

FEB 4 1990

2280 **BURRELLE'S**

# A biography that reads like a novel

## STAKING A CLAIM:

**Jake Simmons Jr. and  
the Making of an  
African-American  
Oil Dynasty**

By Jonathan Greenberg  
Atheneum Publishers  
311 pages. \$19.95.

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**T**he visions of equality and acceptance that had kept hope alive in the slaves before this country's bloody Civil War diverged widely from the day-to-day reality many of them lived in the war's aftermath.

Hundreds of thousands of blacks were liberated from physical slavery only to be sold into economic slavery, laying the foundation of a black underclass in today's society

How different this country's history would be if those freed slaves had been accepted fully into the political and economic mainstream is a matter open to speculation. But perhaps if white America had lived up to its promises, there would have been more African-Americans like Jake Simmons Jr., the great-grandson of a Creek Indian chief,



**GREENBERG**

who became a hugely successful entrepreneur in the oil industry.

In "Staking A Claim," author Jonathan Greenberg paints a thoughtful portrait of a man who during his lifetime transcended the limited expectations and nonexistent opportunities for blacks in a white society.

Born in 1901 on a 1,000-acre ranch his parents owned in Oklahoma, Simmons was a descendant of Cow Tom, one of the only black chiefs ever to lead a Native American tribe. From an early

## READING ROOM

age Simmons knew what he was and what he wasn't. Both as an adult and an adolescent, he never hesitated to correct whites when they called him "boy."

While studying at Tuskegee Institute under the tutelage of Booker T. Washington, Simmons' drive and determination were cemented. "How the hell can a black man stay in bed in the morning when white men rule the world?" was one of his maxims, a credo he lived by.

Greenberg's account of Simmons' life reads like a good novel. The language is crisp and focused and the book moves at a smooth and even pace. Research was exhaustive and is evident throughout, although it is integrated appropriately into Greenberg's seamless prose.

By focusing on and exploring the life of one individual, Greenberg examines various facets of Simmons' life, including the Indian Creek tribe, the American oil industry and the early civil rights movement as witnessed and experienced by Simmons and his family.

"Staking a Claim" is billed as a biography, but it is really a history text that educates, fascinates and inspires.

— **Elena M. de Lissar**  
Asbury Park Press