

James F. Simonet, Washington County Surveyor

James F. Simonet, LS 705, November 26, 1906 – November 18, 1993



James F. Simonet - 1951

From his point of beginning, Jim, as he preferred to be called by friends and business acquaintances, was born November 26, 1906 to Julia and Felix Simonet. Raised on the corner of South 4th Street and West Walnut Street in Stillwater, MN, Jim grew up in the shadows of the Washington County Courthouse. During his high school year, Jim played football for the Stillwater Red and Black as a guard and center. He was on the team in 1926, when the Red and Black beat Humboldt High School. As a result of that win, a Stillwater Gazette sports writer coined the name Ponies from the fleet footed Red and Black efforts. Jim graduated from Stillwater High School in 1927. Besides school work, Jim was an active member of the Minnesota Army National Guard Howitzer Company from Stillwater, MN. One of their annual military trainings took place at the north end of Lake Pepin in Lake City, MN in 1928.

For the next couple of years, Jim worked for the Milwaukee Road Railroad Company located in Minneapolis, MN. The old railroad depot still stands on the corner of Washington Avenue and Central Avenue. His office was located on the third floor, south eastern corner. Jim would take the engineer drawings, secured to a large rig and place the drawings on the clock tower to develop blueprints. Later in 1929, his adventure with Milwaukee Road found Jim in the remote location of Scenic, SD managing the rail line in this western South Dakota town.

Between working, Jim continued his studies at Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis, MN from 1928 to 1933. While at Dunwoody, Jim received advance surveying instruction from Mr. Westley, graduating in 1933 with a degree in surveying. He gained a license to survey and was issued license number LS705 on March 18, 1933.

Jim spent time with the Washington County Highway Department. It was here he perfected his drawing of land maps and surveying technics.

In 1934, Jim ran for the elected position of Washington County Surveyor. His opponent in the 1934 race was L. Norton Clarke LS1134, the incumbent Washington County Surveyor. Per the November 8, 1934 Stillwater Gazette, Simonet received 2,489 votes to Clarke's 1,775; winning 16 of the 21 voting districts. He served a four year term from 1935 to 1938. During this term, Jim was a contributing partner with Hudson Map Company and published the 1936 Washington County Plat Book. In 1949, Atlas Map Company published a Plat Book for Washington County. Most



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of the same data found in the 1949 Atlas Plat Book was based on Jim's original plat book published 13 years earlier.

In the November 10, 1938 Stillwater Gazette, Jim Simonet ran un-opposed for the position of County Surveyor receiving 8,705 votes. He left office in 1939 to join the US Army Corp of Engineers. L Norton Clarke LS1134 finished Jim's term as the Washington County Surveyor.

With the war looming in Europe and Asia, Jim re-entered military service. His duties brought him to a variety of places to include Fort Peck, MT, Burlington, NY, and St. Paul, MN. While assigned to the Corp, Jim was responsible to test and inspect a variety of equipment. Stories from the family remember him telling of testing a plywood landing craft on Lake Minnetonka. The crew would run the 'boat' as fast as they could towards shore. When they hit the shoreline, the crew found themselves tumbling head over heels out of the destroyed craft. He also inspected the Lock and Dam system along the Mississippi River. His area of responsibilities started at the Upper Saint Anthony Falls lock in Minneapolis, MN down to Dubuque, IA. On many of these trips, he took his kids along to see other parts of the country. On one trip, he pulled the two eldest girls out of school for a couple of days. When the girls returned to school they were met with an extra assignment from the good Sisters. The two siblings were supposed to document 5 times the statistics of different countries. Jim helped the girls out by providing carbon paper to lessen the task.

The highlight of his US Army Corp duty was while station at Holman Field in St. Paul, MN. During this time, Holman Field was outfitting B-24 bombers for war service, Jim was responsible for inspecting the fuel tanks prior to the airplane being dispatched overseas. Part of the inspection process required the removal of gas from the tanks for inspection. Per US Army Regulation, any gas removed from the tanks was to be destroyed. Gasoline rationing was the law at this time of the war and extra gas was a cherished commodity. The amount of gas provided by rationing was never enough for any family. Jim found this extra gas could work in the vehicles of the time. So he found ways to allocate the extra gasoline to his co-workers based on their need. One day, the Officer in Charge (OIC) was walking through the hanger. Jim quickly told a co-worker to dump the gas into a drain, as this was US Army Regulations. The OIC continued his walk but called for Jim to meet him in his office. Jim came into the office, stood in front of the desk, reported to the OIC and saluted smartly. The OIC told him if he ever caught Jim pouring gas down the drains again and not give it to needy co-workers, he and Jim would have a serious conversation. The OIC also reminded Jim that this talk never happened. Jim asked the OIC if that was all, saluted smartly, did an about face, and smirked all the way back to the hanger to continue the allocation of this precious commodity to his fellow co-workers.

In 1958, Jim was approached by the Washington County Commissioners to step into the vacant role of County Surveyor. He held this position from 1959 to 1966. At this time, he also owned his own private surveying practice. Originally, the private practice found a home on the family dining room table with his work spread out taking every corner of the table. Later, he located the business on East Chestnut Street in Stillwater, MN. While in private practice, Jim completed 35 plats that are recorded in the Washington County Register of Deeds office starting in the year 1935. Each plat was hand drawn and calculated with a slide ruler or mechanical

Friden calculator. He also completed surveys in surrounding counties and across the river as a registered land surveyor for Wisconsin.

As the County Surveyor, Jim purchased the first electronic calculator sold by Friden, the EC-130. The Friden EC-130 was the first solid state calculator with a small four inch by four inch screen. The calculator could add, subtract, multiple and divide. To do more complicated calculations like square roots, sines and cosine, you pulled out the user manual and plugged in the numbers based on detailed instructions.

Jim was selected by his surveying peers to be the Minnesota Land Surveyors Association Treasurer and eventually their President in 1964. As the 12th president, Jim gathered surveying artifacts from the family of Myron Shepard to include the Vernier Compass. These artifacts were on display at the Stillwater Book and Stationary during the annual Minnesota Land Surveyors convention. He left his private practice and the Washington County Surveyor position at the end of 1966. Arthur M. Holms LS 7447, a business associate, purchased the private practice from Jim and moved the surveying business to Lake Elmo, MN.

Jim ran for Washington County Register of Deeds in 1966 winning the vacated seat held by his cousin Edward W. Simonet, Sr. Jim ran again in 1970 and 1974 being re-elected both times. His continuous campaign slogan was "Vote for the Man Who Knows Your Land". A fitting slogan for an individual that walked many miles in the hills and valleys of Washington County, MN.

Jim's first task as Register of Deeds was installing a microfilming process. He worked closely with 3M to understand the microfilm machine and to receive valuable guidance. Early models of the 3M machine had a serious flaw with the small microfilm staying adhered to the computer card. To prove 3M had fixed the problem, the technician challenged Jim to poke the film off the card stock. When Jim failed to dislodge the film, 3M won the filming contract. Jim retired from Washington County Records (Register of Deeds) office in 1978.

Jim was married to Phyllis M Walsh for 56 years, together they raised nine children; three girls and six boys.

On November 17, 1993, Jim attended an investment seminar held at Dunwoody Institute. He spent the night at a daughter's home celebrating a grandchild's birthday. On November 18, 1993, Jim was heading to another son's home to return a wooden brace for an US Army surplus cot. He died on Interstate 35W just past Northeast Broadway Street. This unique location is on the world's 45 degree latitude line: a fitting place for a surveyor to "Return to the Point of Beginning".