

A Capitol Idea: Alum built float for inaugural parade

GW's Congressional charter gave University special treatment in 1940s

by Nathan Grossman
Assistant News Editor

The date was Jan. 20, 1949, a day that most remember for President Harry Truman's inaugural address. But for Frank Peter Simmons, an alumnus of *The Hatchet*, the inaugural parade was his most memorable experience of the day.

Simmons, then an undergraduate student in the School of Engineering and Applied Science at GW, planned and helped create the first – and to this day, only – GW-sponsored float for a presidential inauguration.

"(University President Cloyd Heck) Marvin had reserved seats in the VIP (viewing) stands on Pennsylvania Avenue and he let me sit with him," said Simmons, who served as managing director of *The Hatchet*. "As the float went by the White House to a big round of applause, I felt this warm feeling of pride in GWU."

Marvin, who served as GW's President from 1927 to 1959, later sent Simmons a letter recalling the moment.

"It was dusk when the float came down toward the presidential (VIP viewing grandstand)," Marvin wrote to him in the letter. "The lighting of the float, as it was softened in the lowering darkness made the float stand out as no other float stood out."

Simmons said he first got the idea to create a float the previous fall when he decided GW's Foggy Bottom location made it a prime candidate to participate in the inaugural parade.

Simmons was originally rebuffed by the inaugural committee and told they only allow organizations chartered by Congress to create floats.

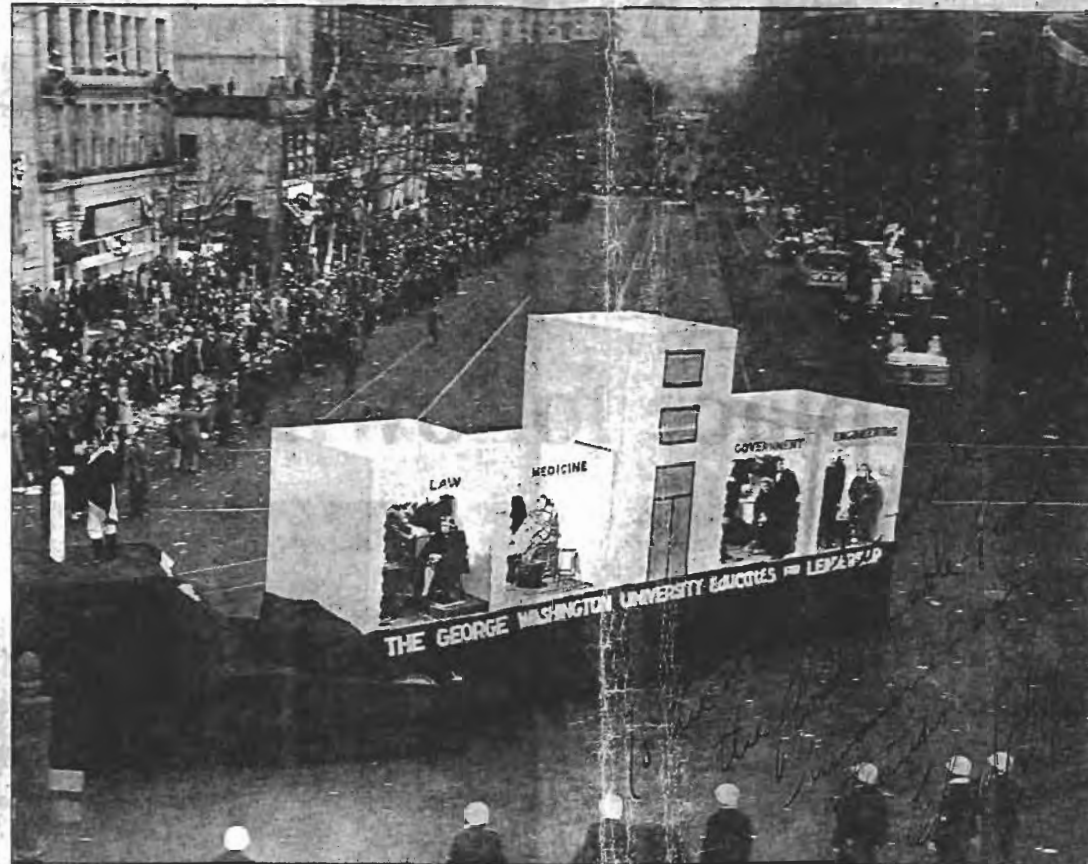
Disappointed at first, Simmons soon realized he was not out of luck. In fact, GW was created by an act of Congress.

"I went down to the Library of Congress and made a copy of GW's original charter," he said. "When I went back to the Inaugural Committee they told me that we could have our float."

Simmons said *The Hatchet* held a contest in which students could submit designs for the perspective float. Simmons and his fellow editors decided on a model that featured all four of GW's undergraduate schools with the slogan "The George Washington University educates for leadership."

With help from a number of students, Simmons said the float didn't take very long to build.

"We rented a flatbed truck for the occasion



Courtesy Frank Simmons

The Hatchet float travels down Pennsylvania Avenue during Harry Truman's inaugural parade. The sections highlight GW's four undergraduate schools at the time: Law, Medicine, Government and Engineering. The photo is signed by former University President Cloyd Heck Marvin.



Courtesy Frank Simmons

Frank Simmons, who spearheaded the creation of the inaugural parade float in 1949, sits with his wife Dottie.

and parked it by the float," he said. "Then all of us who had been helping build it picked it up and placed it on the truck. We also had to go rent a generator to light it."

Simmons arrived at GW in the fall of 1946 after having served as an instructor in communications at Ft. Benning in Georgia, during World War II. Born in Monessen, Pa., he originally wanted to be a forest ranger and used the GI Bill to study at Pennsylvania State University after the war. But a visit to Washington quickly changed his mind.

"I went to the National Forest Service building, and I got to talk to the chief forester," Simmons remembered. "He said, 'With your background in communications you shouldn't be a forest ranger, you should be an engineer. Look, my brother's the dean of the engineering school at George Washington University over at 21st and G Street, I'll give him a call.'"

Simmons agreed and was verbally accepted into the School of Engineering and Applied Science that same day. After beginning classes that fall, Simmons said one day a representative from admissions pulled him out of class and asked him to fill out paper work so the University would officially have him on the books as a student.

"It was a really great feeling that they were taking me on the faith that I would be a good student," Simmons said. "Because of that, I always had a good feeling about being at GW."

His first job was with the National Cash Register Company developing magnetized check numbers that an oscilloscope could read.

"You know those numbers at the bottom of a check. Well, those are my numbers," Simmons said.

Simmons later worked for the Grunman Corporation, an aerospace engineering firm best known for creating the Tailhook airplane. During his time there, he played a lead role in developing four Orbiting Astronomical Observatory telescopes, the first telescopes put into space and the model used to create the Hubble Space Telescope.

Today, Simmons lives in Battlement Mesa, Colorado, with Dottie, his wife of more than 50 years. While no students have taken it upon themselves to build another inaugural parade float, Simmons is hopeful that a student – preferably one involved with *The Hatchet* – will follow in his footsteps.

"GW has this special opportunity that no other school has," he said. "I don't see why no one else has tried it." ■