

Simpson Family History (James' Line) Part 5 – The Founder

The last child of Jerome and Mabel Simpson is Melvin 'Mac' Simpson. Without him, the Museum would not be in existence. Mac, along with his wife Betty and numerous community builders dedicated so much time and energy to create a space that honoured/honors Canada's significant Black History. Mac was born on October 13, 1916, attended General Amherst High School, and went to the Detroit Conservatory of Music. He also played the drums and was an accomplished singer, even singing at the opening of the Cleary Auditorium in Windsor. There are several articles from the *Amherstburg Echo* that mention his talent including "Amherstburg Boy Sings" which says "The Detroit Conservatory of Music presented an open air recital of songs in the Detroit Symphony Shell, Belle Isle, Thursday, June 16. Melvin Thomas Simpson, pupil of Carl Mann ... The audience, like all audiences have heard him in the past year, appreciated his outstanding bass voice. Among those thrilled by his singing was his mother, Mrs. Jerome Simpson, of Amherstburg. Melvin received his first instruction from Mrs. Abbott, teacher of music in the Amherstburg Public School."

In addition to singing, Mac was the president of the A.A. & M. Goodfellows and also worked as a florist. Mac even gave presentations on plants and flowers as is reported in the article titled "Horticultural Society Hears Fine Local Speaker On Christmas Plants" which says "Melvin Simpson of the staff of Grays Greenhouses, gave a splendid talk on 'How to care for and hold over Poinsettias and Azaleas from Christmas to Christmas,' to the members of the Fort Malden Horticultural Society, meeting in the museum Tuesday evening. Mr. Simpson has been in greenhouse work for 10 years so he spoke with authority from his own experience. He was clear and generous with his tips, in answer to members' questions. At the conclusion of his talk, three Christmas plants were drawn for, winners being Jack East, Mrs. M. Parks and George McCurdy Sr."

Mac married twice. His first marriage was to Murtle Tiller and they had a son named Sheldon who was born in 1943. Mac's second marriage was to Betty Johnson-Hurst. Betty was first married to Burnie Hurst and they had a daughter named Joan Patricia, who was born on March 26, 1944. Joan first married Robert Browning and they had two children: Janisse and Richard. Joan later married Charlie Bray as well.

Betty was born on May 11, 1925 in Colchester South and was the youngest daughter of Harland and Harriet (Holland) Johnson. Betty worked at Hotel Dieu Hospital (Windsor Regional Hospital) for 25 years and began her career as part of the hospital's kitchen staff, later becoming an electro-diagnosis (EEG) technician. She also acted as Vice-President of the Museum's Board of Directors, past President of the Women's Auxiliary and a member of the Emancipation Day Committee. Additionally, following the passing of her husband, Mac Simpson, Betty continued the dream that she and Mac created with the Museum. She passed away on April 2, 2014.

In the book "Some Johnson Family Stories, From Slavery to Present," Betty recalls a fond memory with Mac and says "when Mac and I first danced it was in the Emancipation Dance. It was down at the old park down behind the school, and my brother Lloyd met his wife there. There was these pretty girls that come from Wyandotte, Michigan, and they were sharp, man. They had these great, big hats ... We had a lot of fun at the Emancipation."

Mac passed away on January 7, 1982 and was a respected community figure. His obituary shares many details and says "Melvin T. (Mac) Simpson, King Street, Amherstburg, who had recently realized his dream of a Black Museum for Amherstburg was the spark behind its fruition, of this project, died in Hotel Dieu last Thursday, in his 66th year. He was a native of old Amherstburg, being a son of Rome Simpson who was head gardener on Bob-Lo for years and his wife Mabel McCurdy. He was a member of the Nazery [sic] A.M.E. Church. Founder

and curator of the North American Black Museum; member of the Board of Directors the House of Shalom. He was husband of Betty (nee Johnson); father of Sheldon, Detroit; brother of Everette, Concrete, Washington; Wilfred, Detroit; Mrs. John [Dorothy] Dwelle, Detroit; Mrs. Burton [Kathleen] Clemons, California; and Corrine deceased. Three grandchildren. The funeral was in St. John the Baptist Church Saturday afternoon, conducted by Reverend Lloyd Jenkins, assisted by Reverend John Burkhart and Maynard Hurst. Burial was in Rose Hill Cemetery.”

Another tribute to Mac said “Anyone meeting Mac Simpson for the first time came away with an impression that he was something special. An individual who genuinely cared about others, and who would gladly offer any assistance he could provide to anyone who needed that assistance. He was a real citizen of the world; not caring who you were, or where you were from, or how long you'd been around.” According to the *Amherstburg Echo* over 600 people attended Mac’s funeral.

Thanks to the efforts of Mac and Betty, a Museum that shares the history and journey of Black Canadians exists in the small town of Amherstburg. We continue their legacy by celebrating the contributions of Black Canadians every day. To learn more about the Museum’s history, see our 45th Anniversary Celebration video on our YouTube page which includes interviews with people connected to the Museum -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WLV4YGoALQ>

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week where we will celebrate another amazing family.