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Baseball's Oldest Old-Timer Opens a Window

By ALAN SCHWARZ September 26, 2006

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla., Sept. 20 — Silas Simmons was handed a photograph and asked if he recognized anyone in it. He fixed his eyes on the sepia stares and moved his curled fingers over the glass and frame, soaking in the faces for more than 20 silent seconds.

It was a picture of the 1913 Homestead Grays, a primordial Pittsburgh-area baseball team that played before the Negro leagues were even born. His mind, Simmons said, needed time to connect the faces to positions to names. He was entitled to the delay; next month, he will turn 111 years old.

Simmons, known as Si, was born on Oct. 14, 1895 — the same year as Babe Ruth and Rudolph Valentino, and before F. Scott Fitzgerald and Amelia Earhart. He played at the highest level of black baseball while a boy named Satchel Paige was still in grade school.

That Simmons is still living was unknown to baseball researchers until this summer, when a genealogist near the nursing home where he lives in St. Petersburg alerted a Negro leagues expert.

A member of the Center for Negro League Baseball Research confirmed a baseball historian's dream: that Simmons was indeed a man who had pitched and played the outfield in the equivalent of the black major leagues on and off from about 1912 through at least 1929, and that he had played against such stars as Pop Lloyd, Judy Johnson and Biz Mackey.

Lloyd was like "the second Honus Wagner," Simmons said. "Judy Johnson, they called him Pie Traynor."

Simmons added: "It was a thrill to watch players like that. After a while they were in the big leagues, playing ball, which you thought would never come. But eventually it did come. And that was the greatest thing of my life when I saw these fellows come up and play big-league baseball." Simmons is not the oldest-known living American — that title belongs to Lizzie Bolden of Memphis, who turned 116 in August. The oldest living person who played Major League Baseball is Rollie Stiles, 99, who pitched for the St. Louis Browns in the early 1930's.

Confined to a wheelchair but reasonably communicative, Simmons has no major health issues beyond his extraordinary age. He is an avid sports fan who watches many Tampa Bay Devil Rays games on the television in his room — "I like young players," he said — and even attended a Devils Rays game at Tropicana Field this summer with his church group.

Friends of his at the Westminster Suncoast retirement community said Simmons rarely talked about his Negro leagues career. Dorothy Russell, 90, said: "When we played volleyball — with balloons — he said, 'You know, I used to play baseball.' But he didn't make it sound so spectacular. And I didn't know enough to ask him about it."

Negro league researchers did. Wayne Stivers, who spearheaded the fact-finding committee that led to 17 people associated with the Negro leagues being inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame this summer, said: "We were aware there was a Si Simmons and that he played. But we didn't know he was still alive. We figured, 110, no — this man is not alive. My reaction was, 'We need to talk with him immediately.'"

Simmons's first games were not in the Negro leagues as they are now remembered. The first established circuit, the Negro National League, started in 1920. Before that, local all-black teams would

play against one another, against all-white teams or occasionally against groups of big leaguers barnstorming in the off-season.

Having grown up in a central Philadelphia row house on 17th and Bainbridge Streets, Simmons was a left-handed pitcher who was signed by the nearby Germantown Blue Ribbons, a well-regarded team. He said he started pitching for the Blue Ribbons at age 16 or 17, meaning 1912 or 1913. Box scores and articles from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* describe the 5-foot-10 Simmons as routinely striking out 10 or more batters while getting a hit or two a game.

Simmons had difficulty remembering all the teams he played on. While unable to explain in detail, he indicated that players, particularly pitchers, were often picked up by other teams for brief stretches, so he might have played select games for other teams as well. (Experts confirmed that this practice was commonplace.) Researchers have uncovered box scores and game recaps with his name from many years throughout the 1910's and beyond.

Two box scores from 1926 show Simmons pitching in relief for the New York Lincoln Giants of the Eastern Colored League. He also played at least one game for the Negro National League's Cuban Stars in 1929.

"I had a good curveball and a good fastball," said Simmons, who added that he was paid about \$10 a game. He said that in his prime he might have been good enough to play in the major leagues, but did not consider asking for a tryout. "It was useless to try," he said.

"A lot of good black players, but they couldn't play in the league," he continued. "So that was it. After Jackie Robinson came up, they found out how good they were and started recruiting. You have to give them a chance to play.

"Negroes had a lot of pride. They felt like baseball, that was the greatest thing in the world for them. You had some great players in those days. Biz Mackey. Pop Lloyd. Judy Johnson. Scrappy Brown, the shortstop. We played against all those players."

Simmons ended his baseball career soon after 1929. He had five children and settled into life as a porter and eventually as an assistant manager at Rosenbaum's Department Store in Plainfield, N.J. He retired to St. Petersburg in 1971 and lived with his second wife, Rebecca, until she died seven years ago. Having outlived his children, he moved into Westminster soon afterward.

His discovery has caused a buzz in baseball's large community of historians. Dr. Layton Revel, the founder of the Center for Negro League Baseball Research near Dallas, took particular interest and flew to St. Petersburg this summer to interview Simmons and confirm his birth date, career and stories. Revel was so excited that he plans to throw a party for Simmons on Oct. 14, with 30 to 40 former Negro leaguers — including the Hall of Famer Monte Irvin — gathering to celebrate his 111th birthday and hear about the even older days.

Most of those men played in the Negro leagues decades after Simmons, primarily in the 1940's and 1950's as the circuits were decimated by players jumping to major league clubs. Chances are that no face will look even vaguely familiar to Simmons.

But as Simmons held that old sepia photo of the 1913 Homestead Grays for those long 20 seconds, he gradually decided that one face did ring a bell. He fixed on it and pointed his weathered hand at the player sitting in the middle row, second from the right. He said nothing as he pointed.

Who is that? he was asked.

"That's Si Simmons," he said.

Really? Was he sure?

"That's me," he declared. "Oh, we had good times."