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Susan Simmons Winans

Last Known Survivor of the Chicago Fort Dearborn massacre.

“ONE STILL SURVIVES.”

The Chicago Sunday Tribune, Dec. 27, 1896

Woman Present at the Chicago Massacre Yet Lives.

SUSAN WINANS HER NAME

Chicago Historical Society Authenticates Her Story.

NARRATIVE OF HER ESCAPE.

Hidden Beneath Her Mother's Skirts During the Butchery.

EXAMPLE OF MATERNAL DEVOTION

Birth: Feb. 18, 1812, Camp Fort Dearborn, Cook County, Illinois.

Death: Apr. 27, 1900, Santa Ana, Orange County, California.

Mrs. Susan Simmons Winans, a survivor of the Chicago Fort Dearborn massacre, is still living and has been located at Santa Ana, California, by the Chicago Historical Society.

It has been supposed that the last person on that awful occasion had been dead for more than thirty years, and local historians had agreed upon the supposition as a fact, but Edward G. Mason, President of the Chicago Historical Society, has just discovered that there still lives a hale old lady with unimpaired faculties who carries not only the distinction of being the sole survivor of that slaughter by the Pottawatomies, but also that of being the oldest living person born on the site of Chicago.



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Mrs. Winans, as a babe 6 months old, was held at the breast of her mother, who wrapped her in the folds of her mantle and, bending low in the body of the covered wagon, saved her infant from a maddened warrior's tomahawk, whose blade had already struck the life from ten Innocents. Mrs. Winans mother, Susan Millhouse Simmons, who saved her child's life by her heroism and presence of mind on the day of the massacre, carried her safely through many succeeding scenes of almost equal terror. At one time she ran the gantlet at the command of the Indians, carrying her babe wrapped in a blanket with her, and bending low as she ran down the armed line that none of the blows aimed might fail upon the nursling. She reached the goal which marked the extremity of the hostile array and fell there, bruised and bleeding, but with her babe untouched. The child still lives and has within the week sent a greeting to the members of the Chicago Historical Society.

What President Mason Says.

"This discovery that there is living today a person who passed through the Chicago massacre is the most interesting and surprising thing which has happened in a local historical way since my connection with the Chicago society," said President Edward G. Mason yesterday. "There is absolutely no question about the truth of the story. Mrs. Winans herself does not tell it except when asked. The story of her existence came to us through a relative of her family and I have personally investigated the matter and have found out beyond a doubt that Mrs. Winans was present as an infant at the Chicago massacre, and that she is the oldest person born upon the site of this city. We have just opened, as you know, the new building of the Chicago Historical Society, and I used the knowledge which has just come to me that Mrs. Winans was still living to send her a dispatch asking her to send us a greeting as we were taking possession of our new home. In response she sent to us this greeting: Mrs. Winans sends greeting to the Chicago Historical Society and thanks the members for their kind courtesy in remembering an old lady of this far Western State."

"We have secured a picture of Mrs. Winans and will have an enlarged painting made at once to be framed and placed in a position of honor in the halls of our society building."



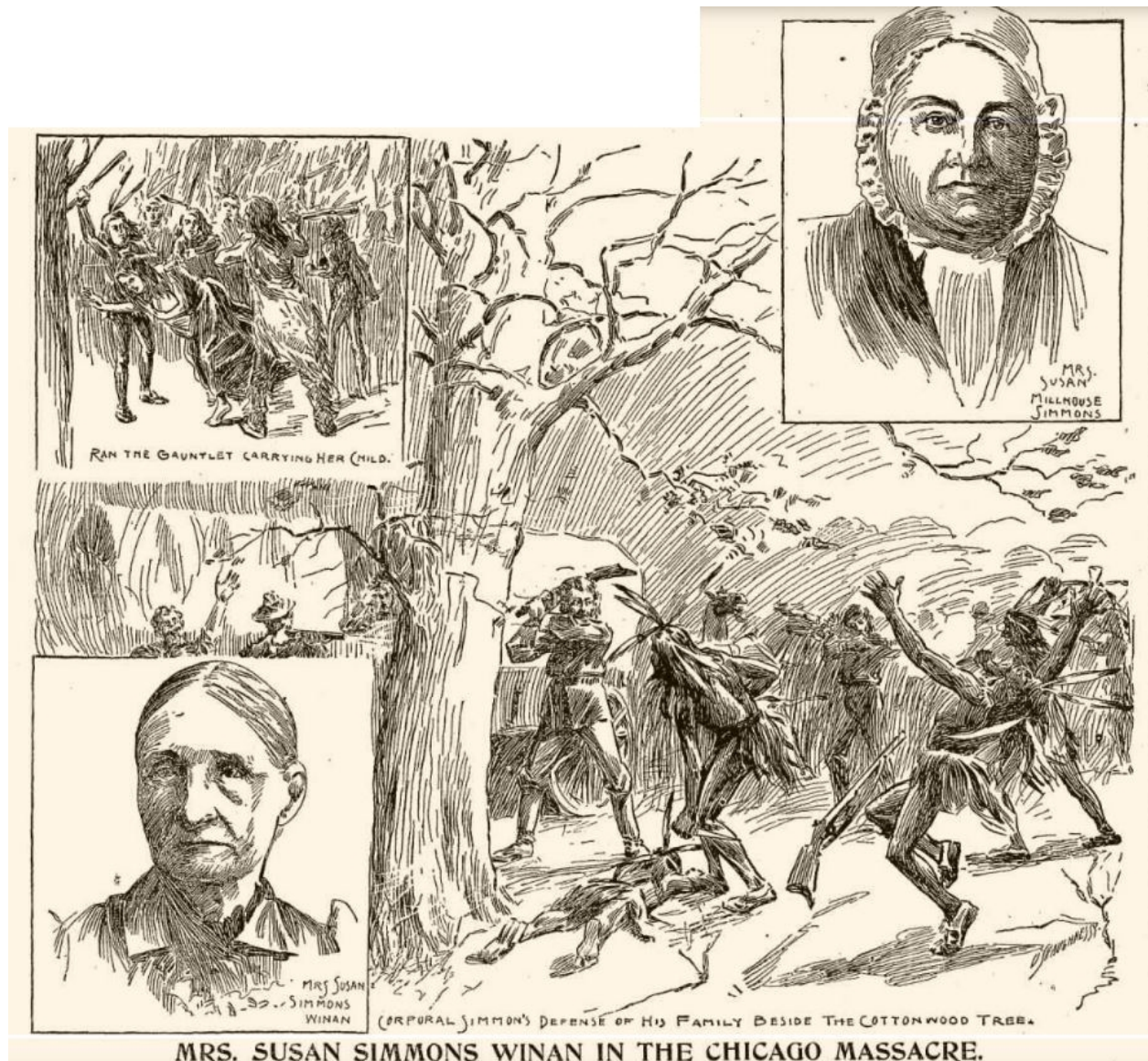
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How Mrs. Winans was Discovered.

Knowledge of the fact that there is still living a survivor of the massacre came to the Historical Society members in a curious way. The fact that Mrs. Winans never lived in Chicago after the day when the Indians led her mother and herself away as captives accounts in a large degree for the fact that her existence has been unknown here. The story had been told to some people living at a distance, but they did not for a moment



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realize the Interest which the recital holds for Chicago people, It never came to ears of anyone living in Chicago who realized its significance from the point of view of local interest.

When the Fort Dearborn massacre monument was erected by George Mr. Pullman the address upon the occasion of the unveiling was delivered by Edward G. Mason. A crowd had gathered at the scene of the massacre, at Eighteenth Street and the lake, and attracted by the gathering was Dr. N. Simmons of Lawrence, Kansas, who to be In Chicago at the time, He heard Mr. Mason's recital of the facts of the massacre and his graphic description of its details. As he listened Dr. Simmons remembered that a member of his family, though not closely related, was a corporal in Capt. Heald's company and had been killed at the fight upon the scene of which he was then standing. Dr. Simmons went to his home in Lawrence, Kansas, and looked up the matter of the family with the Fort Dearborn massacre. He found that the daughter of the corporal, Mrs. Susan Simmons Winans, was still living. Dr. Simmons obtained all the facts in the case with their proof and sent them to the President of the Chicago Historical Society, who has verified them to the last detail. The story is one of almost unparalleled heroism on the part of a woman and is of much romantic interest.

Was at the Massacre.

John Simmons and Susan Millhouse were married in 1808. The husband enlisted In Capt. Whistler's company, First United States Infantry, afterwards commanded by Capt. Nathan Heald, March 4, 1810, and was assigned for duty to Fort Dearborn. He was soon made a noncommissioned officer. A daughter was born Feb. 12, 1812, within the limits of the stockade of Fort Dearborn to the wife of Corporal Simmons. She was for her mother, Susan, and it is this child, still living, who passed through the perils which overlook the garrison.

In telling the story Dr. Simmons has put it down largely as it falls from the lips of this survivor of the massacre, who heard it time and again from her mother. It seems that Corporal Simmons realized, perhaps more than some of the others, the dangers that lay ahead of the garrison of the evacuation. He had an incentive, indeed, to perform a soldier's part. In his protection were his wife and two children, for one boy. David, had been born a year after marriage. During the day prior to the evacuation, Capt. Wells



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with his twenty friendly warriors of the Miami tribe arrived and Corporal Simmons heard Black Partridge declare to the Captain that the Indians intended to attack the whites. Corporal Simmons informed his wife that Capt. Heald had given the order to destroy the whisky and ammunition, and that he believed that when the Indians discovered this they would not hesitate to murder the garrison.

Died in His Family's Defense.

The children and the women, or the greater part of them, as has been known, were placed in the wagons. Corporal Simmons kissed his wife and children good-by and took his place with the guard. He told Mrs. Simmons to remain close by the children in the wagon and requested his commanding officer to give him a position as near the wagon as he consistently could in order that he might be so placed that he could defend his family to the last. The story of the fight and the massacre has been told many times. Everyone knows of the death of the brave Capt. Wells, of the cowardly and treacherous conduct of the Miamis, and of the slaughter of all but twenty-three of the fighting white men. The romantic escape by the aid of friendly Indians of Capt. and Mrs. Heald and Lieut. and Mrs. Helm has been narrated time and again. But it has remained to this latter day for the story of the heroism of Mrs. Simmons and the saving of her child to be made known.

When the attack was made Corporal John Simmons stood almost at the base of the great cottonwood tree, a portion of the trunk of which is now in the possession of the Historical Society. He was fighting to protect the wagon which contained his wife and children. He finally fell, but rose again with an effort, clubbed his gun, brained one of an assaulting party of braves, and fell dead.

How the Child Escaped.

No sooner had Mrs. Simmons seen her husband fall beneath the bows of the savages surrounding him than she realized that all in the wagon were at the mercy of the infuriated victors. A young Indian, tomahawk in hand, climbed into the now unguarded vehicle, and in utter disregard of the tears and importunities of Mrs. Simmons and the other women struck his weapon into the head of all the older children within, killing them instantly. When the infuriated Indian sank the blade of his tomahawk into the first child



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Mrs. Simmons pressed her baby to her breast and leaned over, secreting it in the folds of her dress. After killing the other children, one of whom was the little boy. David Simmons, the Pottawatomie staled his hand and leaped from the wagon. Three children besides those in the wagon were murdered at the same time.

Cruelty of the Indians.

No sooner had the savages completed the destruction of the wagon train than most of them ran to aid in the capture of Capt. Heald, who, with his party, was now surrounded by an overwhelming force from which there was no escape. After the surrender, as it is known, five of the disarmed soldiers were killed. Mrs. Simmons, with the other prisoners, was compelled by the savages to witness the butchery. She discovered that the delight of the Indians was much enhanced when they succeeded in wringing manifestations of pain and anger from their prisoners. She, therefore, summoned all her fortitude to prevent any expression of the anguish which was weighing on her soul. Her resolution was soon put to a crucial test. The Indians collected all of the murdered children and laid them in a row with their faces upward. Two burly braves then took the mother, still clasping her infant in her arms, and led her slowly past the children, expecting that if her boy was one of the number of the dead she would make some demonstration at the sight. She soon saw her murdered child, but she made no sign, never once during that the yielding to desire of the Indians to make her reveal her sorrow.

Made to Run the Gantlet.

When the Indians divided up their prisoners it fell to the lot of Mrs. Simmons to go to Green Bay, and her captors crossed the Chicago River and started for their home. During all that journey Mrs. Simmons was compelled to gather fuel, build fires, and prepare food for her captors. She walked and carried her babe the entire distance, something over 200 miles. More than a week was employed in making the journey. Swift runners heralded the approach of the party to the members of the tribe in camp, and the women and children sallied forth to meet the returned warriors. Upon the announcement of the death of their friends they commenced a fusillade of insults, spitting on the prisoners, pulling their hair, kicking them, and tormenting them in every way possible. The prisoners were marched to one end of a double line of savages



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composed of young and old, male and female, and were compelled to run the gantlet, receiving blows from clubs in the hands of those who formed the lines. Mrs. Simmons hoped that her sex and the infant she held in her arms would exempt her from the ordeal, but in response to the universal clamor she was led to the starting point. She looked for a moment in horror at the long line of savages armed with implements of torture and eager for the punishment to begin. She lost heart for a moment, but her courage came back as she thought of her child, which she dared not leave for fear that it would be killed, and wrapping it closely in a blanket and folding it in her strong arms, and bending forward to protect it from the cruel blows, she ran rapidly down the line, reaching the end, bruised and bleeding, but with the babe unharmed.

First Act of Kindness.

Immediately after passing the gantlet Mrs. Simmons was astonished to receive an act of kindness, an elderly squaw took her by the arm and led her into a wigwam where her wounds and bruises were washed and she was permitted to lie down and rest. In the autumn the warriors of Green Bay with their prisoners marched again to Fort Dearborn, passed the scene of massacre, skirted the end of Lake Michigan, and made their way to Mackinac. Mrs. Simmons and her child suffered terribly on this journey. Winter had come on and she was thinly clad as she had used a large part of her clothing to form a covering for her child, who perhaps owes today her health at an advanced age to the care exercised by the mother during that time of privation and peril. When they reached Green Bay the Indians attempted, by various devices, offer under pretext of friendship, to take the child away from its mother. They declared they would relieve her of the burden and rear Susan as one of their own children. These offers were unconditionally refused. One chief who had been refused the child many times at length seized it by the arm and attempted to drag it from its mother, at the same time brandishing a tomahawk over her head and threatening to kill her instantly unless she gave up her child. She defied him, saying: "You may kill me, but in no other way can you get my child. This was the last effort made to take the child from her, though she maintained a vigilant watch upon it while she remained a prisoner. The Indians paid no further attention to the infant except to demand that the mother bathe it several times daily in order, as they said, to wash the white blood out of its veins.

Next Taken to Detroit.



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From Mackinac Mrs. Simmons was sent in midwinter to Detroit, a distance of over 300 miles. The knowledge that the government authorities might ransom her and her child kept up the mother's strength and courage. The weather was almost unendurable and the food of the party was often nothing but acorns and nuts found under snow. The child, Susan, now a year old, had much increased in weight, yet with her own diminished strength the mother not only carried it constantly on the march, but generally held it in her arms while she performed the camp drudgery for the Indians. When Detroit was reached that post was in possession of the British and Indians, the latter having practically control. At the departure of Gen. Proctor, the British commander, the Indians butchered part of the prisoners in cold blood.

From Detroit Mrs. Simmons and her child were taken to Fort Meigs, which was then in command of Gen., Harrison. Here she was set at liberty and learned that a supply train had just arrived from Cincinnati and would immediately return under a strong escort. The train was to pass on its return within a few miles of her old home in Miami County in Ohio. That was 200 miles away, the streams were swollen, the swamps covered with water, the roads deep in mud and slush, and the weather chilly. But the contrast of this journey with the recent experience made it seem like a pleasure trip. She was now among friends and soon with her child was warmly wrapped in blankets and sheltered in a comfortable government wagon and on her way home. She arrived at the block house safely only to find that her trials were not over. Within a short time after reaching home her only sister and her sister's husband were killed by the Indians while they were at work in the field. Four little children were witnesses of the murders. The Indians were at that time on the warpath in Ohio, and it seemed to Mrs. Simmons' as if she had but gone from one danger to another as great. The body of Mrs. Simmons' sister was brought into the block house on the anniversary of the killing of her own husband and son under the cottonwood trees at Chicago.

Mrs. Winans Subsequent Movements.

Susan Simmons, the child who had passed through all these privations under the care of her mother, grew to womanhood in Ohio. There she met Moses Winans, whom she subsequently married. Mrs. Winans moved with her husband to Springville, Lynn County, Indiana in 1853. With them went the aged Mrs. Simmons, who died February



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27, 1857. Mr. and Mrs. Winans subsequently moved to California, and there Mrs. Winans is still living in the home of one of her daughters. Six of her children are living in Orange County, California and three in Iowa. Mrs. Simmons is 85 years of age (in 1896) but does not look much over 50. Her handwriting is firm and all her faculties are unimpaired.

An attempt was made by her friends to induce her to come to Chicago at the time of the World's Fair, but could not bring herself to undertake the journey.

Within the span of this woman's life has occurred everything in the history of Chicago since the year 1812. Her life was spared through trials, dangers, and tortures which would have broken down all else but the courage of a mother's love.

Death of Noted Chicago Woman at Santa Ana. April 27, 1900.

Mrs. Susan Simmons Winans of this city died at an early hour this morning, after an illness extending over several months. She was the first white child born in the city of Chicago, and was the sole survivor of the Fort Dearborn massacre in the year 1812, during which her older brother and father fell before the descending tomahawk of the Pottawatomies.

The deceased was the daughter of Corp. John Simmons of Capt. Whistler's company, First United States Infantry, and at the time of his tragic death, was six months old. Immediately after the Fort Dearborn massacre, Mrs. Simmons found her way back to her old home in Miami County, OH, where she lived until Susan grew to womanhood and was married to John Winans, after which he removed to Illinois, and then to California. Mrs. Winans has been a widow for many years, and has made her home with her widowed daughter, Mrs. L. K. Glenn, in this city, at the corner of Parton and Hickey streets. She was 88 years of age. [Los Angeles Times April 28, 1900.]

FAMILY:

Parents:

Corp. John Simmons (1790 - 1812)



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Susan D. Millhouse Simmons (1777 - 1857)

Spouse:

Moses Pryor Winans (1808 - 1871)

Children:

Hiram Webster Winans (1830 - 1914)

John Winans (1832 - 1869)

William Brown Winans (1833 - 1917)

Amy Winans Cornell (1833 - 1929)

Esther Jane Winans Goodlove (1836 - 1864)

David C Winans (1843 - 1921)

Lewis Winans (1844 - 1891)

Lydia Katherine Winans Glenn (1849 - 1926)

Sibling:

David Simmons (1810 - 1812)