was usually right at the end of my shift.

SMOOT: So how often were you paid?

SIMMONS: Once a week.

SMOOT: Do you have any more deep, dark secrets you'd like to tell us?

HARRISON: [chuckling] Any stories or anything that . . .

SIMMONS: I can't recall any. Like I say, she didn't talk real clearly at the time I was here. She tried to, but I know it was frustrating for her not to be able to make people understand her. And mostly what I think of is her laughter. She didn't talk a lot, but then you could tell by looking at her eyes a lot of times, too. The only thing I really remember her saying real clear, about as clear as I could ever hear anything, was that "Absolutely not!" when she didn't want her car fixed.
[chuckling]

SMOOT: Did she ever show a sign of frustration when she wasn't able to communicate?

SIMMONS: Yes.

SMOOT: How?

SIMMONS: Her face would get a little bit red and she'd try to kind of holler at you, and then she'd laugh after you'd . . . you know, you'd kind of try to smooth it over, she'd kind of laugh. She wasn't really angry, but she just . . .

HARRISON: I don't have anything else especially.

SMOOT: I don't think I have anything else either at this point. So we'd like to thank you for your time and the information that you have provided us with. I'm sure the information that you and the other people that we've interviewed will be very

helpful in the interpretation of Harry S Truman National Historic Site. And again we'd like to thank you. I think Steve wants to take your picture.

HARRISON: That's right. Some of these stories are good for us to know, although we may not use all of them, like the one about Margaret and Clifton having breakfast at the table. [chuckling] That's a good story, but . . .

SIMMONS: Your look of shock made me wonder if I should have said it. [laughter] [tape is turned off] The chandelier light was on and Mrs. Truman rang her buzzer. We thought she had been asleep. I wasn't here at the time, but she wanted to know why the light was on in the dining room. She could see it shining underneath her door. [chuckling] She knew what light it was, I guess.

HARRISON: Kept track of all of them.

END OF INTERVIEW

APPENDIX

1. Photograph of President Jimmy Carter with Bess W. Truman's staff, Sept. 2, 1980 (courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Library).
2. "Her eyes just sparkled when she was happy," *The Examiner*, October 19, 1982, p. 2.