

Sims War Siege

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The events that revolved around Robert "Bob" Sims and his devoted followers during the year of 1891 is known generally as The Sims War.

Bob Sims was a Confederate Civil War veteran who had been wounded and interred in a Union prison camp during the war, a farmer, and a deeply religious man who formed his own church and preached a strict adherence to Old Testament teachings. His church had a fairly considerable following, including his immediate family and many local citizens, both black and white.

He believed Saturday was the Sabbath, and in this respect, was probably a forerunner of the Seventh-Day-Adventist believers in the area. He believed he owed no allegiance to an earthly government, for God was the Supreme Ruler of man and the Bible was the only true Law. He felt he should have to pay no government tax or fee, whether for land he bought and owned, marriage bonds, or goods he sold and produced using his own labor and property.

He could quote Bible passages from memory with astounding accuracy, and was nearly always able to back up his beliefs with a verse.

His beliefs, however, put him at odds with the local government, some local church congregations who believed differently than he, and some local citizens who, for whatever reasons, felt uncomfortable with his presence. He had been brought to court on more than one occasion in the years previous to 1891.

Once he was brought to court for supposedly shooting a neighbor's hog when the animal had wandered into his garden. He had allegedly taken the neighbor's gun from his hands, shot the hog, and then turned the gun on the neighbor, threatening to do the same to him if he didn't leave immediately.

On another occasion, he was at a camp meeting. The preacher called on members of the congregation to come forward, bow at the altar, and ask forgiveness for their sins. Bob came forward, but instead of kneeling at the altar, picked up the Bible, kissed it, and went back to his seat. It was against his beliefs to bow to anyone but God. He was hauled into court and fined for disturbing the peace.

He was known to have a whiskey still and produced what many regarded as the best in the county. Local ministers disapproved of the practice on religious grounds and preached against it to their congregations. Local authorities disapproved also, for he paid no liquor tax, but were powerless or unwilling to put forth much effort to break up the enterprise. In the end, however, his whiskey still was probably the thing that led to his and his follower's undoing.

Bob was the target, fairly or not, of quite a bit of harassment in those days, but it can probably be said his troubles really started with the murder of Richard Bryant Carroll on the night of May 1, 1891. (Note: Richard Carroll Bryant was Thomas Jerry Scott's great, great, great, great uncle. Jerry's mother was a Carroll.)

Richard Bryant Carroll was a Baptist minister who lived at Soulwilpa. He had preached fervently against Bob Sim's beliefs and practices. My great grandmother, Anna Phillips, was a granddaughter to Rev. Carroll. She related a story handed down to her of how one of the Sims followers was coming to court one of Rev. Carroll's daughters. He tied his horse to the gatepost at the entrance to the yard, and came inside to visit. Rev. Carroll disapproved of his daughter's courtier, whether for his religious affiliation or his personality, one cannot be certain. While the horse waited outside, he, in my great-grandmother's words, "did his job" all over the ground near the gate. Rev. Carroll sent the man away with a sharp warning that if he didn't have sense enough to tie his horse out away from the house where he couldn't make a mess, he didn't have sense enough to be courting his daughter.

Though it could not be proven, and there was no doubt bad blood between the parties, some of Bob Sim's followers were accused of shooting Rev. Carroll on his front porch on that fateful night, right

after supper, while he was getting a drink from the cistern well. Bob Sims was accused of ordering the assassination.

R.B. Carroll was the first person to die as a result of the Sims War. He was buried at [Harrison Cemetery](#).

The anti-Sims sentiment increased after the incident, and local citizens began to plan a way to have Bob and his followers removed from the county. They felt their best bet lay with the federal authorities and they planned to report his illegal alcohol production. They hoped the U.S. government would have the means to deal with him, once and for all.

The federal authorities were notified and during the summer of 1891 the federal marshal tried unsuccessfully on four separate occasions to apprehend the moonshiners. On each occasion the authorities went to Bob's home or still, but being outnumbered or outgunned at each meeting, they were forced to return empty handed.

On the fifth visit to Bob's home late that summer, the marshals found him with less reinforcements and were able to take him into custody. He was taken to [Bladon Springs](#) on that Thursday to await the arrival of a steamboat bound for Mobile on Friday. The group received lodging at the Bladon Springs Hotel.

Later that night, Bob was in an outbuilding where he was left under the guard of a single man, Frank Dahlberg. Bob's brothers, Jim and Neal Sims, Bob's son, Bailey Sims, and three other followers came to Bladon and rescued him in a hail of gunfire. Killed in the escape were Bailey Sims, and [Dr. A.B. Pugh](#), an innocent bystander who had come to the outbuilding to visit the guard. Dahlberg was wounded, as well as Jim Sims. Jim ran some distance before he succumbed to his injury, fell helpless, and was taken into custody.

A rumor arose that night that Bob was planning to return to Bladon Springs with reinforcements and take revenge on his captors and their accomplices. Guards were posted around the area to keep watch for the gang's return. Sometime during the night, an old black man came riding down the road on a mule. One of the guards called out for the man to stop, but when he did not, he was shot and killed. It was then realized the man was deaf and did not hear the call.

The marshals thought it would be prudent to stay in the area to help protect the public from any reprisals that might be brought forth by the Sims'. They did not leave for Mobile as originally planned. Public outrage grew over the course of the next couple of days, and early in the predawn hours on Saturday, Jim Sims was taken by a lynch mob and hanged in a tree near the hotel.

Later that day, some of Bob's children came to Bladon Springs and retrieved the bodies Jim and Bailey. They were taken back to the Sims home and buried out behind the house in the [Sims Family Cemetery](#).

During this period in the county's history, there were no efficient means of communication to areas outside the county. The marshals were not sure what should be done next. They had not preconceived the possibility of the events that had occurred, and had no specific orders to operate under. They also did not have enough money to pay for the men and supplies needed to sustain an operation that appeared to have grown out of their control, and it was also the feeling among the authorities on the scene that Bob Sims had enough of a local following to repel any advance the small troop made. With that, the men left the county, supposedly to return later when they were better prepared.

This was not enough for many of the residents of the county. A posse was formed to find Bob and Neal Sims, who were somewhere in hiding. The posse went to the Sims home but did not find the fugitives. They told those who were there that the Sims' and their followers had to leave the county or face dire consequences. Many of the Sims family and their followers left the county seeking refuge with sympathizers across the state line in Mississippi.

Although there were many rumors and sightings reported during the fall of 1891, Bob and Neal Sims' whereabouts were not determined. Manhunts were launched into the surrounding area, but to no avail.

Two of the Sims daughters traveled to the state capitol in Montgomery and pleaded with the governor for protection and to be

allowed to return to their homes. Permission was granted with his promise of protection from harm, and less than a month from the time they were forced to flee the county, the Sims', minus Bob and Neal, were back at home.

In December, a lawsuit was filed against Bob Sims and his property was to be put up for auction to cover the settlement. Apparently Bob heard news of this and decided to return home and try to save his property. As mentioned before, communications in those days were slow, and any federal authorities that happened to come to the area were not the same men who participated in the previous events.

Therefore, they did not know Bob Sims by sight, and he was generally unmolested.

Bob had heard that John McMillan, a store owner in the [Paragon](#) community was the person who had reported his still to the federal authorities and organized the citizens against him. On December 22, Bob and Will Savage hijacked one of McMillan's freight wagons at [Old Samuel](#) (about a mile east of Gilbertown at the crossroads) as the lone driver was bringing goods from the river to the McMillan store. They made the driver unload the goods from the wagon and told him to tell John McMillan they were coming to burn his house and kill him.

A group of armed men waited up all night and the next day at the McMillan store for the arrival of Bob Sims and his gang. Since Bob had not shown up, the tired men retired the next evening to the house to get some rest and a meal, thinking it must have been an empty threat. In what would prove a fatal error in judgment on their part, they left their guns behind.

That night, on December 23, 1891, the Sims group surrounded the house and, after everyone inside had gone to bed, set fire to it. The inhabitants of the house awoke and began clamoring to get out. As they exited the burning building, they were greeted with a barrage of gunfire.

There were seventeen people in the house. Ten of them were small children. One adult and three children were killed outright by the gunfire. Nine people were wounded. One of the wounded, Belle

McKenzie, was a schoolteacher boarding with the McMillans. She died of her wounds on January 18, 1892, making her the last person to die as a result of the Sims War. She was buried at [Kaizer Hill Cemetery](#).

The day after the fire, a posse was formed and they rode to Bob Sims' home and surrounded it. What ensued was a siege of the Sims home that lasted all that cold, rainy Christmas Eve and until late in the afternoon on Christmas Day. Gunfire and harsh words were exchanged throughout the event. The Sims group refused to surrender and the posse could not rout the defenders. Bob's house was a virtual fortress, equipped with gun slots and surrounded on all sides by a wide, open field. The gunfire was interrupted from time to time that Christmas Day while the two sides tried to bargain for a surrender. As each negotiation failed, the gunfire began again. Finally, late that evening, Bob Sims and the other defenders surrendered and came out of the house.

The sheriff, who had arrived on the scene that afternoon, took custody of Bob Sims, Tom Savage, Will Savage, and Tyree Savage. They started toward the jail at Butler, about 20 miles to the north. They were escorted by 25 men who had been agreed upon by Bob Sims and the sheriff, for protection. They were met by a mob of about 300 men at the crossroads at Old Samuel. The mob was unwilling to wait for justice, and eventually took the prisoners from their escort.

The four were hanged from a tree there at the crossroads and were buried nearby in the [Sims Cemetery](#).

This is what I know about the Sims War, although there are quite a lot of details that could be added by someone who has researched it more completely. I was once in a play, written by Dr. James Mazingo, based on the events, and that and my great-grandmother's stories are the source of my information. There have been two books that I know of written on the subject. Ms. Edith Doggett wrote one that is out of print. The Choctaw County Public Library has a copy. Ann Gay also wrote an account. The play I was in, I think, was based on Ann's book. This book is still in print and copies can be purchased at [The Choctaw County Public Library](#).

~Randall