

Unlikely Oil Magnate

By Keith Henderson

HE was a militant, a patriot, an African nationalist, and an American capitalist all wrapped in one. Jake Simmons Jr. was his own kind of original, a man whose life begs the descriptions, "self-made man," "beating the odds," and "rugged individual."

But as Jonathan Greenberg explains, oilman Simmons had an advantage over fellow African-Americans of his generation. His family roots were in the Creek Indian nation of Oklahoma. Early in the 19th century, blacks fleeing slavery were welcomed into the tribe. Jake Jr.'s great grandfather became a chief. The rights to land and self-government accorded the tribe's members applied to black Creeks too.

A code of self-reliance took hold among these people. Simmons's father and mother, Jake Sr. and Rose, built a productive cattle and farming business. They demanded good working habits and a commitment to learning from their 14 children.

After a youth spent learning the cowhand's trade, Simmons headed to Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. He had already decided his father's life in ranching was not for him. Dr. Washington's philosophy of self-sufficiency through marketable skills appealed to the young Oklahoman. And the Tuskegee principal's way with words fascinated him. Simmons's love for self-betterment lectures would never wane — to the occasional dismay of his children.

Son Donald Simmons recalls a father who demanded excellence. "If you made an A, you had to make an A plus, or ask if they gave A pluses. You didn't get any compliments from my father for being ordinary, or as good as."

The 160-acre allotments given members of the Creek nation by the US government were Simmons's entree into the petroleum business. He began by brokering his own allotment to interested drillers, then provided the same service to neighbors with promising holdings.

Business soon expanded to the oil fields of east Texas. Simmons had his share of "dry holes," wells that sputtered instead of gushed, but his optimism never dried up.

Greenberg does a thorough job of filling in the hostile social environment Simmons operated within. The year after Jake Jr. started his oil brokering, Tulsa erupted in a race riot. In the '20s, Oklahoma had more than 100,000 active Ku Klux Klan members. "Grandfather clauses" and "at large" districts kept the state's large black minority away

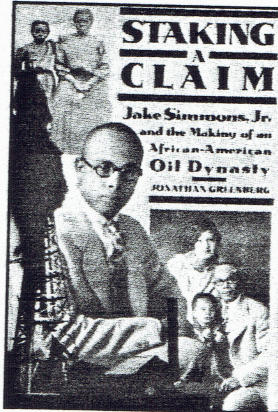
from polling booths and public office.

Greenberg in fact peppers his narrative with references to the racial attitudes Simmons confronted. Like most of the book, these anecdotes are related in a readable, journalistic style. Occasionally the pace slows. Overall, though, the text moves well.

Jake Simmons responded to racial affronts with the same directness he used to lecture a child or barge into a corporate office, deal in hand. He wouldn't take the insult, "boy," from anyone and kept himself and his family armed and ready — a fact known to local racists.

Simmons's pride in his African

BOOKS



STAKING A CLAIM:
JAKE SIMMONS, JR., AND THE
MAKING OF AN AFRICAN-
AMERICAN OIL DYNASTY
by Jonathan Greenberg
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heritage led to the biggest business deals of his life. While serving on a federal commission examining economic development in Africa, he made contacts with African ministers of state in charge of mineral resources. Using those contacts, Simmons became a trusted middle man between American corporations looking for new sources of oil and the continent's post-colonial governments. Simmons shared the Africans' desire to move their newly independent countries toward economic autonomy. He also shared the capitalist's instinct for a profit.

This was a man who believed in the American system. He could make the crucial distinction, it seemed, between sound principles and flawed practice. Simmons's story, stitched together here through extensive, well-documented research, is one that Americans of all races will find instructive.

■ Keith Henderson is editor of the Monitor's editorial page.