

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
PROFESSOR EMERITUS MERLE E. SIMMONS
(September 27, 1918 - April 4, 2008)

Merle E. Simmons died in Bloomington on April 4, 2008, at the age of 89. He was born in Kansas City, MO, and received his BA (1939) and MA degrees from the University of Kansas. After serving as a teaching fellow at Harvard University and completing his PhD at the University of Michigan (1952), he came to Indiana University in 1951. By 1962 he had been promoted to the rank of Professor of Spanish and Professor of Folklore. Simmons was a quiet man – dedicated, persistent, and diligent. There were three major endeavors to which he dedicated himself in his quiet and humble, but decisive, way until his retirement in 1983: Colonial Spanish American literature and Hispanic folklore; the Department of Spanish and Portuguese – in his many years as professor, Director of Graduate Studies, and ultimately, as Chair -- and study abroad.

Professor Simmons’s research and teaching centered on Colonial Spanish American literature and on Hispanic folklore; he authored a number of books and articles in those fields. As a teacher and mentor he passed on these passions not only to many talented students but also to younger faculty. His interests extended from the study of the early chroniclers of the Spanish conquest in America to the later quest for independence. It was the latter research, after Simmons retired, which earned him international recognition. In 1984, he was named “Individuo Correspondiente” of the Venezuelan National Academy of History. Then, in 1989, the government of Peru awarded him the highest honor that it can confer on a foreigner, the “Order of the Sun” with the rank of “Oficial Mayor”.

Simmons numbered among that generation of scholars here at Indiana University who created and defined the discipline of folklore. Fellow folklorist John McDowell wrote in a fitting tribute, “He was a gentle soul and a wonderful scholar. His connection to folklore came through his interest in the traditional song of Spanish America, and he made major contributions to the study of the Mexican *corrido*... An important episode is Merle’s 1963 exchange with Américo Paredes in the pages of the *Journal of American Folklore*. The debate concerned the antiquity of Mexico’s *corridos* – Simmons argued that heroic verse resembling the *corrido* had been bouncing around Latin America for centuries; Paredes responded that only in Mexico did this traditional verse take root to foster a ballad tradition. As befit the temperament of these two gentlemen, this debate was carried out in a manner both earnest and genteel.”

Professor Simmons’s administrative service within the College of Arts and Sciences also had a triple thrust. The first was his great desire to improve the teaching of Spanish in the state of Indiana, and for several years, he directed Spanish teacher training in the department. But he also established strong personal relationships with teachers from all over the state through the Indiana chapter of the American Association of Teachers of

Spanish and Portuguese. There was a time when the majority of Spanish teachers in Indiana knew Simmons personally and esteemed him as their mentor.

From 1967 to 1976, Simmons served as the Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. He then chaired the department until illness slowed him down in 1981. In 1996, in recognition of Professor Simmons's ongoing support of graduate student development, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, then chaired by Professor Darlene Sadlier, established the annual Merle E. Simmons Distinguished Alumni Lecture Series.

Simmons believed strongly in the internationalization of post-secondary education. In the 1940s he took the first group of students from Indiana University to Mexico in order for them to know what it was like to travel and study abroad, laying the foundations for what would become the Office of Overseas Study, an organization that would project Indiana University into the forefront of study abroad programs across the United States. In 1959, he established the IU Lima, Peru program, the first Indiana University foreign study program and the first United States study abroad program in South America. In 1964, Simmons was responsible for the establishment of Indiana University programs in Spain, France, Italy and Germany, and he administered all of these programs for their initial four years. He also served as resident director for programs in Mexico and Spain numerous times. In addition to creating the IU program in Mexico City, Simmons, along with Fred Jackson of the CIC, established the CIC Summer Program in Oaxaca, Mexico for advanced undergraduate study.

Notes from former students express deep appreciation and respect for Merle Simmons. Julie Greer Johnson, PhD 1972, wrote, "I met Merle Simmons in 1965, when I went to the IU campus for an interview for the Junior Year Abroad Program in Peru, a meeting for which I will be forever grateful. From that time until his death, he was a true friend and wise mentor to me. He was the best teacher I ever had. His careful, comprehensive instruction provided a solid foundation for my career in research and teaching, and his diligent counsel inspired me to always do my best." Marcia A. Hakala, PhD 1970, observed, "Dr. Simmons was a brilliant—yet unassuming—scholar, an outstanding professor, and an extraordinary human being. He challenged students to question and to excel academically, by his own example and through his high expectations for them. He was my inspiration as well as my mentor...the one after whom I tried to model my own professional career. It was an honor to have known him." In 2007, in recognition of Simmons's forty years of research, teaching, and mentoring, August Aquila, PhD 1973, initiated the Merle E. Simmons Travel Fellowship for Research on Latin American Literature, a lasting memorial to a distinguished educator.

Merle Simmons is survived by his wife of fifty-nine years, Concepción (Concha), and his daughters and their families: Martha (Marta) Simmons Wright and Leo of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Mary Alice (María) Hamilton and Jason of Bloomington; grandchildren are Andrea and Emily Hunt of Athens, GA, and Raquel, Alejandra, and Isabel Roberts-Hamilton and Antonio Hamilton of Bloomington.

His colleagues request that this memorial resolution be presented to the Bloomington Faculty Council and be made part of its minutes, and that copies be sent to the President of the University, the University Archive, and to the family members and friends named herein.

Russell O. Salmon (now deceased)

Associate Professor Emeritus, Department of Spanish and Portuguese

Catherine Larson

Professor and Chair, Department of Spanish and Portuguese