



Cookie Simms, dressed in slave costume, participates in living history programs around the state. Here, with the help of her granddaughter, Nikita, she explains the story of the quilt at the Exchange Hotel in Gordonsville.

Photo by Phil Audibert



It took her six months...piecing together the squares of fabric, some bearing photographs, others text. And through it all, she stitched embroidery in the traditional African colors of red, green and yellow. It is simply known as The Quilt.

The quilt tells a story. Believed to be a slave tradition, Cookie Simms says, "It was a way of communicating," a way of telling a family history in pictures, because most slaves were illiterate. Some slave quilts were actually coded maps to the Underground Railroad.

"It starts in the middle," Cookie explains, pointing to a square in the center depicting a fireplace. "The next row tells what happens around the kitchen...hair combing, a child is teaching a slave to read which was against the law. The next row tells the stories and songs and recipes that would have been done at that time."

The rows seem to spiral outward...pictures of slaves picking cotton, taking care of their mistress' children. "Then you see where the Negroes are being sold or being punished for running away," she continues. Looking like a fragmented dream through time, the quilt depicts images of the Civil War and the entire text of the Emancipation Proclamation. "And I put it upside down because the Emancipation Proclamation was confusing," says Cookie. "We were taught the Emancipation Proclamation freed ALL of the slaves, when it hadn't. It only freed the slaves in the states that hadn't seceded."

The quilt also tells folk stories, myths and legends, such as the one about why blacks have white palms and soles of their feet. "A long time ago, everybody in the world was black...everybody," relates Cookie. "There was this pond, and several people got in the pond and when they came out their skin had changed color; they had turned white. It was a magic pond and people started telling all their friends about it...Hundreds came...and the water level went down," she continues. "The more people that got in there, the less magic was in there...By the time the last people got there, all they

could do was put their feet and their hands in the water, and that's why black people have white palms and white on the bottoms of their feet."

Cookie smiles at the child-like story and turns serious. "You look back in history; family meant something, and the slave family more so than anybody because the family could be separated at any moment." She points to the tradition of hair braiding. "They would sit there and braid that hair because it brought them closer to their kids; it made a bond with them... The slave mother and father, they cherished their children. They wanted their children with them as much as they could get them because they didn't know when they got home if their child would be there or not."

Over the years, Cookie Simms has developed a passion for history. "I LOVE history," she says breathlessly. "If I could do that all day long and make enough money to pay for benefits and the bills that I have, that's what I would do...The history part; that part of my life I don't ever want to get rid of." Cookie first met Orange County Historian Frank Walker when they were both doing a living history program at the Exchange Hotel a couple of years ago. She had just finished her quilt. Since then she has gone on two of his tours as a guide in training.

But, she adds, "I would prefer to do living history...the fairs, the libraries, the schools...when I go to the schools, I get the kids involved in it too. They get to do the weaving and the carding of the wool, picking the seeds out of the cotton. If I could, I'd like to have a cabin, put all this stuff in it, and take it from place to place...Re-enactments are a lot of fun, but it's not the same as doing a living history."

Alice "Cookie" Morgan was born on Long Island and grew up in the affluent New York suburb of New Rochelle. After her first husband died, she met Paul Simms in Washington, D.C., and "we've got about 31 years together," she says with obvious pride. Paul worked as an electrician for AMTRAK. "We were looking for a place to move out of D.C. from, so we started riding around and we

found the house we have now." For the past 29 years, the Simms have lived in their Orange County home nestled back in the woods with a nice view of Clark's Mountain. "My husband is a pack rat," warns Cookie as we walk in.

Hmmmm. Look who's calling who a pack rat. There's nary a free square foot of wall space for all the photos and paintings, many of which Cookie painted herself. There are at least three spinning wheels in the living room alone, a couple of looms, the bookshelves groan under the weight of black history books, and on every horizontal surface are dolls; Cookie collects them. Paul, an avid Redskins fan, is getting ready to go to a Head Start fatherhood meeting. "I help the parents," he says softly. "The mothers or the fathers may be incarcerated. We try to be a go-between." Cookie follows up. "Fatherhood is getting dads involved. At one time only the mothers would be involved, and to go and see fathers at a meeting, that's awesome."

She ruffles through a scrap book. "My great grandfather was 116 when he died," she blurts. She thumbs through photos of her grandparents, parents, herself as an infant, her sisters, her own five children and seven grandchildren. "This is my husband when he was in the army, before it was desegregated."

Asked what she likes to do for fun, she responds, "I like to camp out, but I don't do sleeping bags anymore; I have to have an air mattress because I'm too old for that. I can't sleep on the ground anymore...the arthritis." A love of camping comes in handy if you are a re-enactor.

She tells a story of a "supernatural experience," she had at a re-enactment in Warm Springs. Cookie was playing the part of a slave in a real slave cabin. The first night she felt someone touch her when there was nobody there. The second night she could not, for the life of her, make a lantern stay lit. She finally gave up. "I got in the bed, and the lantern lit up like an electric light bulb...BY ITSELF! I was spooked!"

Not to worry Cookie, the ghost of the slave in that cabin was just trying say, 'you do a good job of shedding light on the past.'

Something Different



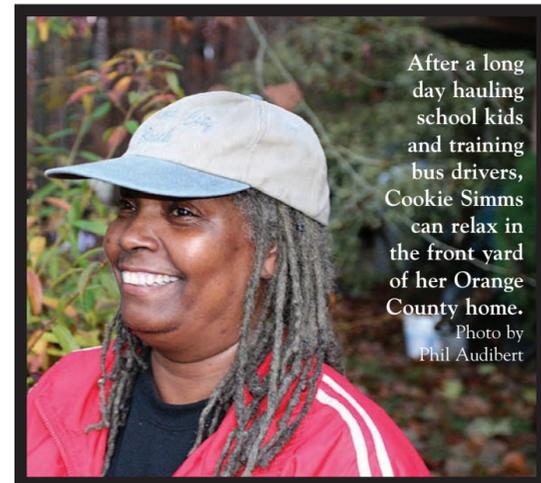
A school bus driver must be able to multi-task. Here, Cookie Simms checks out her passengers in the wide rearview mirror while honoring a facing school bus that is discharging students.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Every Day

"Hey, blue shirt. Get in a seat. Move over. You cannot sit in the aisle." From the driver's seat in school bus number 001, Alice "Cookie" Simms, graying dreads flowing from under her ubiquitous ball cap, glares up at the huge rearview mirror. The hapless middle schooler finds a seat. Cookie puts the brand new bus in gear and heads down the hill from Prospect Heights.

Today she is substituting for a bus driver who is so pregnant she can't fit behind the wheel. So, Cookie doesn't really know who these kids are; she has to call them by their clothes color, or just "Hey You!" Her run today takes her through the town of Orange and out behind the nursing home to Orange Estates and Oakbrook Terrace. "I'd appreciate you waiting for me to cross you," she says to a group of disembarking students. They ignore her advice and start to cross in front of the bus. She blows the horn, angrily. "I told you to wait." The kids hesitate. "Did you hear? Wait for me to cross you," she mouths the words at them through



After a long day hauling school kids and training bus drivers, Cookie Simms can relax in the front yard of her Orange County home.

Photo by Phil Audibert

This school bus driving thing is a lot more complicated than just stopping every now and then, turning on the lights and opening the door.

the windshield. She shakes her head in mock disbelief and adds as an aside, "They didn't even look to see if a car was coming."

Man, oh man, this school bus driving thing is a lot more complicated than just stopping every now and then, turning on the lights and opening the door. Cookie is as busy as a one-armed paper hanger. Her eyes dart from the road to the side mirrors to the fender mirrors to the rearview mirror and back again. She hauls the steering wheel like a sea captain, accelerates and brakes smoothly, turns, stops and backs this lumbering yellow behemoth effortlessly through the narrow streets of Orange. On top of it all, she has to maintain control of up to 80 kids and today deal with this writer/photographer who keeps asking her dumb questions—a lot of balls to juggle.

Cookie keys the public address microphone, bellowing, "We do not walk across the seats!" Then she adds sotto voce, "They are very well-behaved today." It must have something to do with this guy with a camera around his neck and a mini-disc recorder in his hand. A girl hands Cookie a purse that was left on board by another student. "Thank you for finding that," she says softly. We meet a car on a narrow street. The car hesitates and then backs up. "That's right I'm bigger than you are," taunts Cookie. On another occasion, a line of cars honor her flashing lights. "Look what I did," she says in mock wonderment, "made all them cars have to wait. I have the POWER."

Cookie has been a substitute bus driver in the Orange County School System for the past 10 years. For five years before that, she ran a regular route, but she prefers to be a substitute. On the regular route, "I was actually taking their problems home with me." She remembers one boy who was put off of the bus for disciplinary reasons. "Well every day he's out there waiting for the bus. I'd pick him up, but I'd say, 'Don't be at the bus stop tomorrow.' He's in middle school, he knows better. Every day he's out there waiting for the bus. 'Why are you out here?' " she remembers asking him. " 'You know you're not supposed to be out here.' And he said, 'My momma's gonna beat me.' " Cookie pauses and purses her lips. "I wish he hadn't told me that. I don't know if she did or not, but that's what he told me."

On a regular run, which starts at 6:30 in the morning, a bus driver gets to know the passengers intimately. "You

just get real attached to them," says Cookie. "Any driver will tell you that, when they drive a regular run, they know these kids' birthdays; they know when they're sad; they know when things are going good in their house or when things are going bad in their house. You can read them."



Above, before every trip, a school bus must undergo what's known as a "pre-trip" inspection. It includes everything from checking the oil to looking for vandalism and sabotage, the latter being a requirement stemming from Sept. 11, 2001. Below, At home with her looms, spinning wheels, history books, and doll collection, Cookie shows off a painting she did that won her a blue ribbon at the Orange County Fair several years ago.

Photos by Phil Audibert



Elementary school kids are the worst. "I like them in the classroom, but not on a bus, because they always want to be hugged which is good; they're always tattling, which is bad," she laughs good-naturedly. "You have to love them all the time and you can't drive and love them

at the same time." What do you do when a six-year-old proudly presents you with his bloody baby tooth that he just shook out of his head? Or how about the kid who threw up on her? "He got me good," she shudders.

Cookie Simms is also a school bus driving instructor. She has spent the middle part of this day training a new driver. "I really put her through it," says Cookie grimly. The driver is just learning manual shift, (not all the buses have automatic transmissions) and Cookie has her out at Lake of the Woods doing starts on hills. "I remember how I felt as I was being trained. It was the scariest thing for me. And after I finished; it took me a couple of months. It took me longer than most. I would see new people come in and I see them struggling with their pre-trip. I've already got that in my head. I can go over there and help them," she remembers telling herself years ago. "I know how I felt and it was scary, and it doesn't have to be scary." Scary? No. But intense, yes. "This is a job you have to be focused on," she emphasizes. She's had trainees break down in tears. "One lady said, 'I have to do all of this and then watch the children too?'" Cookie is relentless. "When I'm training, I try to distract those drivers as much as I can. The first day of driving I don't, but the second, third and fourth day I try to distract them as much as possible...the kids are going to talk to you and they're going to be telling you some stuff, so you might as well get used to it."

There is a shortage of qualified school bus drivers in Orange County. "Help please," pleads the training director, Jean Atkins at the school bus garage office. "They think a lot of times you just come in and go to work, not realizing what all's involved, what it takes to get a commercial driver's license, the background searches that have to be done." Jean ticks the list off on her hand: applicants are fingerprinted, undergo a sex offender background check, a physical exam, 56 hours of classroom instruction, including first-aid, defensive driving, another 35 hours behind the wheel, "and then they're with us with kids on board for 10 hours after that before they're put out on their own." That's the true test;

can they handle the first day on their own. Some can't. Cookie nods in agreement. "It can't just be somebody who's just looking for a job. It's got to be somebody who cares about kids, because if they don't care about kids, this is not the place to do it." The school transportation

director's secretary, Patricia Verling adds, "It's an ideal job for a mother with kids in school." For Melda Oliver it has been an ideal job she's held for—count 'em—49 years!

We're back on board bus number 001 for its second run of the day... taking high school students home on the exact same route. On her way to OCHS, Cookie drives down Main Street, Orange and approaches the railroad tracks where she recites a litany of regulations and safety precautions that she must follow: "We stop 15 to 50 feet from the first track. Everything is off. Window open. Door open. Look and listen. Then drive and put it in a gear that will take it completely across the tracks. We do NOT switch gears on the tracks."

Asked about drivers who pull out and pass a stopped bus despite flashing yellow and red lights, despite the swing-out flashing stop sign, despite the gate that swings off the bumper, she says it happens all the time. "I was stopped out on 20," she tells a story of a close call. "I stopped at 601, the library road, to pick up some kids. There was a car that was stopped facing me, and a pick up truck came from behind that car and came face to face with me...I looked at him in my door. The last kid had just stepped up on the bus." She shakes her head. "He (the pickup driver) wasn't paying attention. He came up on that car so fast; the only thing he could do was go around or hit that car."

And then there's the bus driver's worst nightmare: running over one of your own children. It happened opening day last year in Culpeper.

For Cookie, her worst bus driving experience happened on Interstate 95 at Bowling Green. She was hauling a bunch of Orange County kids home from an outing to Kings Dominion. "I never saw the car," she says wide-eyed. "He came up from behind the bus. I think he had fallen asleep. He saw the bus. He swerved to avoid hitting the bus and went up on two wheels. When he got control of the car he came straight up and came across in front me, and I pushed him out of the way. The right side of the bus caught the right side of his car. He was facing south on a northbound lane." Cookie remembers it like it was yesterday. "Nobody was hurt," she says gratefully. A week later she forced herself to drive another loaded bus home from Kings Dominion. "I had to or I would never have gotten back on a bus."

Bus number 001 pulls up and stops at Orange

Elementary School. A gaggle of high school kids disembark to walk the few blocks left to their homes. "N*****, MOVE!" says an African-American girl to her friend who has paused on the steps. Cookie's eyes flash in anger. "HEY!" she hollers outraged as the offender quickly



Above, Cookie Simms with an old family photo album. Below, Cookie and Paul Simms keep warm under The Quilt. Taking her more than six months to piece together, the quilt tells the story of the slave-to-freedman experience.

Photos by Phil Audibert



moves off down the sidewalk and out of earshot. "The N-word. If they knew exactly what that word meant; they would not be using it...when I listen to the way they talk, the way they talk to each other, the way they talk to their parents, it's sad. When a white person says that, it's

racism."

Several years ago, an African-American boy used the same word in front of Cookie. She gave him a choice, either be handed a bus referral which is a complicated disciplinary action or to write an essay. I said, "You write a report. Tell me the origin of that word and what it means. I'll put the bus referral away.' So he did."

All the way back to the bus garage Cookie fumes about the incident. "I'm gonna give her a bus referral, because that's a racial slur, even though she's talking to one of her friends," she threatens. Otherwise, she says the high school kids were better behaved than usual. "They were great. The last time I was on this bus, the cussing? These are city kids. Country kids aren't that bad. The country kids are loud. They have to talk for acres." She roars at her own joke.

Cookie carefully backs bus 001 into its parking space. "This bus has a child-check on it. So I want to make sure everything is off before I shut the bus off." An alarm sounds. "You hear that? It means that I have to go to the back of the bus to check to make sure there are no children left, because if I don't, the lights start blinking and the horn starts going off." Cookie goes down the aisle just like she did on the thorough "pre-trip" interior and exterior inspection. "And while I'm back here I'm looking at the lollipop sticks they threw on the floor, the candy paper they threw on the floor. They shouldn't be eating on here. I saw one girl with a cell phone. It's prohibited."

Why? "Well, the thing is what they're doing with those cell phones... some of them take pictures; they're taking pictures of each other; they're text messaging; they're actually starting things like trouble; they'll goad somebody into an argument. Somebody else is listening, talking trash."

Cookie takes the purse that was turned in, saying tongue-in-cheek, "Any money found by me belongs to me, but they're stingy." Back in the office, the purse and its owner are reunited. "Check to see if anything's missing," cautions Cookie. She hands in the bus keys, and heads out the door.

On the ride back to her car in Mine Run, she says, "We get up every morning and you do the same thing every morning. You get up, you take a shower; you brush your teeth; you get dressed; you go to work at the same job. It's the same thing day after day." She pauses before making her point. "Do something exciting. Meet new people. I think that's why I like subbing too. It's something different every day."