African Americans in Winslow: Scenes From Our History

The Simmons Family

Ralph H. (1909-1991) and Bessie Simmons married in 1942 and raised two sons. Bessie was originally from Texas, and she worked as a nurse there and in California before moving to Winslow in 1940. Together they opened Ralph & Bessie's Bar-B-Q Pit & Café on East Second Street around 1950.

Ralph & Bessie's was beloved by the people of Winslow for their Southern food and warm hospitality: "They had a way of always making you feel welcome and like you were family," said Bea Elzey. "No matter how busy they were, Bessie and Ralph always had a smile on their faces," said Vicky Espinosa.

After they sold the business around 1975, Ralph became the first African American resident elected to Winslow City Council and served as Vice Mayor in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bessie became head chef at the Happy Senior Citizens Center, feeding lunch to the community's seniors on site and through home delivery. At the time she said, "We have good meals . . . I can cook all kinds of food. But my specialty is pies!"

She continued, "Ralph is just the same now as he was when we were first married. We've always had a good time together." After Ralph passed away in 1991, Bessie was remarried to Lucius Scott until his death in 2001. Bessie moved to the Payson Care Center in 2015, where she is "a total joy to everyone in our facility, including other residents' family members," said Nurse Wesley Still.

Clockwise: The Simmons with friend Margie in 1965; Ralph & Bessie's Bar-B-Q Pit & Café on East Second Street; Ralph & Bessie at work; The city broke ground for Clear Creek improvements on April 3, 1979. Ralph was one of the chief negotiators on the project. Left to right: Mike Hendrix, Jack Lane, Arturo de la Cerda, Lee Dover, Pat Engelhardt, Ralph Simmons, Sherwood Rodgers, Audy Wilson, and Bob Chacon; Bessie at work in 1959.

Acknowledgments: Additional information from "Personality of the Week: Bessie Simmons," *Winslow Mail*, 7/27/1978; "Lucius C. Scott Obituary," *Navajo Hopi Observer*, 9/26/01; Life Care Centers of America, https://lcca.com/news/articles/107-year-old-resident-at-Payson-Care-Center-has-legacy-of-hospitality. Images except below right courtesy of Clifford Renfro.