

MRS. RUTH SCOTT SIMMONS



Jackson, Mississippi

Teacher

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MRS. RUTH SCOTT SIMMONS

My full name is Ruth Emmeline Scott Simmons, and I was born October 30th in 1916 in Jackson, Mississippi. On my next birthday, I will be ninety. I imagine I was born at home. We had a big house on Farris Street. We went back to Jackson to visit about twelve years ago, and the house was still there. Can you imagine that? Also still standing was a two-story office building that my father built in 1910. After all this time, the house and office building was still there. The house was adjacent to an oil mill and we didn't know until many years later that the mill had created my father's asthma or at least contributed to it. The doctor said there was nothing that could be done to help my father because there were no medicines then for asthma. The doctor said we should probably move to another city where the air was better. My father chose Johnson City, Tennessee.

When we were in Jackson, my mother had a buggy that she rode in and she would drive it herself. She had a surrey to hold the family because there were nine children and a mother and father so I guess we probably used both of them. I had six brothers and two sisters. There were nine children. [Smiles] The eldest girl was Vashti, and she was the first one to finish Spelman. Esther was the next elder daughter. I was the youngest daughter and the youngest of the whole family. I was the baby. My six brothers were Aurielus, William Alexander, Cornelius, Daniel, David Augustus, and Emel. The oldest brother was Aurielus and the youngest was Emel.

My brother got sick with typhoid fever. We were in Tennessee at the time, and I was about seven or eight. That would have been in 1924 or 25. He was the only one in the family that had it. I remember how faithful my mother was. She would tell us, "You don't just pick up a glass and drink from it." She would boil everything. It took a lot of work caring for my brother and people from church would come and assist my mother. It was a fine church that we were members of. That's where I was baptized, and I remember they wrapped me in a robe like a bear robe. I kept that robe on after I was baptized. It was cold in the basement and I thought I was going to freeze. [Laughs]

My sister Esther was three years older than I am, and she always felt that she should tell me what to do and how to do it. She was the kind of person somebody would call prissy because she loved to dress and she loved to match things. If you had on a blue dress you had to

have on a blue ribbon and you if you had on a blue ribbon, of course you had to have on blue socks. I was different. If I had on nice clean socks, that would be all I'd want. Whenever Esther would get ready to down Farris Street with her friends, she wouldn't want me to go. I would tell Mama. I would say "Esther and them don't want me to go with them to get ice cream. Esther said my hair wasn't fixed right and I don't have a ribbon on, but we just going down the street. I don't have to dress up to go down the street." She would say, "You go back and tell Esther the ribbons don't have to match if your hair looks nice and it's plaited up and your hands are clean. Tell her I said that if the girls are going down the street to get ice cream, they are to take you along with them." [Laughs] That went on all of my life because Esther always wanted me to always match.

Being the baby, I started school early. I started school when I was three. You see, my mother worked at my father's Progress Printing House office and everybody else was already in school. I guess my mother thought she had had been mother long enough, so she sent me to school, and the principal was so impressed with me that first day because I knew my address, my sisters' names, my brothers' names, where my mother was working and I knew our phone number. He carried me around the school and told all the children, "Look at this little girl. This is the first time she has been to school and she knows her telephone number and she knows her address." He would ask me, "What is your telephone?" I would recite my telephone number. [Laughs] I finished high school when I was only sixteen and I never skipped a grade. I enjoyed that, but I never had any desire when I was in school to make this honor roll or that honor roll.

Oh, yes, I remember the games we played in Mississippi and particularly in Tennessee. We did more skating and bicycle riding than anything, and I remember the way I learned to ride a bicycle. Of course, my sister Esther was too prissy to ride a bicycle. [Laughs] I don't remember anything but a tricycle and that wasn't too much fun. You couldn't get any speed out of a little thing like that. [Laughs] My brother Augustus worked at a grocery store and he would ride a bicycle to work. As soon as he would get off his bicycle at home, I would get on the bicycle, and he would ride me. That was so much fun. He would say, "I can't keep riding you. I got to get back to work!" [Laughs] So he decided to teach me how to ride by myself. I remember our house was such that it was on level ground with a vacant lot in the back and a hill

that led to it. My brother said, "I'm going to ride you up here to this hill so you can learn." The hill was more like a slant in the driveway but to me it looked like a big hill! The garage was straight ahead. So, he put me on the bicycle, and I was headed straight for the garage and the door was open and I could see myself going through there and hitting the back wall, but I turned and I made it. [Laughs] I was in about fourth or fifth grade. I figured I was big enough and I wanted to learn, but girls didn't have bicycles. Only boys had bicycles. They also did skating and they played baseball. Really, I didn't do anything physical until high school level at Langston. I played basketball when I was in the eighth or ninth grade, and I joined because I thought it would be fun plus the fact that the teams would go to Bristol, Tennessee and other places.

I think we must have moved to Johnson City, Tennessee, when I was in the fourth grade. I started high school there at Langston High School. We moved to Atlanta in 1928, and I went to Booker T. Washington High. It's being remodeled now, and I don't think any students are at the school now. But that's where I went to high school. I finished there in 1930 and, many years later, I taught there. That was after I had finished Spelman. The school is up the street from this house. When I was there, the street was called Hunter Street, but it is Martin Luther King Drive now, so this house is on Martin Luther King, but when we moved here, the street was called Hunter Street.

My father's full name was William Alexander Scott, I, and he was from Mississippi. My mother's full name was Nancy Emmeline Southall, and she was born in East Liverpool, Ohio. My mother was quite graceful, and she grew up in high school as the only colored in her class. She was close to her father. His name was Daniel R. Southall, Jr. He would carry her to church all the time. They would go to a White church and to a Colored church. She met my father at a church. You see, churches in Liverpool would host students from Hiram College in Hiram, Ohio. I don't think it was all that far from Liverpool. The students would come to the churches and sell books and bibles, you see. And so, this time, when the students were coming, the minister told my mother, "There is a young man with them, I would like you to meet." And she said, "I would like to meet him." That young man was my father. He was the only colored person in the class, and being a girl my mother didn't have any social relations. She was an outstanding student of Latin. She led her class in Latin and was the only Black student in her

class. The teacher would say, "Who's going to translate today," and nobody would translate. Mama would stay up late at night studying. The teacher would say, "I guess we have to let Miss Emmaline translate today." Latin was her favorite subject.

My mother was very fair and she had brown hair. She always wore a switch. She was the oldest of eight children and she had only one sister. As I said, she was born in East Liverpool, Ohio. Oh, no, my father was not born in Ohio. He was from Mississippi and the way he got to Ohio, where he met my mother, is an interesting story. It has to do with my grandfather on my father's side. He and other slaves helped Union soldiers at the Battle of Vicksburg. What they did was to show the Union army a way through the swamps. The soldiers would not have known because they were from the North. That's what my grandfather and other slaves did. When the War ended, one of the Union generals said to the coloreds who helped them: "You all have been such a help to us. What can we do for you?" My grandfather said, "There's nothing you can do for me, but I have a son who I would like to get educated." That son was my father, and that is how it was arranged for my father to attend and graduate from Hiram College.

My mother's father owned property in Liverpool, but he wasn't born there. He was from Virginia where he was a slave. His name was Daniel Southall. He was the black son of the owner of the Southall Plantation. My grandfather had the job of managing the stables, which he did very well. During the Civil War, the "White" son went to the front and was shot off his horse and killed. My mother's father kept taking care of the stables while the master was at the front fighting. He did what he was taught to do and he carried on just as if he were White. When the war was over, he had done so well and since he had stayed with the stable and the "real" son had been killed, the master, his father, gave him land. I don't know how my mother's father ended up in Ohio. I have a picture of him; he looks just like one of my oldest brothers. I think he must have gone from Virginia to Canada and from Canada to Ohio. He must have married a White woman named Amanda. They had eight children, and my mother was the oldest in the family. She had six brothers and one sister. I remember that my mother's mother would come to visit us, and my older brothers would go to meet her at the train station and they would tease her: "Grandma, they're going to get you about riding with those White people in the car. Why would you come down in the White car?" She would say, "Well, I don't run the

trains. I give them my bags and I sit where they place me.” She had red hair, and she was whiter than most White people. I remember that. You know, my mother said that her father actually got sick when she told him she and my father were going to move South. He was a wealthy man, and he would give each of his children land when they married, and just the thought of his oldest daughter moving to Mississippi made him sick. One daughter of one of the brothers came here, and she went to Clark. She’s still living here. I don’t know how old my parents were when they married. I would like to go to Louisville and get a copy of their marriage license. That’s where they married. In Louisville, under the sponsorship of a Rev. Singleton.

They came to Jackson in 1910, and my father started a printing business. Actually, he had four jobs. He was always busy. He had the printing business. He was a minister. He was head of the Grand Worthy Counselor of the Court of Calanthe Lodge. So, my father was very busy. He worked so hard and that’s probably why he died at such a young age. He was not yet sixty when he died. And that was the year I went to Washington High School. That was in 1928. I remember when he would come home from one of his trips, and I would be so happy to see him. I would hug him and kiss him, and then I would tell him, “You got those stickers on your face.” I could feel those stickers. [Laughs] One time, he went out West, and that was a long trip, and when he got back, he had these stickers. I didn’t know that was a thing for men.

I adored my father. I adored my mother. And I loved growing up in my family. I can never remember being alone. Some people say I was spoiled, and maybe I was. [Laughs] My brother Aurelius loved rocking me more than I loved being rocked. I grew up around a lot of people. All of them were bigger and older than I was. [Laughs] I can never remember being afraid of anything. I can never remember being alone. I was close to my sister Esther because we were the closest in age. We shared the same bedroom in all of our houses until we moved into the house that was down the street from this one. That was our family home and I was nineteen when it was built. Then Esther had her bedroom and I had mine. There were three other bedrooms upstairs and a bath. I’ve never had any trouble sharing.

The first time I saw Atlanta was when my sister Vashti graduated from the laboratory school at Spelman, and that was also the year my brother Aurelius graduated from Morehouse. That was in 1925. I was born in 1916, so you can figure out the math and know old I was. My

mother and my father and Esther and I were in the car. Gus was driving the car. I remember when my father would tell Gus to pull over to the side and stop the car. My father would go into a gas station and talk to the White man. He would tell the man that he was Rev. Scott from Jackson, Mississippi, and he was going to Atlanta to see two of his children graduate from school. The White man would tell one of his workers, "This is Rev. Scott and he wants you to check his tires and his oil and show the ladies to the restroom." And we would go and continue on our trip. That was our first car. It was a Ford Model A. I was amazed that we could roll the windows up and down. If it rained, we didn't have to worry. We could just roll the window up. And that was amazing because colored people didn't have cars and we had been riding in surreys. They had blinds that you could pull up if it rained, but the car had windows, and I appreciated that.

When we came to Atlanta, we stayed with a lady called Ma Hadley. She had a house right across the street from Spelman. I couldn't imagine my sister Vashti had lived here for two years going to high school. I was just delighted. Atlanta was such a beautiful place. The houses and the flowers and the beautiful places colored people lived in. Of course, Atlanta was segregated when we came here, but I never had any racial confrontations. I remember, though, when I was in the car with W.A., and the car broke down and we had to get on the bus to come back into town. My brother had to get off the bus before I got off the bus, so he went up and told the conductor I was his sister and be sure that she gets off at such and such street so that she can catch the bus that goes down to Auburn Avenue. The man said okay. He would do that. So while W.A. was up there talking, he just got off the bus at the front, and the man said, "Wait you can't do that!" W. A. said, "Well, I am already on the ground now." He just walked on and nothing happened, but something could have happened if the bus driver had been a racist and an idiot. He could have called the police and it would have been a scene.

We could never drink from the fountains. Mama would say, "Before you ever leave home, the first thing you do is to go to bathroom and wash your hands and know that you're not going to be sitting on these seats in public places." You didn't tell us there they don't have any seats for Colored people. That's the way she did it for us. Whenever we were going any place, we always go to the bathroom first and wash our hands and we didn't drink out of public fountains. It was a long time before I knew the difference between White and Colored because

there were so many light-skinned Colored people in my family and all around me. I don't remember when I realized there differences. And my parents never told me anything about how to approach White people.

I remember I was in grade school in Tennessee and the grade school was about three blocks down the street and my mother taught at the school. I also remember across the street from us some White people lived and they were so old and at night they would sit on the porch and smoke pipes. The lady would smoke a pipe and the man would smoke the pipe.

What was very interesting about it was that they had a grandson and this grandson was in grade school and the old people didn't know how to teach him. They would ask my mother to let the little grandson come over and do his homework with us and he would come over and we would all do homework together but we never played together. I can't ever remember playing with any White children. You see, some of the Colored people were as light as the White people and so growing up, White and Black, we just never discussed it.

Now, in Atlanta, I didn't have any problems with race and what not, you see, because I never went anywhere by myself. Somebody was always with me. I guess I was sheltered or something. And we always lived near the heart of the White businesses because, you see, Auburn Avenue leads right up to Peachtree Street. You could walk right into the heart of the city and just come back to Auburn. I never sat behind White people on the bus. The only bus I used was the one in the Colored neighborhood, and I wouldn't go beyond Auburn Avenue. When we shopped at stores downtown, they wouldn't let us try on hats unless they gave us something to put on your head before you tried on the hat. And Davison's didn't want us to try on shoes. But they would love for you to put stuff in the layaway.

My brothers started the first paper in 1928, and that was here in Atlanta and it was called The Atlanta World. W.A. went home to Johnson City, Tennessee to talk with our parents about starting a newspaper in Atlanta because he wanted Negroes to have inspiring news, you know, about what Negroes were doing. He wanted to prove to White people that Colored people could have an important business and could give jobs to other Colored people, you know? So, our parents said okay and they gave W.A. money to start the paper and he came back to Atlanta and started working on the newspaper. The first one came out in 1928, but my father never lived to see the paper. He died in 1928 several weeks before the first one was published. I

don't remember when the paper changed from Atlanta World to Atlanta Daily World, but that's what it was named. The Atlanta Daily World. I think my brother W.A. was a genius, and it was so tragic that he died at the age of 31. He was murdered here in Atlanta, and the man who murdered him was acquitted. That had to do with what W.A. was doing for the Black community. Would you believe the attorney who was defending the man who killed W.A. actually used the word "nigger" in the trial? He called W.A. a "nigger" that the White people were fortunate not to have to deal with anymore. That was very tragic and that was very hard on my family, especially my mother, but we didn't stop the paper.

The newspaper made for a lot of excitement in the family and because of the newspaper we met many famous people. My mother and my father met the first President Bush and Mrs. Barbara Bush, and so I met them. I met President Nixon and President Ford. I've been to the White House many times. In the early 1950's Emperor Haile Salasie of Ethiopia visited the U.S. and President Eisenhower invited my family down to Fort Benning, and Emperor Salasie brought two of his granddaughters on his visit. We spent the weekend as guests of the President with the Emperor and his granddaughters. One was tall, and the other one was short. Both were extremely beautiful young women.

Mrs. Bethune stayed with us in our house down the street whenever she came to Atlanta. She came to Atlanta to see her grandson graduate from the School of Social Work at Atlanta University. Mrs. Bethune was something! My son and I were her guests at her home at Bethune-Cookman College on several occasions in Daytona Beach. My mother was a very close friend of Mrs. Bethune and she and Mrs. Bethune often vacationed together in Cuba during the late 1940s. My mother was also a founding member of the National Council of Negro Women, and that's how I met Dorothy Height. Oh, I've met so many wonderful people! And my mother believed in community service. That's where I got involved in different organizations. I helped establish the Southwest Community Hospital and Senior Social Services. I was also the first Colored woman invited to join the Downtown Atlanta YMCA Board of Trustees.

I started at Spelman in 1933, and graduated in 1937. I thought Spelman was the most beautiful place I had ever seen. We did a lot of courting around the fountain. [Smiles] I lived in Morgan Hall on the other side of the campus. After Spelman, I went to Atlanta University for one year. I guess it was just one year. I was so through with school when I finished at

Atlanta University with a Masters in Business Administration. After AU, I taught at Washington High School for a short time and I earned \$80.00 a month. Laughs]. I quit teaching and in 1942 I had my first and only child, a son named James Russell Simmons, Jr. after his father. I started working at the newspaper in 1943. I stayed there a long time. I didn't leave until 1998. I left then to care for my husband.

I have five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren with a sixth on the way. They keep me happy, but I was happy before I had grandchildren. I have always been happy. Even when I was growing up with my sisters and my brothers, I was happy. I guess I am happy because I have never been alone and I have always felt loved.

Do I see myself as a southern lady? Yes. I like that. I like being called a southern lady.