Naming Rights

> The University of Texas once admired Ku Klux Klan organizer and law professor William Stewart Simkins. Today the UT System's regents meet to consider whether the tree-shaded all-male residence on San Jacinto Boulevard that bears his name still should.

BY ELIZABETH TITUS JULY 15, 2010 5 AM



Caleb Bryant Miller

The story of this old dorm — a locked, two-story brick building beside a half-empty creek — would have been unremarkable save for its namesake. The university that once admired law professor and Ku Klux Klan organizer William Stewart Simkins now largely scorns him,

and its board of regents meets today to consider whether the tree-shaded residence at a noisy San Jacinto Boulevard intersection that bears his name still should.

The decision follows weeks of self-examination for the University of Texas. It began, rather uncomfortably, in May, when an Austin TV station aired a story about a paper by then-UT law professor Thomas Russell, who detailed Simkins' aggressions as a Klansman in Florida after the Civil War. When the news story first aired, UT first dismissed the idea of renaming the dorm, pointing out it would eventually be demolished under the campus master plan. Then, with mounting negative media attention, the university formed an advisory group and organized a set of public forums to discuss Texas history and race relations.

Finally, on Friday, President William Powers Jr., concurring with the advisory group, recommended that the regents change the name. If the University of Texas System Board of Regents sides with proponents of the name change, the campus will rid itself of what officials and Russell say is the only Klan-associated name on a building here. Others, though, are uncomfortable "rewriting history" by changing the name, and some see no need for the brouhaha around Simkins Residence Hall, the last remaining all-male dorm on campus. And the fiery campus debate has been fueled by myths about the dorm and other campus landmarks named for heroes of the South. Whatever the regents decide, UT won't be the last college in the former confederacy with a Klan claim to fame.

There are at least four others, said Russell, the legal historian who authored the Simkins paper while at UT and has since moved to the University of Denver (for a change of scenery, he said). The University of Alabama has Bibb Graves Hall, named for the alumnus, former Alabama governor and member of the Montgomery chapter of the Klan. Bob Jones University in South Carolina also has a residence hall named after Graves.

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Middle Tennessee State University features Forrest Hall, named for Nathan Bedford Forrest; some interest arose, then died, in 2007 about renaming the hall, which houses the ROTC program, because of Forrest's Klan association. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has Saunders Hall, named for William Saunders, a Klansman and former university trustee.

In at least two instances, Klansmen's names have faded from other campuses. Pearl River Community College in Mississippi named the Bilbo Hall residence, built after World War II, for former governor and U.S. Sen. Theodore Bilbo, a Klansman. The college demolished the 62-year-old building in January 2008.

And the University of Oklahoma dropped the name "DeBarr" from its chemistry building in the 1980s after protests against the late Edwin DeBarr, a dean fired for his Klan association.

At UT, some myths about Simkins heightened the intensity of the discussion. Gregory Vincent, vice president for diversity and engagement, said a "major misconception" was that the university named the hall after Simkins because his family gave money to the school. "That's certainly not the case," Vincent said. According to the Texas State Historical Association biography of Simkins, the professor did leave books to the school in his will. (Professor Russell pulled the will and said there was nothing about books but that he doesn't doubt Simkins left some behind.)

Russell also encountered those who believed the 190-bed Simkins Hall was originally an all-black dorm, he said; a version of that appears in a spring 2009 newsletter from the Division of Recreation Sports, calling Simkins "the first dorm for black men at UT." Not so, according to a university-written integration timeline.

And despite rampant discussions about other buildings and statues on campus honoring southern heroes like Jefferson Davis, both Russell and Vincent said Simkins is the only one with Klan ties. Robert Lee Moore Hall is named after a mathemetician who became famous for refusing to teach black students, but he wasn't in the KKK.

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"People presume such widespread Klan membership that they walk around and look at the names on the building and think, 'These must all be Klansman.' That's interesting to me," Russell added.

The regents set aside just five minutes of their two-day meeting for the Simkins discussion today after Powers suggested "Creekside Dormitory" for the new name. UT's student newspaper, The Daily Texan, ran a poll on its website Wednesday inviting readers to vote on other names for the all-male dorm, including "Sweatt Hall," a nod to Heman Marion Sweatt, who sued the university in 1946 to become the first African-American law student there. (The defendant was then-President Theophilus Painter, namesake of another campus building.)

If the board approves the renaming, it would exercise an existing campus policy that "we can rename the building if it violates or compromises the public trust," Vincent said.

For Ashley Robinson, 20, it would mean something more. Robinson is an officer in the Black Student Association, which sent a representative to the advisory group. She attended

a public forum last month and will be following the board's decision closely.

"I feel like it's a win if they do rename it because a lot of people, especially at the forums, felt that it wasn't such a big deal, but a lot of people in the black community felt like Simkins Hall, the statues on campus, are kind of like a bad stench in the room because [the dorm] is there but people aren't really paying attention to it," Robinson said. "But we are, because we felt the backlash to it."

"For this fight to be coming to an end, hopefully, is kind of big news to us," Robinson said.

[Editor's note: An earlier version of this story said the initial news report on Simkins appeared on a Florida TV station.]

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