



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Philip Simmons,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Philip Simmons on April 4 and 5, 2001. The interview took place in Charleston, South Carolina and was conducted by Mary Douglas for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

## Interview

MARY DOUGLAS: This is Mary Douglas at the artist's studio in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 4, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

I'm going to start by talking to you about your history a little bit. Mr. Simmons, when and where were you born?

PHILIP SIMMONS: I was born on Daniels Island, an island just east of Charleston.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what year were you born?

MR. SIMMONS: 1912.

MS. DOUGLAS: And could you describe your childhood?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. I could do that. Pretty clear. When I came here, my grandparents, the little Indian lady up there [referring to a photograph on the wall], I born in her house over on Daniels Island. She sent me here to Charleston for an education. I was eight years old when I came here. I came here strictly -- they had better schools in Charleston than they had over on that island. That's why I was sent here, for an education to start off with.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, were you living here in Charleston full time to go to school?

MR. SIMMONS: Full time to go to school. I moved here. Sent me here with all my little baggage, and I could bring that in a little handbag -- clothes.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you go back home in summers?

MR. SIMMONS: Oh, go back home in the summer and work on the farm for fifty cents a day until school open, when school open here in Charleston, which would be in September. I made enough on that farm to buy all of my clothes, my little pocket change and school clothes, in June back on that farm. Those same people there, my same, my grandmother and my grandfather. I would come back to Charleston to my mother. My mother live here and work here.

MS. DOUGLAS: In Charleston?

MR. SIMMONS: Uh huh.

MS. DOUGLAS: And, so, did you have brothers and sisters?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. I got three brothers and three [?] five sisters.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did they come to Charleston, too, to go to school?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, they were born here. I'm my mother's first child. When I was living on Daniels Island and my mother was living over there.

MS. DOUGLAS: What was your life like on Daniels Island?

MR. SIMMONS: Just like any other kid grew up on the farm and had to work on the farm. Daniels Island was a place noted for farming, fishing, and hunting. That's all went on on Daniels Island.

MS. DOUGLAS: It must have been a big change from Charleston then.

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. It was a real big change and I had to change with those times. After coming to Charleston, you know, most boys eight years old they want to do something to earn, want to be independent of their parents, which I did. And I got a shoeshine box on Sunday, and I sold papers and shined shoes on Sunday to make me a few dollars. I wanted to be independent of my parents, which I did. And happy for it, too. I'm very happy for it.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, when you were in school here in Charleston, were you studying basic things like math and English?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, we study hygiene, geography, and other books like that, arithmetic, I guess you would call it math today.

MS. DOUGLAS: What motivated your interest in blacksmithing?

MR. SIMMONS: Okay, that's a long story. I so often like to tell it to others. I kind of thought I could have made more money by going to blacksmith shop. Eight-years-old boy, the old man Peter Simmons, the live-in guy, he wouldn't take me in the blacksmith shop. That time, back then, the early, early '20s --

[Phone rings, interrupts.]

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you were talking about Peter Simmons and how you got interested in --

MR. SIMMONS: -- how I got into blacksmith and got interested in the blacksmith.

Yeah, well, like I said, when I came, a eight-years-old boy, Peter Simmons had the blacksmith shop here on Calhoun Street. He would not hire me because I was too young, like most kids. And I told you I got a shoeshine box and start selling papers out there. I done that until -- but, I keep bothering him, I would -- blacksmith shop on the way going to school; I had to pass by the shop every morning going to school. And then I come back from school in the evening rather, I would walk by and look at it and still ask, "You ready to hire me?" And I was getting older too, eight, nine, ten years old. I guess he got so that he want to make me comfortable by telling me, "Well, come back when you 13 years old; I'll hire you." And I done just that. I was 13 on a Wednesday. And when I came back from school that Wednesday, I told him, I said, "Mr. Peter, I'm 13 today, Wednesday." He said, "Come in tomorrow." That was Thursday. And you know I stayed in that shop up until the other day my health got bad, and that's about 78 years.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you took over his shop, the same shop?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah. I inherited it from him.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's quite a legacy.

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, it is. Many days I sat in that shop and I thought about the past and how I got in the shop. That exposure means so much to me. Even going to Washington, D.C., going there and working among people from all over this country, out of the country. And people I work aside up there at the Smithsonian, people from England, France, China, Japan, Africa, you name the country, and I wouldn't give nothing for that exposure working aside those talented people. I thought when I first went up there, I was going to be the only pebble on the beach. But, I found out there are people up there with talent out this country. And that exposure I wouldn't give nothing for. If I had went in the military service, all of the branches, I couldn't have got the exposure I got by going to Washington in 1976 -- they called me back in 1977. And 1982, I went back and I had chance to have the lunch with Ronald Reagan. And he greeted me for being one of the honorees.

MS. DOUGLAS: Was this for National Folk Awards?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, that's right. That's right. I got all of it on the wall up there.

MS. DOUGLAS: I see you have a lot of awards up there.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, I got it from the master, they give me that from the Smithsonian Institute. In 1976 I was asked to come up there by John Vlach. And I said, "John, what you want me to do when I come up to Washington?" He said, "Anything you want to do. Just do the same thing you're doing in Charleston." I say, "I gonna need all of my equipment here." He said: "Well, bring 'em along with ya. We'll pay for it. Haul it up here." But I made all my pieces comfortable in here that you saw in the office. But I went up there in '76 and I start this gate and I didn't finish it because working up there -- tourists, you know, during the year a lot of tourists visit that park. Thousands, thousands came by and look at this gate and ask a lot of questions. So, my time, the time I had, was kind of limited because I didn't have but two weeks up there.

MS. DOUGLAS: You're talking about the Festival of American Folklife that they have out on the Mall --

MR. SIMMONS: Mall --

MS. DOUGLAS: -- in Washington.

MR. SIMMONS: That's where I worked.

MS. DOUGLAS: You were actually out there demonstrating and making --

MR. SIMMONS: Different things.

MS. DOUGLAS: -- in front of everybody.

MR. SIMMONS: Everybody! That's what it's all about -- thousands of people come by, day by day, and ask questions. So I didn't finish it. So when I came back, my two weeks are up, and I came back to Charleston, I brought it back with me. And they called me back in 1977, right in June and say: "Simmons, you finish that gate you was making up here?" I said, "No, I just bring it here and put it

one side in the corner." They say: "Would you bring it back up here and finish it?" In 1977, I took it back there and I finish it. And that's what they got all excited, you know, what I work with, this things that I work with, they don't see how I could make such a -- made a lot impression on the spectators up there, too.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you have a name for that gate?

MR. SIMMONS: Just what you've seen. That's the name you got me, the star, the fish, and the quarter moon. That's the quarter moon here. The moon is waxing then, and then the fish I make -- I call it "The Star and Fish Gate."

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you know where that gate is today?

MR. SIMMONS: In Washington, D.C. They own it; they bought it, and they paid me for it, me going all over the country. We had it here on a surprise on my birthday. People hear I made that gate up there. You know, when the people here in Charleston seen it, or South Carolina, in the magazine, *Southern Living* magazine, and they read it and they got on me. "See here, you made a national piece, and we here don't know anything about it. And you live in Charleston, you live in South Carolina, you live in the United States, and you made the gate." And I said, "Well, they bought it off of me. And become their property, become the Smithsonian property." And they say, "Well, we sure wanna see it." And that's all they said to me.

On my birthday, about four years ago, they had the birthday down to the gallery. And I was invited to my birthday party. [Laughter.] I was invited to MY birthday party! Instead I invite them, they invite me MY birthday party! And they sent to the Smithsonian Institute; they went up there and got it, put insurance on it and everything and bring it down here on my birthday -- a surprise, I didn't know anything about it.

MS. DOUGLAS: This gate?

MR. SIMMONS: This gate right here. They check it out there and put insurance and brought it. And since that thing went back to New York, Syracuse, New York, and had it down in Harlem, and they had it in California. I think -- I don't know whether he's still touring the country now or not. But, I know they're touring the city now, you know.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, when you came to Charleston as a child and saw Peter Simmons's shop, was he the only blacksmith?

MR. SIMMONS: No, we had 15 here right in this small peninsula. And everybody had plenty of work. The blacksmith had plenty of work. Some had several helpers.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, that was one reason why you were, you thought you could do blacksmithing, because it was a lively trade? Or -- ? Is that one reason you were interested in it, blacksmithing?

MR. SIMMONS: No, you know, how come I went in that shop? Cause a lot of action been going on in that shop. The horses kicking up -- there's no wrought-iron gates like you see here today. No. The work of the blacksmith then is to shoe horses, to fire them, to shoe horse, broke wagon wheels, repair those wheels, fix the carriages, and you name 'em, that's what the work of the blacksmith was. Work for the farmers in the plantation -- was no wrought-iron gate like you see here today. No, never. And why I wanted to go in that blacksmith shop as a eight-years-old boy because a lot of action was going on. The horse was kicking up and they put the twists on 'em, calm the horse down to put the shoes on the feet. Sparks was flying all over the shop -- shop back there right now.

Sparks was flying all over the shop. I being a boy eight-nine years old, I said, that's where I want to be. And I asked the boss, Peter Simmons, I say, "Would you hire me?" He say, "Well, you too young now." He say, "But, when you get 13, you come back." And just like I said, I was 13 on a Wednesday and I came from school and stop in the blacksmith shop and let the blacksmith know I'm 13, would he hire me now? He said, "Well, come in tomorrow." Tomorrow was Thursday. And I stayed in that shop 79 years. Seventy from that day -- 79 years. That was in 1925. That's amazing. I fall in love with it as I working there. I fell in love.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's very hard work, though.

MR. SIMMONS: Hard work but once you start doing it, you love it, it become easy. I love it, love the whole shop. And the whole shop serve five generation anyway. Four now because my cousin back there now -- four generation.

MS. DOUGLAS: Where was that shop?

MR. SIMMONS: On Calhoun Street. I can remember on Calhoun Street I start. But that shop be moved eight places.

MS. DOUGLAS: Eight?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, this the eighth place that we move.

MS. DOUGLAS: Here on Blake Street?

MR. SIMMONS: Blake Street.

MS. DOUGLAS: Eighth place?

MR. SIMMONS: Eighth place is Blake Street.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, so you apprenticed -- what was the apprenticeship like with Peter Simmons?

MR. SIMMONS: Just learn the name of the tools. How to make the fire up. How to keep the tools in the proper place. And I done that until I stayed there long enough to learn to do things around the shop on the forge and the fire.

MS. DOUGLAS: On the fire?

MR. SIMMONS: How to make up the fire, how to keep the fire going, the name of the tools. The old man wanted tool, he asked for a hammer, don't you hand him a swage. He ask for a swage, don't you hand him a hammer because he knows the tool, and I learned those tools. Less than a year, I knew all of the name of the tools and everything.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, were you responsible for building the fire?

MR. SIMMONS: I responsible to build the fire, keep the shop clean, sweep it up, and -- But, I didn't do that too long before I learn how to do certain things in that shop 'cause I wanted to beat on that anvil too like the old man; catch the fire, put the iron in the fire, and get it hot. So, in a year time, I was beating and beating iron out that fire. In four years time, I knew myself when I'm pretty good.

MS. DOUGLAS: So was your apprenticeship over in four years?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, we call it over, but I didn't learn the trade, because, you know, as you work in the blacksmith shop or in any other craft shop, you learn as you do. Kids come in and ask, "Mr. Simmons, how long it take you to learn from -- " -- students from the school, they come and they'll ask a lot of questions -- "Mr. Simmons, how long it take you to learn the blacksmith trade?" And that was a good question 'cause I did go into metallurgy; they want to know how long to stay in they got there, before they'll learn. So, I say, "Well, I was in here." At that particular time, I was in here I think about -- well, let me see. And I says, "You never learn; I'm still learning." I said, "If you're coming here to learn the trade, you should know your way around pretty good in four years. In four years, you just start learning. And you should know your way around, know all your tools and know how to do certain things in the shop, you should in four years."

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I think when you learned blacksmithing, that doing an apprenticeship was probably the only way to do it.

MR. SIMMONS: That's the only way. That's the only way to do it. See somebody else do it, look at them, and ask questions. I didn't have to put anything on paper. Didn't take a test in it; never did. My test was when I get to feel myself comfortable. Old man tell me in the shop: "I'm going away, make certain thing, make this or make the other thing." That's my test.

MS. DOUGLAS: Maybe you could talk about the shop moving away from doing repair work and working on wagons and horses to doing the ornamental ironwork. How did that come about?

MR. SIMMONS: I had to make those changes, 'cause the horses was going out; the cars was taking place of the horse and wagon. And all I knew about cars is ride in 'em. And the cars was coming. We would say, when I first went in the shop in 1920, we would see a car in the streets once or twice a year. Everything -- when being poor, all the delivery in Charleston -- vegetable, fruits, and other things was being delivered, the merchant had horse and wagon. And after things have changed, cars, machines, and I have to make changes. People will come by the shop just before I start doing wrought iron and say, "Hey, Philip, how you doing?" "I say I'm doing [fine]." "Did you heard the blacksmith is becoming now a lost art?" And they even tell me what happening. Mr. Thomas and Howard be buying trucks and putting the wagons away. They named these merchants. And that's what was happening. And I knew it with myself, 'cause I was right here to see the changes. But, I had several changes. I had too much of a setback. But, I learned something from those changes.

When people start buying the car, you know what I start doing? Making the trailer to pull behind the car. The trailer being made just like a wagon. You only put rubber tires on 'em, and put one shaft in the middle and put it behind the car. That's the same wagon.

But, listen to this story! For 14 years I was making trailers to pull behind the cars. Guess what happened? The machines, the factory started turning out trailers half as cheaper than I could have made them. Half! Half as cheaper that I could have made them. So you see what happened now? That's how come you asked the question. That's how come I had to turn to wrought-iron work. And so far as the pattern, Charleston was a role model for that pattern, 'cause a lot of wrought-iron gates and all was here.

Finally people start taking on the wedding [?] gate, and I start making here right here in the front of you, if you look over here on this -- this, this the first wrought-iron gate I made in 1948.

MS. DOUGLAS: My goodness!

MR. SIMMONS: So, you see, trailers -- the factory started making the trailers. Now, listen to this! No

more trailers. So, then I had to turn to something else. Turn to wrought-iron gate. This gate is -- you believe that this gate is in Charleston today? I made it and put it up here for a man by the name of Jack Cartier. He is a merchant. He ran a clothing store on King Street. And you go behind that same clothing store -- it's still here -- in the parking lot, and you will see the same gate, which I'm so proud about. I'm real proud about that, 'cause that tell me, Philip, you can go ahead and make gates; you can forget about the trailers and the horse wagon. And I -- and this the first gate that I made. And you believe this the first gate? It look like now the last gate I made. I had a good insight 'cause Charleston was a role model so far for patterns. I had to go by in Charleston -- that exposure between the horse and wagon, the trailers, into the wrought-iron fences and gate.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you got some of your design ideas from what was already here in Charleston.

MR. SIMMONS: Exactly right. A lot of this stuff had come from Europe, and they had a blacksmith here by the name of Warner. But at the same time, coming to Charleston I had a chance to see all that stuff before I start shoeing horses -- building wagons and ploughs and wheelwrights, they called it, shoeing the horses, all those kind of things. But making those three changes, I could have got upset like some of the others and walked on and went done other type of work. Some people quit the blacksmith shop, went in New York and some went away; some died, and some got other jobs.

But let me tell you why I stick to that trade. The blacksmithing didn't walk out like some of the others. I had loved that. I learned that trade, and since I was in that shop that 70 years, I learned how to create things on my own. I look at the things God created and made them. Look at it. You see the snake get out there. That come from creation. The bird. The fish. I got the palmetto-tree gate, the pecan-tree gate, the snake gate, and all kind of gate.

And the other day I made the heart gate. Let me tell you what that be. Now that idea come from the heart. In Charleston, we got all types of gates, wrought-iron gates. And at that particular time, we didn't had a heart gate. Now, we got one now at the garden. That's where the idea came to me; say, Philip, why don't you make a heart gate? [Referring to the Philip Simmons's Gardens on the grounds of St. John's Reformed Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina] We don't have -- we got all types and designs of the gates in Charleston; we don't have a heart, and that's where that idea came to me so plain. So, just sit down and think about how God created these things, you know -- that exposure is so plain, got so plain and so exciting to me.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, most of the ironwork in Charleston didn't have that kind of imagery in it, did it? Like with animals and -- the existing iron gates. It was probably a lot more abstract.

MR. SIMMONS: No. I had a chance to continue my knowledge.

MS. DOUGLAS: So this gate here, when you made it, it was a big change, I guess, from what you'd been doing -- to scale up to that kind of project?

MR. SIMMONS: Big scale. But that particular time, I took my eyes. I used it. I used it very forcibly, looking at things. And after I made that gate, then I kind of venture out, start thinking and looking at creation and things that I see with my own eye, things that above in the air and the water and the ground and you name 'em -- thoughts just try flowing over me.

MS. DOUGLAS: So your ideas start coming from nature and --

MR. SIMMONS: Nature.



MS. DOUGLAS: -- and your environment.

MR. SIMMONS: Nature, yeah. You see how important that is? How God made these things? Created it, and I made it into different things. That knowledge got to say come from our above, too, you know?

MS. DOUGLAS: Has that source of inspiration changed over the years?

MR. SIMMONS: With me?

MS. DOUGLAS: In your work? Looking at nature?

MR. SIMMONS: I always look at nature; that will never change. Even up until the day they come with the shovel, I try to branch out and do things I haven't seen, just come to me in my mind, like a lot of the stuff I see in Charleston made by somebody. Well, I start thinking after I branches out, start, that's kind of educational thing to me -- just to study God nature and how it work.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about this drawing here on your desk? Is that a project you're getting ready to do?

MR. SIMMONS: That's a drawing from Daniels Island. That logo you see up there, I already made that. I already made this, and it's over there on the island. They want me to copy it and put it somewhere else on that island. Put it on the park.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is that the palmetto tree?

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's like your gate for the South Carolina State Museum -- the palmetto logo?

MR. SIMMONS: That's their logo. That represent the state.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's beautiful.

MR. SIMMONS: I add a bird; the bird and the tree represent the state of South Carolina. That's South Carolina logo, too -- palmetto tree.

MS. DOUGLAS: It's a beautiful gate. Was that a commission, that gate?

MR. SIMMONS: That's a commission. They gave me a commission to do it. And they didn't tell me how -- what to put in it. But, I usually ask the question. I like to see the customer commission me to do any piece for them. I like to sit down and draw it, let them see what they look like. Sometime they don't take the first sketch nor the second. I had customer -- I had to make three sketches for them before they approve it.

MS. DOUGLAS: For this one?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: I've seen that gate. It's very impressive.

MR. SIMMONS: I made two sketches and give it to them. And they took the second one. So, you see, the customer in selecting these things, they plays a big part, too!

MS. DOUGLAS: But is most of your work commission work, then?

MR. SIMMONS: Most of my work today is commission work, either for the school, factory, home, library; or sometime I have the opportunity to sketch it, and sometime they brings their own sketches. But, most time it be left to me.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, it's very creative.

MR. SIMMONS: And that's the time -- yeah, you took the word away. That's what I think is very creative.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think have been your most important commissions?

MR. SIMMONS: The national piece I just showed you.

MS. DOUGLAS: The one from the Folklife Festival?

MR. SIMMONS: Folklife Festival. That festival make -- going up there those three times to Washington, D.C., and demonstrate what I was doing back in Charleston, I wouldn't give nothing for that trip. Like I fore said, if I had been in the four branches of service, I couldn't have got the exposure that I got by going up to Washington in 1976, '77, and '82. And what was exciting when I went back in '82 and got this national award here.

MS. DOUGLAS: That was for honors?

MR. SIMMONS: The certificate, yes, honors. Very exciting. Everything was exciting to me. Even having lunch with Ronald Reagan up there. That was exciting that I ever thought I was sitting in the White House and having lunch with the President of the United States. I didn't think that when I was on the farm working then on. But I tell this kid in school, "Go ahead and do your things while you're in school. You don't know where you gonna end up."

But, those three setback I had, like I fore said? What encourage me, you know, after the horse went out and I couldn't shoe no horses? The trailers -- the factory started making the trailers cheaper than I could have.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MR. SIMMONS: One has overcome. I has three changes in that old blacksmith shop. I change three times to survive.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, certainly you made a huge success out of obstacles.

MR. SIMMONS: That's right. That's right.

MS. DOUGLAS: Were there other blacksmiths doing ornamental ironwork when you started doing it here in Charleston?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, but they weren't operating then. They had ran out of business too.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh.

MR. SIMMONS: Which I heard about; never seen it when I came to Charleston. Only thing I see here is the gates. Some came from out of town; some was made here.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, was most of your work by word of mouth?

MR. SIMMONS: Word of mouth -- that's what it's all about -- word of mouth. All this -- all the drawing is freehand drawing. I never take mechanical drawing, never take it up in school.

MS. DOUGLAS: Maybe I could ask you to talk about your process a little bit. Do you -- where do you go from this sketch when you make a piece?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, after completing it, sometime I put it up and sometime the owner who commission me to do it, they install it.

MS. DOUGLAS: The drawing. But, when you start to actually make the gate, do you make full-scale drawings or how do you go about making the gate itself?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, I'm -- sometime I make full-scale drawings. Sometime I just make a picture and let the customer go look at it and go from there.

MS. DOUGLAS: I know some blacksmiths do chalk drawings on the ground.

MR. SIMMONS: I done it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is that the way you work?

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh. I don't work like that now. I get catch in the place where I don't have paper and pencil and talking to a customer or talking to someone who commission me to make gate or make a piece, any kind of piece, and then -- put chalk up until the day I had it in my pocket.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you had apprentices in your shop?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes.

[Phone rings, interrupts.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, you were just talking to me a little bit about your apprentices. Did you start out having apprentices working for you?

MR. SIMMONS: When I first start, you get them -- use them part time. Later on, after I learn a lot about the trade, then I thought about hiring one permanent. I had about 10 apprentices. And I got two here still with me -- not with me, but still take the shop over.

MS. DOUGLAS: You've retired from making work now?

MR. SIMMONS: Everything.

MS. DOUGLAS: But, so, all along you've had someone helping you?

MR. SIMMONS: All along. All along.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, has the way you work changed over time before you retired?

MR. SIMMONS: Change?

MS. DOUGLAS: From when you started making, doing your own business, and then up until, say,

you retired, has the way you worked been pretty much the same, or has it changed?

MR. SIMMONS: Pretty much the same and I try to keep it -- my apprentices become permanent workers now. And I would like for they do it the same, the same ole way, and the same way I done it, to keep the ole history alive.

MS. DOUGLAS: I wanted to go back to getting you to describe how you make a gate, if you could do that for me -- for people that don't know anything about blacksmithing. You got your drawing, and then you do a layout on the floor, then you start. How does that go?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, if I'm doing -- let me say that if you commission me to make a piece or to make anything, I would like the apprentices to come on, come to be in on it -- the apprentice, I like for they to be in on it.

MS. DOUGLAS: On the meeting?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah. If they don't be in on the meeting together, then I make the sketch plain enough for they -- that I can put it in their hand that they can go ahead with it, that it will be plain enough, they will go ahead with it. But, as well as doing the live product, I like for the -- you know, I like to get it in their hand for they to see how it being done. So, many time I would never make a piece unless they here to see me start off, start with it. Even if they can't start, I would like to see them start apprentices. I don't require anything on paper, I doing it the same ole way the ole man done me, be in the shop while it being done.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, how do you attach the bars together? Are those welded or riveted?

MR. SIMMONS: Some riveted. I start off riveted. This gate here is the first gate I made. And this whole gate is riveted in 1948. No arc weld or electric weld on this at all. Because when I first came in the shop or the first blacksmith -- they didn't have arc weld. They had to rivet it.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, all the upright members are riveted to the cross members?

MR. SIMMONS: Riveted, riveted. Everything here is pointed and drill a hole and push it through and rivet it. Everything there is riveted. You're looking at that gate is exactly the way you looking at it, and that's exactly the way it is and the way it was made. Was riveted. You see the Cooper River bridge out there? No arc weld on that. All riveted.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you're -- you've got the forged members that are curved. And those are forged, right?

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh, that's right. That's the forged.

MS. DOUGLAS: And then the straight members -- is that bar stock or --

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, bar stock. You got a good eye there. That's right, bar stock.

MS. DOUGLAS: I studied metals a little bit.

MR. SIMMONS: You sure did -- what you're saying here, bar stock. You use the word as first that riveted, 'cause people don't know that name coming here. And who got a little idea about it, they're thinking about the arc weld and not rivet.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about that gate on the left there with the window grills on the left and right?

MR. SIMMONS: Right here?

MS. DOUGLAS: Yes. When did you do those?

MR. SIMMONS: I do that right after I finish this.

MS. DOUGLAS: Wow, those are very ornate.

MR. SIMMONS: 'Bout five years later -- after I made this, five years later, I made that. This gate here is to keep the people out -- this at the parking lot to the store. The store's on King Street and this is on Joy Street. When you go to park, you have to in the parking lot there and walk through that gate. He asked me to make that gate, and I made it for him just to keep the kids out or keep people from prowling at night in there. And later I put this to the patio -- you don't have to have that there. You just set out there and enjoy that gate -- just look at it while you're eating or something on the patio -- this gate here.

MS. DOUGLAS: Some of these pieces --

MR. SIMMONS: These here made for a different person, a different family. This gate here and this one and this one made for different family. This piece of grille and this gate and these two here made for another customer.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do the pieces -- when you design a piece does it tie into the setting?

MR. SIMMONS: Tie into the setting, that's the only way you could complete it -- tie it proper into the setting. This frame is made -- this frame here is made -- that's all right to go around -- a bar across there, a bar across the top. And you make these pieces and set it in.

MS. DOUGLAS: Let me ask you about your studio that's here now on Blake Street. How long has it been here on Blake Street?

MR. SIMMONS: I was on Blake Street here 40 years.

MS. DOUGLAS: Forty? Goodness.

MR. SIMMONS: And I was other place about twice 40 years, is 80 -- I was a blacksmith 40 -- 79 years. You subtract that 79 years from 2001; that'll tell you exactly between my age and time I came in this shop.

MS. DOUGLAS: 1922. So, have you -- when you've had your shops in different places -- have you lived in the same place where your shop has been?

MR. SIMMONS: No, this is the only place -- I love where the shop is; I love here.

MS. DOUGLAS: So when you live nearby, you can pretty much go in and out of the workshop whenever you want to.

MR. SIMMONS: In and out and knock off as late you want and just walk from the shop to the house.

MS. DOUGLAS: What kind of hours have you kept before you retired? What would be a typical working day?

MR. SIMMONS: Five days, from Monday to Friday. But now the hours are different. Sometime I feel like working ten hours, I work ten. I feel like working eight hours, I work eight. Six hours, for how I'm feeling. But, early part of my life, at my age between 55 and 60, I work every day and make long hours.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you just recently retired then from smithing?

MR. SIMMONS: I just retired in nineteen-twenty- -- nineteen-ninety-, let's say, five --

MS. DOUGLAS: So about six years ago?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, about six years ago. I've retired from the hard work now, but I was doing lace work and drawing for those guys.

MS. DOUGLAS: You're still working?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, was still working doing light things that I can do -- Now I can't do anything even light now. My health don't allow me to.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think are the -- you know, we were just looking at this gate you made in the '30s, the first gate you made.

MR. SIMMONS: '40.

MS. DOUGLAS: '43?

MR. SIMMONS: '40. Around 40 years I start and I finish it in '48 anyway.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think the similarities are between that work and your most recent work, or the differences?

MR. SIMMONS: Big difference. Before I -- this type of work, wrought iron, artistic work, I had to learn my way around just like I am seeing a lot of it, like I was able to do this first drawing, because, you know, I was changing one thing to the other that I was familiar with. When I [was] building wagons for the horse and all, and here the horses went out and the cars came in, and I want to keep up with the time, at least some of the things that I would choose, you know. To make trailers, I said if the cars was there and going to use trailers.

MS. DOUGLAS: But, I mean -- I guess what I meant was, like, say, between that piece -- your first gate -- and this gate -- do you feel like there's a big difference?

MR. SIMMONS: Huh, no difference. I see it the same in my mind. The same way. But now I have launched out creative -- I have left to the creating both. And both the same -- I made for the customer. Things people have seen somewhere. Very few people never seen a gate. But they've seen it somewhere. But now after I start making the gate, then I want to get away from the other fella's creation and do my own. That's why I went to the air -- air, water, and ground.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, what is it about steel that inspires you -- that makes it an important material to work with?

MR. SIMMONS: What make it important?

MS. DOUGLAS: You know, creatively what is it about steel that you like?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, I use the steel that -- let me give it to you this way. It's different type of steel. When I start using the steel for the wrought iron, I would get the steel that the factory recommend. Today -- this 70-some years -- today I'm using mild steel. And there's another steel called wrought iron, too. But, that's hard to find. That's real hard to find. So, I use American mild steel. You can get plenty of that. They stock it all over this country. You can buy it --

MS. DOUGLAS: It's easier to work, isn't it?

MR. SIMMONS: Easy, exactly right. Easy to work.

MS. DOUGLAS: More fluid?

MR. SIMMONS: More flexible, too.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you ever worked in any other medium besides metal?

MR. SIMMONS: Nothing else. I tried to work with tin, but not successful.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you ever combined other metals with the steel in your work? Like brass or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, I work with brass sometime. Sometime I add brass to my work that's steel -- put the two together. You see a lot of work going on now got brass and steel blending together. I made a step the other day, the rail for the step, and the cap -- I put the cap on the top out of brass. And I frame it with wrought iron. And I like to work the wrought iron and brass together. Even lead -- I use lead sometime along with the wrought iron.

MS. DOUGLAS: Lead?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, to anchor them to cement, to anchor them to the building, or wherever you going to put it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you ever get frustrated working with metal?

MR. SIMMONS: Never one day. Never one day. I get tired and relax, but not that I get frustrated that this come too hard for me, something like that. Or come too complicated. No, never. I can go to bed and sleep if it get too complicated. Or not complicated, but if I get bored, I'll stop and go to bed. Next morning, I'll wake up and go at it fresh. But, no, I love it just that much -- stay on it, just stay on it -- see what I could do -- get all that I could, learn all about the different type of iron. I could work in different type of iron, like wrought iron, steel, mild steel, cold-rolled -- so many different type of iron. You got to know your iron, too.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about making tools? Did you make your own tools?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, I made my own tools. You go back there, I'll show you some of the tools back there I made.

MS. DOUGLAS: And did you learn to do that from --

MR. SIMMONS: Peter Simmons. He train me all that -- coming to training I had to make my tools and some of my equipments I used back there -- I made them.

MS. DOUGLAS: Yeah, I guess this -- what is it about metal that you like to express creatively? That probably sounds like a stupid question because it's such a given to you that that's what you've

worked with all your life and you naturally enjoy using it.

MR. SIMMONS: That's right.

MS. DOUGLAS: But I guess for people that have never worked in metal -- and they look at these beautiful things you've made, they wouldn't have an understanding of it. What about the material is it they like?

MR. SIMMONS: That's happening my life so often -- people don't understand.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you tell them?

MR. SIMMONS: Asked the question about how I would do this, how I done that. Way I learned this from you. Or so many things about the shop or the operation or the steel -- a lot of questions come up. I try to make it as clear as I can, especially in talking to kids, students in school and all like that. I try to make it as clear as I can. Sometime I have to go back to the past and come up to the future, and I explain to them, you know about the new day and the old day. [Laughter.] The old way and the new way. Sometime you got to explain it to them and just about in those details.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you think have been the most powerful influences in your career? And I think you've already touched on some of them, about the change in technology, from people moving away from horse and wagons to cars. That was a big influence. Can you think of other ones that are big influences, like certain people or life situations?

MR. SIMMONS: No, no, no, no more for what I have seen -- not in the blacksmith's shop. But I look at cooks now and then -- cooking school, and they're being taught now different diet; shoe repairs now they got -- don't use the tacks anymore; they use the glue. And other things have changed, and I look at it and I said, well I can see I didn't had it too hard. My change come easy to me -- when I look at the changes come in other field, you know?

MS. DOUGLAS: Is all of your work architectural at this point?

MR. SIMMONS: To this point -- architectural.

MS. DOUGLAS: I guess, have people ever commissioned you just to do a piece to hang on the wall that's not actually tied into a building, just for decorative purposes as opposed to being like a window grille or a gate or something like that?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, sometime the one that the grille in the gate was demanding now -- like this fresh air lady that want me to make that for just to hang on the wall. And I staff (ph) my name, something to keep for memory. And this thing here, like the numbers and the letters up here. These are for an old horseshoe for memories. See the old horseshoe there? That's for memory. And this candle holder -- that's horseshoe -- and a lot of things is not demanding to live by, but for history purposes something you want to keep, especially if in the family there was a blacksmith or a basket weaver or carver or something. They would want those things. Not that is demanding to live by, but they want it for history purpose, to remember. I like this iron here -- these iron is no good today. But, for memory, I like to tell the kids why these is so important -- students in school why. And I go to talk to them sometime I carry this along with me, the past and the present, and the lamp like that -- the past and the present. And now you could tell the story better like that to see things, which are on the eye, and how things have change and why things have change.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, the interesting thing about crafts in the United States is people think it



represents the past.

MR. SIMMONS: Which it does --

MS. DOUGLAS: But, it also has a place in the present.

MR. SIMMONS: That's right. That's right. You go to the Bible, the Old Testament, now people tell the Old Testament's no good, but how you knew about the New Testament without the Old Testament -- in the Bible?

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about when you went to Washington to the Folklife Festival. Did you meet other blacksmiths there?

MR. SIMMONS: One was there. And all the other from different field and different craft. But I had one blacksmith, so I had company. I had one blacksmith; the basket weaver, they had company. The carver, the woodcarver, they had company. The seamstress, they had company. The knitters, they had company. And talent was on that camp, was on that park. Talent. And that's the part like I fore said; that's the part I enjoyed! See the other craftsmen and the other things, and see and talk to the other talented -- met people on the park and we get acquainted, and when I get a chance, I walk by the basket weaver. And they had, people had butchers up there. You know what a butcher is?

MS. DOUGLAS: No.

MR. SIMMONS: Carve the cow, or the hog and barbeque. A lot of things people never seen people barbeque, but they had them up there. People from all walks of life was on that park. The talk about the past, the present, and some almost could predict the future.

MS. DOUGLAS: [Laughter.] That would be amazing talent. Well, I was wondering if you had -- I see this picture of you here with a couple of other blacksmiths -- have you had the occasion to get together with them?

MR. SIMMONS: That was exciting day. That's was exciting day. We the three oldest blacksmiths in the southeastern division -- southeastern. You can read that. You can read it better than I.

MS. DOUGLAS: Southeastern Blacksmith Conference.

MR. SIMMONS: I attend that in Madison, Georgia. Now, I got an invitation again right back in Madison, Georgia. I don't know what I did with it, but I got the invitation. I don't know whether I could go or not. But I would like to go. That's an invitation there. Excuse me. I'm invited to that, but my health might not allow me to go.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, so, you're aware of all the other blacksmiths around the country?

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh. We meet together. A lot of us living and working today at the same metalwork.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's an amazing thing, that there's this many blacksmiths working now.

MR. SIMMONS: Well, that's what they give us the credit and the award for. We keep it 'til the other fellas caught the spark burning and want to keep on putting more fire to it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, this group here -- are any of these people trained in universities or teach in universities? Or is it mostly people like yourselves working --

MR. SIMMONS: People like myself.

MS. DOUGLAS: Working now, doing commissions --

MR. SIMMONS: People willing to pass the craft on, come together and discuss what is best for the younger people since they're so all excited about. The older one go there -- we teach it. See, we got 224 years between the three of us. This Whitaker chap -- he died last year.

MS. DOUGLAS: Francis Whitaker?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah. You know him too, eh?

MS. DOUGLAS: I know his name.

MR. SIMMONS: Francis Whitaker. Yeah, he died. He an old craftsman.

MS. DOUGLAS: I think he was from North Carolina.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, how has the field of blacksmithing changed in your lifetime, going from when you started out to this group today?

MR. SIMMONS: I don't see no changes 'cause we want to keep it the old way. We want for history purpose -- we all want to remind ourself every so often where we came from.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about the way the public receives blacksmithing? Do you think that's changed?

MR. SIMMONS: That did change. Yeah. That, it changes. Some get excited just to know we still out there doing it. They thought us a dying art and it had died.

MS. DOUGLAS: You think it's a dying art?

MR. SIMMONS: It would become a dying art if we didn't get together and organize ourselves to keep it as a craft. Everybody, most all the blacksmiths today are known of the blacksmiths today. They still excited to see the craftsman going. Other things, too -- but it seem like the blacksmith is more excited and people like me and other like the guy over there excited about seeing the craft stay here in practice. I know I am. I want to see, want to see the practice always keep going.

MS. DOUGLAS: You think these conferences and groups help do that?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah. That's what the purpose. We have a lot of young students there.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you been involved in any of them besides this Madison, Georgia, group?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, statewide or national, 'cause, out of state -- I could call it national wide, that people are excited about seeing the craft remain. And they're more excited in other craft, you know, the net makers, the net knitters and basket weavers, and wood carvers, and you name 'em, they -- people get excited -- they being this craft, most of these craft being supported by the federal

government, like the Smithsonian Institute and all organizations like that -- excited about the craft, not the blacksmith only, but other craft.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about that group called ABANA [American Blacksmith Association of North America]? Have you heard of them?

MR. SIMMONS: I heard of 'em. I heard of it.

MS. DOUGLAS: I wondered if you had been to any of their meetings.

MR. SIMMONS: Never.

MS. DOUGLAS: Met any of them?

MR. SIMMONS: No.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, so your work has been pretty well received over time.

MR. SIMMONS: Pretty well received and -- I'm excited -- you know before you came, you meet some people here. They came from Colorado -- straight here. Read about it in the paper. Now, it's making me interested in order to hold it and keep it and to help the young ones keep it. People have accepted it all over this country, the old craft.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, how did they hear about you?

MR. SIMMONS: A little magazine, national magazine, national news, radio, television, and all that kind of stuff.

MS. DOUGLAS: And I see your whole wall here is covered in awards.

MR. SIMMONS: They were given to me, and I never stand before no studio and they took my picture when I finish and I ask how much I owe you -- everything on the wall was given to me. Everything on the wall was given to me. People has heard of me and come in take my picture and go. When I see it again, like these on the wall, all of these on the wall. Look at the wall there. This my grandmother. Know how those pictures come about, 'cause they died a long time. But, they had died. That's a travel [?]. During the war a piece of picture -- a pocket book when they being stopped -- we got identify themself.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. DOUGLAS: Okay. So, we're on the second tape of this interview. I wanted to ask you about, have you been involved with any education programs about craft?

MR. SIMMONS: There's something I ordinarily working with, you know, like the school and museum and churches and things like that. When I be called and asked to come around, sometime to show myself or do a slide presentation, I got a slide that I use at the school. That's helped me. I hadn't been doing too good with that, that hasn't been treating me too good. But it does -- the slide, that helps a lot. I got a lot of this stuff on the slide, tape.

MS. DOUGLAS: A lot of your pictures of your artwork, gates -- you take that around to the schools?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. That's a great help.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, what about the tours that come through here in your shop? Can you talk about those a little bit?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, they comes in every day -- two or three time a day. I like to be here sometime. And sometime I just sort of, I can't be -- I either at the doctor or someplace else. Sometime they come -- they want to take my picture -- there's a garden. I'll go to the garden -- to other places -- they want to do the picture on me and take pictures. They move me around pretty good, and I don't mind because it really help to exercise my leg -- these legs'll get stiff. See, I just sit on that stool most of the time. But I set here because it's comfortable -- to talk to you.

MS. DOUGLAS: But when they come for the tours, do you have your assistant work in the shop to show them how blacksmithing is done?

MR. SIMMONS: Sometime I go on over there. I had a little small hammer I take out there sometime. And that's helped the fingers.

MS. DOUGLAS: Your arthritis?

MR. SIMMONS: I can go out there and demonstrate something. I got the heavy hammer, don't fit too good. I went and bought me a little smaller hammer. All those things is helping me, you know, with the bursitis and the other things I'm suffering with.

MS. DOUGLAS: How long have these tours been going on? Were they --?

MR. SIMMONS: Since I know myself. When I came to Charleston, they had it going. They had the old-time Cadillac used to take them to the garden from Charleston over to the plantation, and they got about eight different gardens and plantation -- old property, old -- keeping up the old tradition going, like the Milton [?] Garden over there -- the way they been operating them two hundred years ago. They got the cows, raising the cows over there on the farm. They got the old blacksmith shop over there, and they got other things they were using back then, the 1700s, something like [that].

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you talk a little bit about your foundation, the Philip Simmons Foundation?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, that's something that start about ten years ago. They want to do something, a tribute to me. Since the other country and the other states and the nationalwise they were trying to keep the old memory going, and the church thought that the people in Charleston thought that they'll do a garden in my credit -- credit to me for the work I have done in Charleston -- and for the national and state recognition, city, state, and national recognition they was giving me -- they thought they would add to it, so the city was doing -- I was doing a lot of creative work for the city and the state, as well as the national.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what about the garden? That's a collaboration, or is that all your work in the garden?

MR. SIMMONS: Not all my work -- that just something -- that they thought they get organizing. They got a committee, which is the foundation -- the same lady that you talked on -- I don't know whether you talked to her -- you talk to Rossie Colter?

MS. DOUGLAS: Yes.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah. She just might stop by on her way back.

MS. DOUGLAS: So the garden that we're talking about is over at St. John's Episcopal Church.

MR. SIMMONS: St. John's Episcopal Church.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you did all the ironwork in that?

MR. SIMMONS: All there, the ironwork for it in that garden. Done right here in that old shop back there, which I love so dear.

MS. DOUGLAS: The shop?

MR. SIMMONS: Keep old memory going.

MS. DOUGLAS: Has the shop changed in the last -- how long has it been -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Same old shop. The only thing change I'm doing different type of work in it, but working with metal and the fire and the same old forge, and all is being operated the same way.

MS. DOUGLAS: You were telling me -- we had just walked through the shop. You were telling me that anvil is how old?

MR. SIMMONS: That anvil? I bought that anvil secondhand about 50 years ago. And the other anvil, the old-man anvil -- Peter Simmons -- little Indian guy that taught me -- he wore out two anvil. The last one I finish with it and give it to the museum, the library anyway. That one out there's a new anvil.

As much about the shops as I know, so far the operation --

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: Hello. We've got company.

[TAPE PAUSED.]

MS. DOUGLAS: So we've got a tour coming through right now.

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh. Yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: I wanted to ask you if you think of your blacksmithing art as part of a tradition that is particularly American or African-American or international? What do you think about the work you do?

MR. SIMMONS: International, national, let me say national because they was doing this before I even went into it. This thing came from so far. And Charleston was tourist city, and lot of tourists was coming and this was one of the tourist center for years. And why, you ask me, I don't know. But when I had -- since tourists was coming here on the boat. Now, they come on the plane, the car; they just get up out of the bed in the morning, get in the car, and just drive to Charleston, go into Charleston. In Charleston, there is known for tourist city, you know. St. Augustine and Charleston, New Orleans, too.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you think that the blacksmithing that evolved in Charleston is part of a larger tradition.

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh.

MS. DOUGLAS: Then because of the tourist –

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh.

MS. DOUGLAS: -- the influx of people into the city?

MR. SIMMONS: That's right. It's so many things here attract them, you know? Way back 1670 there was that church, too -- 1760 -- First Baptist Church and other attractive things that the tourist is excited coming here to Charleston to see. Seaport town between the two city, and people live on the water, the land, and different things like that; they want to see things went on here years from slavery up until the day -- they had the slave mart and other thing that pertain here -- the slavery. The garden that work slaves many hundreds of years. All those things make it attractive. When they come down we had 15 blacksmiths here in Charleston, and I'm the only one left. And that kind of attract people to come here. Just like people like you heard about, other people heard about it and come in. They go down there and see the basket weaver, the crocheter, the cane weavers and the netters and colored netters [?], all that thing people were doing by hand. Expect to come from most of the slave, learn this stuff and keep it alive -- some of the ancestor, down at the early settlers.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, do you think your style of blacksmithing that you developed, you think that's evolved from the slave use of blacksmithing, too?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. They learn as well, as well as farming. And, you know, they were good farmers. We were really good farmers. We know about farming, fishing, and hunting. And the machine be learned, too, at the same time about machinery, too.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you -- have travels had much of an impact on your work?

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh. Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you can --

MR. SIMMONS: Traveling made an impact on my work. Yes, it do. You know, several trip I mentioned to you that help. I got a lot of knowledge and that 84 years -- I'm 78 years, rather, I was in the shop. Most all my knowledge came from the other fella and the customer who commissioned me to work for them, and most every customer come here have a different -- make a different effect on me. Everybody come with a different story. Some people come and say could you make me this thing? And I say, no, I never made one before. Could you? Well, could you? I said, well, I'll try, but let me make you a sketch. And I learn a lot from people like that come with different ideas. Different ideas, too. Sometime I make sketches and they don't like it. I got to make the second one, and they don't like it. I make the third one, and they accept it, like the gate in Columbia. I made three sketches, and they approved the third one.

MS. DOUGLAS: Did you travel to install that piece?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, to Columbia. We went there and install it. That's what I like about it -- the installation work as well as the finished product.

MS. DOUGLAS: What do you have to do when you install?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, just like you or somebody come to install me that door. They come with the understanding how to install the door, how to make a door, how to hang it. And the same thing

happen with this piece of sale when I make it. And I understand where I got to install it, where I got to put it, and what I got to do, what material I got to have to install it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, that gate's in a museum.

MR. SIMMONS: That's in the museum. And this in the museum. And, this is at the center, the one under there, right under my picture up there where I in the black. That folder's in the back of the shelf. This one here's in the back. Picture of the back.

MS. DOUGLAS: But, the gate you installed in the South Carolina State Museum, is it actually working? Is it installed in a doorway?

MR. SIMMONS: No, but, it could be. That's what it all about. They wanted it when they place it in the room for scenery -- people who come and just to look at it. They want it be -- want it open and shut it, because that the way it install. But, there not a usable gate -- to go into a door or a yard, no. This is in a room -- show room.

MS. DOUGLAS: Right. Maybe you could talk a little bit about what your typical day is like now, at this point in your life.

MR. SIMMONS: Sitting here and drawing and put people ideas on paper. That's what I'm doing for the mans outside. I no longer could be outside [?]. What I like about it I could sketch things that they could really put together.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, right now you're working on this Daniels Island commission.

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh.

MS. DOUGLAS: Which is --

MR. SIMMONS: They called here since you was here -- on the phone. [Laughter.]

MS. DOUGLAS: -- which is where you grew up.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, which is where I grew up, where I born and grew up to be eight years old. I left, I go back visit, but never went back there permanently to stay.

MS. DOUGLAS: I imagine Daniels Island has changed a lot since you've been.

MR. SIMMONS: Now, that's what really changed.

MS. DOUGLAS: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMMONS: It changed from a farm, fishing area, fishing, farming, and hunting. Rather some beautiful houses they putting up over there now -- beautiful houses. Become a residential area now.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, your typical workday is spent sketching and drawing. How many hours a day do you work?

MR. SIMMONS: I work according to my feelings. I hate to say it and tell you that, but I don't feel like it all the time. You see when I told you about the bother --

MS. DOUGLAS: Your arthritis.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, arthritis is attacking me severely, too. Doctors here familiar with me and knows me, most of them. And they're trying to help all they can. But it's a disease that attack me early part, I guess, about -- early part of my life -- when I said an early part, I guess I was in my 40s. Now, I'm almost twice that age, about twice that age. The Lord bless, I was able to survive, too. When I feel alright, I get out there and try to do something. And that means a lot to me. That exercise means a lot to me, as well as just to make a dollar. It mean my health, too.

MS. DOUGLAS: So now do you go out and supervise your assistants in the shop?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, sometime. I used to in the last ten years. I hadn't been able to do too much of supervising outside. But, the little that I can do, I offer my service.

MS. DOUGLAS: And both of your assistants that you have now, you trained from apprentice?

MR. SIMMONS: From apprentice, my age. I went in the shop at the age of 13, and they came in to me train just about -- they been about 13 years old.

MS. DOUGLAS: Really! So, they've been with you that long.

MR. SIMMONS: That's right. Now, they're on their own. Excuse me. I has a cold. Bursitis. It bothers. But, you fight these things, and you get to the place where you enjoy having them. [Laughter.] I shouldn't say that. Might get used to it.

MS. DOUGLAS: Now, do you, have you taught outside of teaching your apprentices?

MR. SIMMONS: Oh, yeah other people, other people. Here's someone here. This one I taught. They come to me from time to time. And this is my nephew. He passed. I train him here. Excuse me, it's time to get some water. That's all right.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you've taught several people, then.

MR. SIMMONS: Several people. Sometime they spent hours a day with me or weeks from time to time -- not permanently my apprentice, but they will come and go. But, my apprentices, the one you saw out there, and I train about eight or nine of those. I mean Ira DeKoven, we worked together. I didn't train him. And he came out of Charleston. He knew pretty good about the metalwork.

MS. DOUGLAS: But he learned from you, maybe refined some of his --

MR. SIMMONS: We help each other, not learn from me. But we help each other because when I knew him, I was doing permanent blacksmith; when I knew him, he was doing permanent blacksmith.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, so what is your method or your philosophy about teaching an apprentice? How does that work?

MR. SIMMONS: First, I know them if they're serious about learning. Sometime they just come to me to see different things and then go on about their business and come when they can. And some came here and stayed. If I found out they want to stay and learn, so I took up a lot of time. Some I well train out there, too. Some making a living on it today from my training.

MS. DOUGLAS: So when they're in the shop apprenticing with you, do you give them a specific set



of assignments to do or chores or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, they have their assignment. After being here a length of time, they get assignment. Other time, they come I just want them to look and see what going on and learn the tools and the name of the tools and keep it the proper place. And that'll take the most six months, a year. I stayed there about a year before I knew about all the tools he used, the old man used at the shop, and become acquainted with the tools.

MS. DOUGLAS: And also, how do you evaluate their work, how you give them feedback if they're doing good or not doing good?

MR. SIMMONS: Just look at what they're doing from time to time and give them more responsibility each time I give them a piece to do.

MS. DOUGLAS: It seems like they would also be learning the trade, the business part of blacksmithing, while they're working with you, too.

MR. SIMMONS: That's what it's all about. [Laughter.] Learn while you work. That's what I learned. I worked for the old man, and I learned while I was working.

MS. DOUGLAS: You learned the trade, the business.

MR. SIMMONS: The trade, the business.

MS. DOUGLAS: Maybe you could talk about that a little bit. Because, in addition to blacksmithing being an art, it very much is a business. How did you start out learning that part of blacksmithing?

MR. SIMMONS: You mean how the supervise drawing -- ?

MS. DOUGLAS: How to make money at it. How to run a business.

MR. SIMMONS: I learned that from him. I see him write every check for the work he done. Him set and talk to the customer, make the prices and all that in the training. You learn how to make your prices. You know how long you're going to take, the time you're going to put in it. And all that come along with learning the metalwork.

MS. DOUGLAS: Has that changed very much over the years?

MR. SIMMONS: No. Haven't changed, haven't changed at all. I carry them through the same thing, same process. The young going out with him, and right from the time for what I have learned. And I came through the same training. It's much easier like that. They don't have to put it on papers. Give them assignments. They got to take the tests and all like that, no. Their test is how they improving in the shop, and I can see with my own eyes. That's the way I rate them, too. Give them more responsibility as they learn.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you had anybody approach you recently about doing an apprenticeship?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, but I'm not able anymore. I'm not able -- too much of a hassle -- not my health. My health is bad -- sometime I go to bed and lay down. What I can do, I do it. What I can do, I do it. What help I can give, I do it. When you see me refuse, I don't feel like being bothered on account of my health. Health is awful bad now. That's that. A lot of things my health don't allow me to do now. Traveling -- I have to give up some of that.

MS. DOUGLAS: Traveling?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah. Traveling and going to these different crafts --

MS. DOUGLAS: I was wondering if you thought there was still a lot of interest in blacksmithing from the younger people?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, it is. It is, but a lot of young people, like I 'fore said, just come to see it done and don't get serious. And a lot of serious out there now, even up until today. A lot come to classes now, because we have the classes every month. A lot come to class now to learn, male and female.

MS. DOUGLAS: Really?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, here's a lady -- bring a piece of work here. There's a leaf she made and bring it here. People make things and bring it here and I approve it. I allow for they to bring it here. That show that they're learning. This lady right here -- she's a professional.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is she in Charleston?

MR. SIMMONS: No, she live in Denmark, someplace up there.

MS. DOUGLAS: And she came to your shop?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. People -- just like the people come here. Some come to visit, and some come to talk to me, get ideas and everything about the metalwork. And that's what the whole shop now is all about -- just pass it on, you know? The old tradition -- just pass it on.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's amazing to me that a woman from Denmark sought you out and came to your shop. Do you have a lot --

MR. SIMMONS: Most all them come bring me something they made in their shop. Some I never seen before come here and talk to me. Come here to meet you; somebody heard about and brought this leaf. She made that leaf and bring it for me. This guy here, he brought an anvil. This one came and he brought a knife. He carve -- he makes knife. This one bring a homemade anvil; he made that himself. He bring it here. Well, people out there in the blacksmith shop working, and as they improve, and visit me, they would come and bring something that they've made in the shop. The shop make them feel -- after I would look at and say this is good. Thank you! The organization named after me -- the blacksmith -- I gave it to you, the blacksmith association.

MS. DOUGLAS: From Georgia?

MR. SIMMONS: A newsletter, yeah.

MS. DOUGLAS: This group here?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah. We got about, this is the conference now, other conference. This is national. And the local -- they invite the local, and we are the local. See it here. Robert Hill, this is our organization, is mentioned: Southeastern Regional Blacksmith Conference Cooperative [?]. And these are the people that are chairman [?].

MS. DOUGLAS: Will you be going too that?

MR. SIMMONS: The blacksmith name after me. I don't think so because that's too long a trip, and I

think it's going to be a little boring. But they named this organization after me. Yep. I think that's in the newsletter they mention. This an invitation, this one. You're going to ask what's going on or what will happen if I attend this conference.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, do a lot of people come to these conferences?

MR. SIMMONS: A lot of people, people, the spectators come and all.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, not just makers.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, not just makers, spectators. We'll have a special day, and they'll come that day when we get an action.

MS. DOUGLAS: Is there anything you'd like to talk about in terms of your work and life that I haven't asked you about, that you'd just like to elaborate on?

MR. SIMMONS: I think by being in this office you have hit every point. And this office here is a kind of blackboard for me -- what I want to put on the board before the spectators come, and what I want to talk about -- so I just stick it up on the wall there. People come in here and see -- like the group came in here and start looking around. And that's the purpose of keeping the old office. I don't do that much of business, but just to keep the old office -- that they might peep in the door and see what would be going on in the back.

MS. DOUGLAS: And what you have here, are awards on one side of the office wall, and then on the other --

MR. SIMMONS: You mean this? Everything that be put up there, I did bring it in and I put it up there. It isn't uniform or nothing. I try to keep the state, the city, what I got from the state, the city, and national over in that section.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, has South Carolina been very supportive of your work then?

MR. SIMMONS: Very, very, very, mostly all along. You take the South Carolina Hall of Fame. You take from the state. The state give me recognition, and drop down to the house. They give me recognition. Come down to the South. That's very important to me, that one there, South Carolina Folk Heritage Award. That is for a state level, that is similar to this on a national level.

MS. DOUGLAS: And these awards came about at what point in your career?

MR. SIMMONS: Time -- time and they just want to recognize me.

MS. DOUGLAS: You were still --

MR. SIMMONS: I live in South Carolina, I live in the United States, and I reside in Charleston, and they take it state, locally, nationally, and on up.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, these awards are from the 1980s or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: I think they all dated there. They all dated there somewhere. Come so fast, I don't have a chance to read it. We got something in the corner there now, a plaque going up somewhere on this property. But it isn't ready yet to put it up.

MS. DOUGLAS: On your -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Right here on this premises.

MS. DOUGLAS: Your studio and house --

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. DOUGLAS: What time period or what commissions? It spans such a long time. Is there any favorite part of it, more exciting time?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. My most exciting time today it's sitting here talking -- my most exciting time is to attend these blacksmith meeting and association, and meeting different people, people I haven't met before. And the action from the three of us on there have really brought this about. People, they're going to come and hear what I got to say about blacksmith, because none of them interested in blacksmithing. Now, I get to the place where the old art, really the old tradition and things that we are doing now -- people are interested in the work of clothes now -- quilting, carving, metalwork, regardless what type -- after became old and almost a lost art, and now people want to hear what happen. Anything now today -- you want to talk about the young people haven't heard it, or it hasn't been taught in the education system -- that's what they want. That's why I'm so interested in the old tradition is coming back.

MS. DOUGLAS: How did World War II affect your business?

MR. SIMMONS: Didn't affect it at all because I didn't go to the service. World War II helped me to stay at home, because stuff I was working on and repairing and making, that's pertaining to World War II. You take the ships coming out -- you know it's a shipping port, and the cargo come and go. They come here with a load to be discharged, and they would take a load back. And I used to make all the equipment. You know, like the snydel [sp?] hook and the carton. They use the cargo hook; they use to lower the ship and other things. And during the war, I was real busy -- like some people, different type of work they was doing, the war put them out of business, but not me.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you weren't -- you were doing these functional pieces for the shipping industry. Did it affect your --? Had you gotten into the ornamental ironwork at that point?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, I was just getting into ornamental ironwork, just entering. But, you know, while I was doing ornamental ironwork, I didn't have ornamental ironwork to do every day, so I have to do what come in the shop, what type of work come in the shop. And some of those work was making pieces and equipment for the ship.

MS. DOUGLAS: Has that part of your business totally gone away?

MR. SIMMONS: The ship business? Well, now you think I used to make the snydel hook. Now they put the tractors down in the ship hole, and they push the carton where they want. Before they ship a lot of carton, we had the carton. I made the cartons' hooks. Every so often, I would have to make some carton or sling for other things, equipment to use on the ship. I think that's what kept me from going to war, too. I didn't feel too bad about it either.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, how was your business affected after the war when there was a big boom?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, after the war then I had more work among the craft, you know, like the wrought-iron work and furniture, and stuff like that, and other decorative pieces that people wanted me. In fact, there's still demand for it today.

MS. DOUGLAS: Which is what?

MR. SIMMONS: Making those decorative pieces, gates and fence and balcony. I guess more of it now than during the war.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have you had more workers or less workers depending on how much work was coming through the shop? Or has it been constant?

MR. SIMMONS: Same amount of work because after the ship -- a lot of work for the ship, but they don't need it anymore. I got more business on the wrought iron and gates and fences, so things just improve. One just take care of the other. One fade away, the other come, create larger.

MS. DOUGLAS: And have most of your clients been in South Carolina or Charleston, or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Most of them is in Charleston -- most of them. Charleston and the suburbs.

MS. DOUGLAS: How many pieces would you estimate you've got installed in Charleston? Gates and -- do you have any idea?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, I think I could give you a pretty close figure of the gates and fence and balcony and other pieces of wrought-iron work -- I think I got about 250-some odd pieces.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you could --

MR. SIMMONS: Not a close check, but counting all the wrought iron pieces I made.

MS. DOUGLAS: So you could drive through Charleston and see a history of your output, basically? And most are these all private commissions or some public commissions?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, part commission and part I just volunteer go ahead and do things -- private family or most business, it come about the same. I work for a lot of businesses around here, and I work for a lot of private family. And my work increase, and I couldn't tell you from the business side or the private family. I got it here. But the work keep coming. There's a big demand. A lot of people do private, in fact I do private work, and there's a lot I does for people with business.

MS. DOUGLAS: You mean, like, corporations, companies?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, corporations and companies.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, I'm curious to know if the crafts people that have been trained in universities and schools, have they had much to do with your career?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes.

MS. DOUGLAS: In what way?

MR. SIMMONS: That's why we get so much visitors and invitations from the school, especially in the art class. The group will come here, and they wouldn't invite me to the English class, you can see that, but from the craft. You take a group there, say, from the architect classes, had the student down here. So you can see how this just take effect from the educational side as well as the social side.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, it's created all these university-trained people; it's created more of an

awareness for blacksmithing or crafts?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, craft, craft.

MS. DOUGLAS: When you were talking earlier about Charleston being a real crafts center with all the basket makers and the tourism and whatnot --

MR. SIMMONS: Uh-huh.

MS. DOUGLAS: You think that's helped your business also?

MR. SIMMONS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, that's helped the business a lot.

MS. DOUGLAS: Through people actually commissioning you or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: To do certain things for them. Just like the men out there. They in the shop all day, but mostly all the orders come right through the office here for them, doing that as a volunteer service -- things I wanted to do, volunteered myself and help me to keep active. Or keep in shape, not active, but keep in shape and help me so far the health concern.

MS. DOUGLAS: What kind of advice would you give somebody going into blacksmithing today?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, now when I went to school, I didn't think about taking up mechanical drawing, and those kind of thing. But if kids, the advice that they would ask me, what is necessary, what have you got to do, what you got to ask, I would tell them the first thing while you're in school, take up mechanical drawing. This thing call for a lot of mechanical drawing.

MS. DOUGLAS: You've learned that on your own.

MR. SIMMONS: Right, on my own.

MS. DOUGLAS: Would you advise them to go into business by themselves or with a partner or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: No, but I advise them any type of business they go into, any type, I don't care what it is -- be sure you try to satisfy the customer. They need, they come to you and sometime they don't know what they want. They come to you with their problem, and you got to help them work it, or you got to work it out for them.

MS. DOUGLAS: What's some examples in your past where you've had to do that with a client? Can you think of a -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: What kind example?

MS. DOUGLAS: Yeah, like, what's an example of you having to help a client understand what it is they really want or work with them?

MR. SIMMONS: This carry them through the same channel I went through. That's what I would tell him. Ain't too much of changes made so far in the operation and running a business, same here. But your customer. Ain't but a customer a hundred years ago? So far satisfy them. And now, today it's the same thing you got to do. Take your customer serious. Try to satisfy them.

MS. DOUGLAS: How do you do that by -- do they bring you a sketch that they want or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Sometime and sometime I got to make them. Sometime it's so clear in their mind they could give it to me right out their mind how they're thinking. Other time they need help, help them plans.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do you charge a job do you do that by the hour, or do you it by how much iron -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Some you can do it by the hour, and some you can do it by the square feet. And some you can buy it. All that when you making the prices, you've got to determine what amount high you will put on it. How long did it take you, and all those things are very important. So that's what determines the price you charge the customer. It's very important.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have your labor -- the way you do the labor on the work -- has that changed?

MR. SIMMONS: No.

MS. DOUGLAS: Like your techniques for fabricating or -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: No. No. A hour at working, or this work, or any type of work. And you charge 25 cent an hour. When you was in the shop, while learning when, that was the price at 10, 20, 40 years ago. It's the same thing per hour. Fifty cents per hour is 50 cents. Fifteen dollars an hour is \$15 an hour. You have to charge by per hour. And this adds up. And back then, when I be getting 50 cents a day on the farm, I remember that getting 50 cents a day on the farm. And I remember charging a man -- he ask me how much you charge per hour? You charge me all this money. I got to tell him \$15 an hour or \$20 an hour. All going to add up. Fifty cents going to add up. And \$15 going to add up per hour.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, do people understand what kind of labor goes into these projects?

MS. SIMMONS: Today? Yeah. Everybody -- you give them, come in and give them a job now, you know, living went up. And you know most time you can tell the market price yourself. 'Cause a lot of time, like going out and put a man on my car to do an automobile repair, I know what that cost per hour now. And I know what, and some of us know what the cost a hundred years ago.

MS. DOUGLAS: Well, the gates you make are very labor intensive with the handwork on them, the forging.

MR. SIMMONS: They would charge more now probably on the machine. To turn out anything on the machine, you can turn it out cheap, but not on the handwork like what I'm doing it. That's why people who want to be somebody, something that they love to have and to keep.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about this gate behind you in the photograph? That looks a little different from your other work. This piece right here?

MR. SIMMONS: I can point at it. Well, the kid draws -- this is not neatly done. The kid in school done this and give this to me.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh, that's not one of your pieces.

MR. SIMMONS: This is the picture of my -- some of the pieces, but not my drawing, my hand drawing, not, no, not of the pieces I made. They're doing this in the art class. And some other things, too, I don't have it right here -- I don't have too much room in here, but other things the kid done in school and bring it here and give it after they finished, and get my opinion on it, how it looked to me.

[BREAK.]

MS. DOUGLAS: This is the third session with Philip Simmons. It's April 5, 2001.

Mr. Simmons, I want to ask you about the gate you're working on right now.

MR. SIMMONS: Yes. I'm working on an arch to go over the park for the walkway. It's not a gate; it's an arch. You can look on it on a drawing here. And the balance of it is right over here. And it's just not a gate; it's a solid grille.

MS. DOUGLAS: The gate is underneath it.

MR. SIMMONS: No, the gate is on two sides. See the gate here? The gate is on both sides and one on that side. Just an opening, it's not a gate. And an arch go over it. And now I got the sketch if you want to look at it.

MS. DOUGLAS: How do you -- you do the drawing?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, uh-huh, that's all I'm doing -- the drawing. I'm not doing the wrought iron, fabricating the wrought iron. I'm just making the drawing. My nephew here out there is doing the gate, or the grille. That is not a gate; it looks like a gate. It looks like a gate, but it's not a gate; it's a grille.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, you were talking about how you work with your nephew to build this gate.

MR. SIMMONS: My cousin.

MS. DOUGLAS: Oh.

MR. SIMMONS: My nephew is helping him.

MS. DOUGLAS: I see. How do you let them know if they're doing something right or wrong?

MR. SIMMONS: I make the drawing. I keep checking. That's what I want to do now. He is making the palmetto tree. And I'm checking his work with the drawing.

MS. DOUGLAS: And you continue to go back and -- ?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, continue back and forth.

MS. DOUGLAS: Until it's done?

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, until they get a good lead and a good insight, and I can go on about my business. You see, he was supposed to have been working today and yesterday, because we were supposed to start right after you go, one o'clock yesterday. So you see, we set way back behind with him. But that's what it's all about. We doing the grille, and it's not a gate. It look like a gate, but it's a solid grille. And we going to put it down permanent. And they going to walk around on both sides. They'll be walking -- see it here? That's the walkway and this the walkway. That's the solid logo. When you walk down the street and come into it, that's what you would see. That's a palmetto tree. Here I'm trying to put it in detail so it'll be simple, and he can, you know, catch the insight on it and go into town.

MS. DOUGLAS: How are those scrolls made?



MR. SIMMONS: These scrolls? These look like leaves, palmetto branches.

MS. DOUGLAS: How are they made?

MR. SIMMONS: Out of iron. See I start. I start, all I --

MS. DOUGLAS: But how are they formed?

MR. SIMMONS: Here, there's one of them right over there. This a freehand sketch. But no trouble. He can make it out of iron. When he get an insight, when he get that picture there, he can see clear in his mind.

MS. DOUGLAS: Could you describe how it's made on the anvil?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, let me tell you. I would pound on the anvil and then pound on the jig. I got a jig out there. See that stuff look like water? On the bottom I got it through like that. That's a jig. You put it on the table -- I show you yesterday -- and bend it into that shape, and each one separate, and set that down. Bend the other one. Then when you start putting -- you put it in uniform. You start from the bottom and come on to the top. And you stop it there. And that tree is set in the middle, which is the piece -- the raw piece I just show you -- that'll be in the middle with the others like this. That's supposed to complete there and not in working detail, but for freehand drawing. I would start like that, then put it in details so he could see it clear in his mind.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, this is all an original design.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, that's all original. Everything is right here.

MS. DOUGLAS: I was looking through your book and saw this picture of a gate on Meeting Street, and could you talk a little bit about what you've done here using -- this is salvage work, isn't it?

MR. SIMMONS: No, a wooden gate was there, and I took the wooden gate down and replace it with iron gate. But, first I drew the plan. The lady who commissioned me to do it, I draw the sketch and take them to the customer. Most time you take your sketch that look like this and let the customer look at it on paper. Then if they approve it, then you go like I'm doing now, go back, and they done approve, this tree here. They've already approved that. So all these are to make it; I make it, and make the real -- the real wrought iron, because he got the sketches. Now, remember, you make the sketches first. Then you go in the shop there, and you get your material, your raw iron; you cut it up and put it in that stick. You got to, you got to work the -- you don't have anything from your mind to your drawing, from your drawing back on yourself.

MS. DOUGLAS: I was thinking you had made some gates by salvaging old historic pieces of ironwork, incorporating that into the new gate.

MR. SIMMONS: Only when it become necessary if I use that old iron. But most times we make it. People who commission you now, they don't want the old iron. They want the new, unless they got some pieces of their own. Then, they would bring it in, and I would incorporate it into some type of design that will meet their approval. But sometime they had the old wrought-iron pieces, they want them perfect. We got a few pieces out there, like this they brought into me, the original sketches of what they desire, what they want. All this stuff here is, isn't new.

MS. DOUGLAS: It would be a nice way to preserve the old pieces.

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, I got some out there I can preserve later on -- and maybe then I can get somebody to work with me. I got some old pieces, over 100, 200 years. I've got some pieces; they're over 200 years old. I got old one to go to my gate there. I'm going to put up there a design. I already got the design drawn. But I'll have to salvage it first and then work it into what I want into my plan.

MS. DOUGLAS: Would that be installed here at your place?

MR. SIMMONS: I want to. I want to.

MS. DOUGLAS: Let me ask you to go back and talk about you family just a little bit more. We didn't really talk much about -- yesterday -- about your children, your wife, and --

MR. SIMMONS: No, not my wife, but I did talk about, I give you a rundown on everything up there -- those are my children up in my -- I think I told you -- my wife passed in 1940, and she left me with three kids. And then I raised my sister's other children along with mine. That's I was doing all my life mostly. And my mother died, she left four kids and we had to raise them.

MS. DOUGLAS: They were all younger than you?

MR. SIMMONS: She never seen her mother. Her mother passed before she -- her mother passed when she was about three years old.

MS. DOUGLAS: That's your daughter?

MR. SIMMONS: She never seen her mother or see her to know her. And then the other girl, about four, five, was just about fixing to turn five, going on. And the boy was the baby. The boy was the baby, and that second child there, and the third child now, today she already sixty. She was 64 years.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, what did you do when your wife passed and you had small children?

MR. SIMMONS: Well, I had plenty help. On my side, two older sisters, and I got a sister next to me and one next to her. So there'll be three older sister. My oldest sisters, which is two. Well, I my mother's first child. This one, this girl here, this woman here, that's my second, that's her second child, my mother. Then my sister died before. Then my mother left two twins was too young to take care theyself. These two sisters, older sisters get together and take care of those children.

MS. DOUGLAS: So, were they -- did they come around your blacksmith shop much, your children?

MR. SIMMONS: Yes, they come around because they were living down there by the blacksmith shop. They would come about every day, maybe other day, or when they want something, they'll visit to the shop. Most time my shop wasn't too far from my house where I lived. This the first time the shop is on the same premises, that I live on the same premises of the shop, just right here. I was here 40 years.

MS. DOUGLAS: Have any of your children gone into the arts and followed you?

MR. SIMMONS: No, no. None of them went into the art. My son went into the art. He work with wood. He is a carpenter and cabinetmaker. So, he is in the wood -- same principle when it's all boil down: he work with wood and I work with iron.

MS. DOUGLAS: Do your children live in Charleston?

MR. SIMMONS: No, one live in Columbia. That's about 115 miles from here. And this one here don't live too far 'cause he come most every day of every week; that's this one here. And the other one is in New York, a long ways. He come home once in awhile, not too often.

MS. DOUGLAS: You've been to visit her probably?

MR. SIMMONS: Not late. I visit her about 15 years ago. But she comes here most. Every two, three years she would come to Charleston. This is her daughter right here. She's living in Charleston now, she and her kids.

MS. DOUGLAS: What about the community? When your children were growing up, were you involved in their schools, the church?

MR. SIMMONS: You had to, you had to involve in the school, the church, playground, YMCA, Boys Scouts, and all those activities was going on, and sports and everything. And I just involved myself. Then, you know, I got a certificate up there now. Boy Scout -- I took the training in order to just I'll be qualified to train other people child.

MS. DOUGLAS: I understand you were quite a ballplayer yourself.

MR. SIMMONS: Yeah, myself.

MS. DOUGLAS: How long did you play ball?

MR. SIMMONS: Till I got too old and couldn't run any more, get unactive, unactive, quit.

MS. DOUGLAS: When did you start playing ball?

MR. SIMMONS: I guess around about 13 years old I get out there, but I played almost professional. Playground. We call it playground, you get old enough to play on the playground with the bigger boys. So I was playing ball on the park until I got up in my 20s. I think I was about 25, 26 years old.

MS. DOUGLAS: And were there leagues?

MR. SIMMONS: But I still keep it with the other kids. I still helped the other kids, I got out of it, but I involved myself with all the smaller kids in Little League, the Pony League, and you name those leagues.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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