

# Al Simmons, Two-Time Hit King of A. L., Dies at 53

Hall of Famer Batted .334 in 21-Year Major Career; Led A's to Three Pennants

By ART MORROW

Baseball last week mourned the passing of one of its greatest players, **Al Simmons**. The former outfielder died of a heart seizure in his native city of Milwaukee on the morning of Saturday, May 26, four days after his fifty-third birthday. He was perhaps the last of a vanishing species.

The Duke of Milwaukee had an abiding faith in Connie Mack. He loved baseball. He liked and respected old teammates, and even a few former rivals. But they had to be former rivals.

He hated anyone—and everyone—who didn't wear the uniform he wore.

Especially pitchers. "Those guys are tryin' to take the meat and potatoes right off my plate, the bread and butter out of my mouth," he said "I hate them."

Pitchers also had reason to hate Al. In a major league playing career that began with the Athletics in 1924 and ended with the same club in '44, Simmons knocked out 2,927 hits, including 307 homers. He drove in 1,827 runs. In four World's Series, one with the Redlegs, he hit .329. In the first three All-Star games, he swung at .462. He had a lifetime batting average of .334.

Six times he was named to THE SPORTING NEWS All-Star teams. Twice he led the American League in hitting, in 1930 and '31, and three times he was runner-up, once—in 1927—with an average of .392, a point below Detroit's late Harry Heilmann. Over an 11-year stretch with the A's and White Sox he never drove in less than 102 runs, and over another five-year span he delivered a minimum of 200 hits.

Connie Wished for Nine Like Al. He had more hits in 1925 and '32, more total bases in '25 and '29 and runs-batted-in in '29 than any other American leaguer.

In the spring of 1949 somebody asked Connie Mack which player he regarded as his key man. The A's had made a good run for the pennant in '48, and the interviewer sat back to await the answer, expecting the late, great diamond pioneer to introduce the name of one of his current representatives.

The Grand Patriarch weighed the question a moment, then gave a revealing answer:

"I wish," he said, "I had nine players named Al Simmons."

In 1953, two years after his retirement as a coach with the Indians, Mack's greatest righthanded hitter was named on 199 of 264 ballots for a niche in the Hall of Fame at Cooperstown.

Born Aloysius Harry Szymanski at Milwaukee, May 22, 1903, he grew up in a Polish neighborhood with one ambition—to become a ball player. He went to Stevens Point Teachers College as a football player, but when the opportunity arose finally for a baseball contract, he forgot all else.

"If I hadn't been a fresh kid, I'd never have been a ball player," Al used to tell friends. "When I tried out for Milwaukee, the manager got me aside.

Advised to "Forget" Game. "Kid," he told me, "I don't think you'll ever make a ball player. You do too many things wrong. Why don't you just get a job and forget it?"

But the brash youngster was in no mood to forget the game, and the old Brewers must have been a little impressed. They signed him in 1922, and farmed him out to Aberdeen in the Dakota League, where he hit .365.

Oddly enough, Milwaukee was not the Duke's first choice. He had always admired Roger Bresnahan, and he wrote the former catcher about a job with Toledo. Bresnahan and the Mud Hens of that era were close to John McGraw and the Giants, and there has been much speculation over the years as to the course baseball history might have taken if Simmons had been granted his first wish. But Bresnahan did not answer Al's letter; perhaps he never received it.

Advised by friends that anyone with a name as long as Szymanski scarcely could expect to find a job anywhere in baseball—times have changed, as Ted Kluszewski can attest—the kid wrote another letter, this one to Connie Mack. Influenced by a sign he'd read over a hardware house, he signed this missive "Al Simmons."

Mack replied, negatively but kindly. There were no openings on the Phila-

## Bucketfoot Star



Al Simmons

delphia squad, Connie explained, but they would keep an eye on him. As good as his word, the Old Gent had his one-time field captain, Harry Davis, look up Simmons when he came into Aberdeen on a scouting mission. Davis was there to inspect a star outfielder named Wid Matthews, but he also submitted a report on Simmons.

The following year, Simmons played at Shreveport under Mack's old catcher, Ira Thomas, and more reports filtered into Shibe Park. Al hit .360 in the Texas League and finished the season by batting .398 in 24 games with Milwaukee.

Winter headlines featured the purchase of Paul Strand from Salt Lake City for the then-fabulous price of \$75,000. But the A's also made a down payment of \$25,000 on another outfielder, Simmons. With a batting average of .228, Strand was back in the minors before the season was half over. Simmons went on to 20 years as a player and seven more as a coach. Dubbed "Bucketfoot Al"

Yet even his preceptor was dubious in the spring of '24 when he first spotted Simmons in spring training with the Athletics at Montgomery, Ala. The kid's form was unorthodox, to put it mildly. In stepping up to the ball, Simmons also strode away from it, his left foot landing squarely in the direction of the third base dugout.

"Foot in the bucket," older players derided his style. Sports writers dubbed him, "Bucketfoot Al."

Mack, probably concerned with the possibility of pouring good money after bad, asked the owner of the Milwaukee club—Otto Borchert—to come to Montgomery for a conference. But Borchert had seen more of the rookie than had Mack. He was so confident Simmons would make good that he promised to return the A's down payment if Mack were dissatisfied with the bargain as of July 4.

Connie did not wait that long to complete the transaction, for within short order the kid from Milwaukee was splattering the fences with base hits.

Still, fellow players and fans alike persisted in laughing over his stance even after the A's had opened the season and Simmons had gained a place in the upper brackets at the plate. The rookie, worried as well as nettled, climbed up to the tower at Shibe Park one day to see the boss about it.

"I came to see you about my batting, Mr. Mack," Al said, after an exchange of the amenities.

"Your batting, Al? What's wrong with it?"

"Well," Al said, somewhat lamely, according to his own version of the conversation, "the older players don't seem to think very much of my style. I was wondering what I should do to change it."

"Nothing," Mack said. "Don't worry about what the other players think or say. I'm the one you have to satisfy—and I'm satisfied right now. Just keep on hitting the way you are."

Simmons continued plopping his foot toward the dugout, and with some amazing results, but he never did cotton to the foot-in-the-bucket description. Once he came storming into the

## Simmons and Foxx Rivalled Ruth-Gehrig One-Two Punch

PHILADELPHIA, Pa.—Back in the late 1920s and early '30s, one of the main topics of debate revolved around the question as to which club possessed the more valuable one-two punch—the Athletics, with Al Simmons and Jimmy Foxx, or the Yankees, with Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth.

Each combination proved invaluable, but the question boiled down to the age-old debate between righthanders and lefthanders. Simmons and Foxx both batted righthanded; Gehrig and Ruth swung in southpaw fashion.

clubhouse so angrily, leaving a swarm of photographers in his wake, that Jimmie Dykes asked what happened.

"You know what those dirty so-and-so's have out there?" Simmons demanded. "A whole string of water buckets—and they want me to pose in front of them!"

"If I could hit like you can," said Jimmie, ever the pacifier, "I wouldn't mind letting them take a picture of me standing on my head."

Somewhat mollified, Al posed for the picture, but to the end he protested that his was no foot-in-the-bucket style. In the first place, he pointed out, he did not stand with feet straddled wide, as do so many modern sluggers, but moved around in the batter's box and strode forward to meet the pitch. Unlike others with such an open stance, he could—and did—hit to any field. Indeed, he slammed almost as many home runs to right as he did to left. He went with the pitch.

Did What Came Naturally

"A fellow's got to hit the way that comes naturally to him," Al maintained. "Nobody can change a guy all around and make a good hitter out of him. Hitters are born, not made. I'm not saying that a hitter can't improve himself with a tip here and there. But a fellow has to swing the way it feels most comfortable to him."

It was his opinion that many players are overcoached—given so many instructions they become confused—and under neither Mack in Philadelphia nor Lou Roudreau at Cleveland did he ever tamper with a batter's style.

After that first spring with the A's, no one joked about Al's style. Results left skeptics with no points to dispute.

Simmons' single and home run featured the Athletics' astonishing rally of June 15, 1925, when they scored 13 times in the eighth inning to win, 17 to 15, after trailing at 15 to 4. That victory, incidentally, kept the A's a notch ahead of the Washington Senators at the top of the American League heap.

Simmons' homer touched off the historic ten-run rally in the fourth game of the 1929 World's Series with the Cubs, his subsequent single kept it alive and the second run he scored in the frame was the one that put Philadelphia in front. In the next game, after Mule Haas had tied the score at 2-all with a homer in the ninth, Simmons doubled against the scoreboard and came in on a single by Bing Miller with the run that decided the Series.

Al clobbered two home runs in each of his three World's Series with the Macks, and it was not his fault the A's lost the post-season classic to the Card in '31. He drove in eight runs in that seven-game scramble.

Hit Grand-Slam in Pinch

But one of the occasions old teammates remembered best was a Memorial Day double-header with Washington in 1930. The Senators, surprisingly, had pulled four and a half games ahead of the Athletics and held a 6 to 3 lead over Lefty Grove with two out and two on in the ninth inning of the morning game. Simmons tied the score with a homer—and in the thirteenth he led off with a double, advanced on Dykes' infield safety and came in on Eric McNair's single.

But in making the turn at third, Al ruptured a blood vessel in his knee, and only reluctantly did the team physician consent to his remaining around the park for possible emergency use in the afternoon game.

"If he does bat," said Dr. John Carnett, "he'll have to hit a homer, because he can't run."

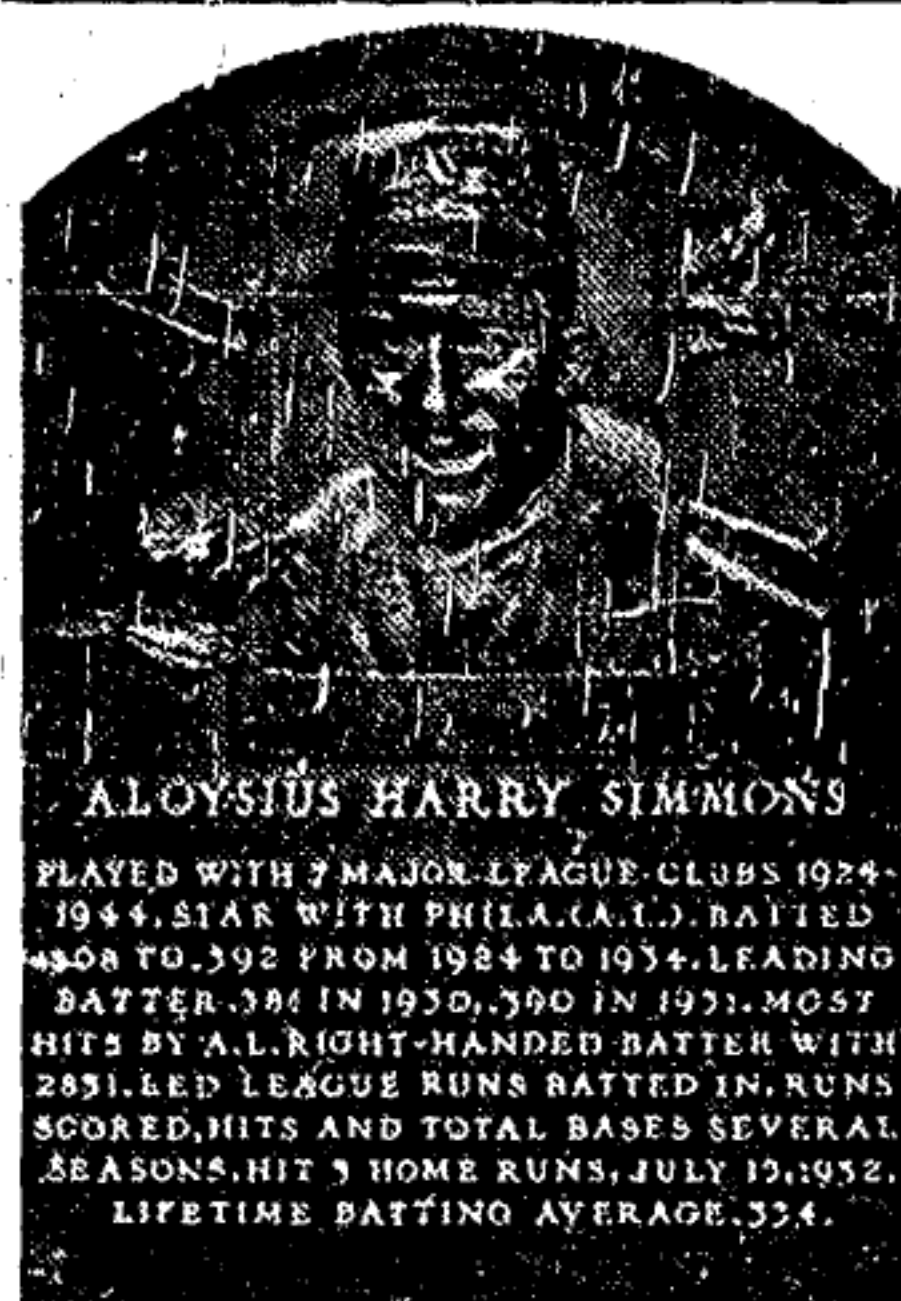
Came the fourth inning, the Senators again in front, 7 to 4, and bases loaded.

"This is the spot the doctor meant, Al," said C. Mack, crooking a bony finger.

Al hit a grand-slam—and the A's went on to win, 14 to 7.

"He followed the doctor's orders," said Miller, still marveling last week. Then there was the opening game with the Yankees in 1932. Al was a holdout that year, not for the first time, and still was arguing with Mack and the Shibe brothers, Tom and John, as his mates took batting and infield

## Shrine Scorecard



ALOYSIUS HARRY SIMMONS  
PLAYED WITH 7 MAJOR LEAGUE CLUBS 1924-1944. STAR WITH PHILA. (A.L.) BATTED .334 TO .392 FROM 1924 TO 1934. LEADING BATTER .394 IN 1930, .390 IN 1931. MOST HITS BY A.L. RIGHTE-HANDED BATTER WITH 2851. LED LEAGUE RUNS BATTED IN. RUNS SCORED, HITS AND TOTAL BASES SEVERAL SEASONS. HIT 7 HOME RUNS, JULY 12, 1932. LIFETIME BATTING AVERAGE, .324.

SIMMONS' achievements in the game are inscribed on this plaque in the Hall of Fame.

practice. But amid howls of glee from the stands, the Duke came chugging out of the dugout to take his place in left field when the game began.

He hit a home run on his first time at bat, and both Connie and the Shibes were glad they'd bowed to Simmons' demands—a \$100,000 contract covering three years. But there was a depression, and the A's failed to repeat in the pennant race. To raise cash, and cut down their bloated payroll, they sold Simmons along with Dykes and Haas at season's end to the White Sox for \$150,000.

Lou Comiskey had home plate moved in order to bring Al closer to the stands in Chicago, and he had two good years. But when he sloughed off to .267 in 1935, the Chisox consigned him to Detroit for \$75,000, with Frank Navin barely beating the Yanks' Colonel Jake Ruppert to the draw.

Simmons hit .327 for ex-teammate Mike Cochrane, but the Tigers missed their third straight championship in '36, and for some reason, fans held Al at least partly responsible. So Detroit sold his contract to Washington for \$15,000 the following April, and after hitting only .279 in 1937, he pulled himself up to .302 the next year.

Resented \$200 Fine by Griff

But late in the season he became involved in an altercation with spectators at his old stomping grounds, Shibe Park, and Clark Griffith fined him \$200. Incensed that the club, rather than the American League, should impose such a fine—he'd already paid a \$50 impost placed upon him by Will Harridge for a run-in with an umpire—Simmons charged Griff with trying to recover some of the bonus he'd agreed to pay if Al hit .300.

Griffith disposed of Simmons to the Boston Braves in December for \$3,000, and the slugger finished the '39 season in the World's Series with the Reds.

Released by the National League champions, he spent the next three seasons back in Philadelphia, one as a coach, essayed a comeback with the Red Sox in '43, then returned to the Athletics. He appeared in four games with the A's in '44, and had three hits, but in his sixth time at bat he lined into a double play as a pinch-hitter. That was the end.

"I'd like to keep going until I had 3,000 hits," Al said. "But I want people to remember me as a good hitter."

As one-time Washington teammate Goose Goslin commented the day Simmons died, "He was at his best when a game was at stake," but if he had not skipped late turns at bat and skipped non-essential games on many occasions in order to visit his old Milwaukee haunts, Al undoubtedly would have earned a place in the select circle of those with 3,000 hits.

Tribute From Lefty Grove

One day in the West a Philadelphia rookie muffed a ball that spelled an end to a 16-game winning streak for Grove.

"Don't blame the kid too much," Dykes cajoled the muttering fireballer in the club house. "After all—"

"I'm not blaming the kid," snarled the terrible-tempered Grove. "It's that blankety-blank Simmons. If he hadn't gone to Milwaukee, he'd have been out there to catch that ball."

But upon learning of Simmons' death last week, the silver-thatched Grove remarked: "You can say for me that he was one of the greatest left fielders who ever played."

The spring he first appeared with the A's, 1924, no one stopped to consider that Al had handled 228 chances without committing an error at Aberdeen in his first season of Organized Ball. There was talk he couldn't go to his left for a ball, and Danny Murphy,

## Priest Persuaded Simmons' Mother to Let Al Enter O. B.

MIAMI, Fla.—Except for intervention by a priest, Al Simmons, who died May 26, might not have become a ball player, relates Eddie Stumpf, Miami Marlin general manager and discoverer of the Hall of Fame star.

"I first saw Simmons when he was playing semi-pro ball with Juneau, Wis., under his original name of Aloysius Szymanski," Stumpf recalled. "After seeing him hit two home runs off Spencer Heath, a spitballer, I became interested in him."

Stumpf at the time was a roving scout for Milwaukee of the American Association. He invited Simmons to the Brewers' park for a workout and told Business Manager Louie Nahin that he had a Polish boy who wanted to become a ball player.

Simmons was signed for \$65 a month, but the persuasiveness of a priest interested in the game was necessary to gain the consent of Simmons' mother.

"She was afraid her son would lose his religion if he played baseball," Stumpf recalled.

"When Simmons was sold to the Philadelphia Athletics and started making good money, he bought his mother a house for \$6,000," Stumpf said. "Later, when given a \$100,000 contract for three years by Connie Mack, Al bought an annuity which guaranteed his mother \$125 a month."

Until the past two years, Simmons had wintered in Miami. BURNS.

an outstanding outfielder, took him in hand.

Simmons practiced for hours on end in the field, and he became so proficient that after tying for the top percentage mark in '29, he had the best average of all both in '30 and '36. "He never threw to the wrong base," Murphy said.

Al was so adept with the glove that Mack frequently stationed him in center field, and there, in 1927, he played between Tris Speaker and Ty Cobb. This is perhaps the only outfield that ever operated as a unit with three members of the Hall of Fame.

Halted Gehrig's Great Day

One June day in 1932, Lou Gehrig played what Philadelphians regard still as probably his greatest game. He hit four straight home runs. Nevertheless, the Yankees' lead was only 14 to 12 until they broke loose with half a dozen more markers in the ninth, and the inning might have been going yet if Simmons hadn't finally stopped Gehrig. Lou slammed a screaming line drive toward the flag-pole in left-center—harder, he said later, than any of his homers—but Simmons, who had been shifted over from left in the course of the afternoon, came dashing cross-country for a leaping, twisting catch that ended the frame.

More than 15 years later someone asked Simmons whether he wasn't sorry, in retrospect and in view of the inevitable outcome of the game, he'd spoiled Gehrig's great day.

"Sorry?" flared the Duke of Milwaukee. "Why should I be sorry? Why should he have a triple besides four home runs?"

Even as a third base coach, Simmons fired up as he had as a player. Umpires, expelling him for protesting too hotly over decisions with which he disagreed, considered Al's boiling point very low indeed. He remained with the A's through 1949, and directed third base traffic for the Indians in '50. He left Cleveland in the spring of '51, and though he served as director of the New York Journal-American's sandlot program in 1954, he appeared no more in Organized Ball.

Spent Winters in Florida

A winter visitor to Hollywood, Fla., Al spent most of his summers in his native Milwaukee, residing at the Milwaukee Athletic Club. Laden with bundles, he rode up to the door there in a taxicab at 2:30 o'clock on the morning of May 26. The driver went into the building to summon a bellhop, and when he returned, Al was lying on the pavement.

Rushed by ambulance to the Milwaukee County Emergency Hospital, he was pronounced dead on arrival.

The death came as a shock to friends and relatives. Although he underwent treatment earlier in the spring for phlebitis, an inflammation of the blood vessels in the lower leg, he had no history of coronary trouble.

After Mass at St. Hyacinth's Roman Catholic Church in Milwaukee, he was buried in St. Adalbert's Cemetery on Tuesday, May 29.

Survivors included his ex-wife, the former Doris Lynn Reader of Racine, Wis., a resident of Miami; a son, John Allen Simmons, a student at the University of Georgia; two brothers, Walter Simmons and Anthony Szymanski, and three sisters, Mrs. Frances Novak, Mrs. Tillie Mazurek and Mrs. Anna Mischker, of Milwaukee.