

Parker Brothers Oral History Project – Interview Transcripts

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Interviews:

These interviews were conducted by Professor John J. Fox of Salem State College [now, University] in November and December 1986 as part of his research on the Parker Brothers Company of Salem, Massachusetts. [Fox published the article “Parker Pride: Memories of Working Days at Parker Brothers” in the April 1987 issue of *Essex Institute Historical Collections*.] Fox later made and distributed copies of the audiocassette recordings from these interviews. The Strong received copies of these audiocassettes from Anne Williams of the AGPC [now, AGPI] in the early 2010s, as well as copies from Philip E. Orbanes in 2012. Fox signed letters of transfer for these audiocassette recordings to be made public for research purposes. The Strong assumes no responsibility for the views expressed by interviewer or interviewees.

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Audio File Transcript: Parker Brothers Oral History Project – George Fox (2 of 4)

Interviewer: John J. Fox

Interviewee: George Fox

Date of interview/recording: November 25, 1986

Transcription by: Nicolas Ricketts, Kristy Hisert

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[*Conversation begins 41 seconds into recording.*]

John Fox: Take one, side two, George Fox. And you were now—Mr. Barton said when he was talking about *The Post* he said, “George Fox.”

George Fox: He said—he’d “take that scoundrel, George Fox” [*inaudible* (00:52)]. Oh God, I just sank down into my chair. And if you—you’d think if your life flashing before you, that’s what happened. And then he continues on. He’s talking about the *Boston Post* that went down, and *John Fox* who was the president or the publisher of the *Boston Post*. But, did he know people? Yeah. For some reason, I was sitting down front, and he must have looked at me and got confused and said, “George Fox,” instead of “*John Fox*.” Well, we laughed about that. Eddie Parker, you know, every now and then he’d remind him. And Ranny Barton, even Ranny was—of course, I didn’t talk much about Ranny. Ranny, when he came to the company, came out of the University of Virginia. He graduated from the university, and he was coming into the company, and his father was going to start him at the ground floor [and that was] something that his father never did. So he put Ranny out in the factory and he worked two or three weeks in each department, and they had him out loading freight cars and everything else. They had a grand time with Ranny. Any time the heavy stuff would come, they’d throw Ranny into the rail cars and say, “Okay, go to it fella!” But Ranny worked in every department and everything, and then a series of jobs finally ending up in the presidency. But Ranny kids his father today about that story of the confusion of John Fox versus George Fox. There was Dick Barton, of course, who worked for the company. For, not a long period of time. Dick came in—

JF: —now, he would be who?

GF: Dick was Ranny’s brother. Ranny’s brother, Robert’s other son. And Dick—Dick came in, he worked in Research and Development for a while. He worked in the Credit department, and it just wasn’t his cup of tea. So, he left and went out on his own. Plus there was Paul Haskell, who was the former purchasing agent that worked for the company for years and years and years. And LeRoy Howard, that was—he developed the games, and he could take

Walt Disney games and turn them around three ways from Sunday so that each year it would look like a new game! But that's the way he—

JF: —can you talk a little bit about the developing of games at this point?

GF: Well, the development of games, some of it was done in-house, and outside interests would send them in. And they'd screen them, and sometimes, if they were lucky, they might get one. But *you* could send a game in back in those days. They would look it over, and if it was accepted, they'd work out an arrangement with you, either a buyout or a royalty basis. I know of a schoolteacher that submitted the game Cat and Mouse, and she was so happy that they accepted it, that she took a flat payment. I think it was around \$250. If she had taken a royalty, she could have retired! And so there were different things. But one of our games—the children's games were developed—mostly developed in-house, and the Clue game came from England. There were—we had Phillips Publishers, that was a publishing company that made Spill and Spell and three or four other games. And Parker Brothers, back in the—probably in the '50s—they bought out Phillip Publishing and operated it as a separate entity and then finally rolled it up.

JF: Where were they located?

GF: Phillips Publishers came from—oh, I'm not sure where they came from, it was a Massachusetts outfit—

JF: —okay, so it was in the area.

GF: Yeah. We experimented, back in the '50s, with stuffed animals: Toothy the Tiger, Gerald the Giraffe. And I—you had a pattern that you'd cut out and stuff the animals and sew them together. That was a flash in the pan.

JF: That was done right here, though?

GF: That was done right here. Yeah—and developed here. It was a woman by the name of Marge Wilson who was in our Research and Development department. She had this idea, they thought it was great, went ahead, [*inaudible* (06:22-06:26)] for years to come and went defunct. But, I guess as years went on, then they would intervene into the professional designers, that they had certain ones that they commissioned to develop so many games for us each year. Whether they were good or bad, they would [*inaudible* (06:56)]. Talk about Hey Pa! There's a Goat on the Roof. That was going to be the greatest thing, and we ended up storing—the third and fourth floor, there's a plumbing place on Canal Street. Not on Canal—

JF: —on Bridge Street—

GF: —on Bridge Street—the third and fourth floor were filled up with Hey Pa! There's a Goat on the Roof. We couldn't get rid of them! We ended up shipping them by carloads to some closeout company, and [they] didn't have an elevator that worked fast enough so they were throwing the games out the 3rd floor window, catching them, and loading them into freight cars [*laughing*]. Yeah, they—there were—along with their successes, there's been the failures, and there's been the comedy parts that go to them. But today, to look back—for me to look back, I still think that we were *as* successful, 45 years ago, if not *more* successful, than we are today.

JF: Why? Why were you successful, not why—why?

GF: I think that we put out a much more quality product. We're too margin-conscious today, and the product that we're putting out—yeah, the name is there, the Monopoly is there, the Cootie's there, the Sorry!'s there. I've seen the changes over the years in dollar for dollar. And years ago, it was much, much, much better.

JF: Alright. But you're talking in terms of the margin, but what were there about Parker's itself, the family itself [*inaudible* (09:11)]. Weren't they interested in making as much profit as they could?

GF: Sure they were. Sure they were. But they were closer to the pulse of the thing. They were closer to our customers. They would go out and—Eddie Parker, all the management would go out visiting with the customers. They would sit down. Now, it's a mechanical-type thing. Here you are. Here's what we get. That type of thing.

JF: Telephone sales...

GF: Telemarketing today. You know if you saw the little guy, he says enough of the little guys. They're the guts of our business today. We're now down to... [a] hundred, [a] hundred accounts are doing 85 percent of our product today. And we've probably got 2,000 accounts on the books, but a hundred of them are doing 85 percent of our business. The mass merchandizers are really taking over. Let's see, Toys 'R' Us, the Child Worlds, and the KBs, that's the way of life. You have to march to a drummer, and we're marching to it.

JF: Was there—such a thing as “Parker pride”?

GF: Most definitely.

JF: Within both the company—the workers and the [*inaudible* (10:54)]?

GF: How do you explain it? I think that it was set by the family as—the family, that Parker Brothers was a household word, and whatever Parker put out there you could rely on. And the people that were producing it—they developed this pride as well—they developed a pride in what they were doing, because they respected who they were doing it for. Well, we don't have that today. We don't have it. It's "Get it done. Get it out. I may be here tomorrow. I may not be here tomorrow." People took pride because they wanted to work for the company, and they wanted to stay with the company. Today, it's whatever people can get out of it, that's it. They're taking more than what they're giving.

JF: Is this true of the people in the factory as well as the people in the corporate headquarters?

GF: Yeah. Yeah.

JF: It's been suggested to me that Parker's is not a very good paying place, compared to other industries in the area, but they seem to have had a number of employees who have stayed for a terribly long time. Or maybe their career goes with it, whether we're talking about people in the factory, or—

GF: —back in—years ago, yeah, they weren't the top-paying company. But the thing that was, that you worked twelve months out of the year. It was not a sweatshop. There was compassion. There was understanding. There were things that made up for the fact that... it wasn't a high-paying—

JF: —personally.

GF: Personally. I was, I had just come into the office. My mother died—my father died, [and] six months later my mother died, and I got a call from Eddie Parker [to] come up to his office. I went up. He said to me, "I understand you've got some hardship." [I said], "Yeah." [He] said, "You need some money?" I said, "Um, yeah." He said, "You need some money." [He] picked up the phone, called up the comptroller, and said, "Write out a check for whatever he needs, and work out the arrangements with him." He wrote out a check for \$1,000 for me. I'd been with the company—what? Seven, eight years maybe. He wrote out a check for \$1,000, he gave it to me, and left it up to me how and when I could pay it back. No interest or anything else. So I was paying them back, I don't know, 10 or 15 dollars a week or whatever it was, and I took sick myself, and I was out of work. And the superintendent came to my house and said—he came to my house with my paycheck—and said to me, "Don't worry about the loan, get back on your feet, we'll talk about that." I was

out of work for six weeks, got my paycheck every week, [and] the loan was there. I wasn't the only one. People got into financial trouble, and [they'd] just tell them, they'd loan you the money, no interest or anything else. That went like that.

Sickness—if somebody was working in the factory, and they were sick, they'd get paid. They—the company—looked after their people. You were an individual. You weren't a number, you weren't—you meant something to the company. And the company, in turn, did these kind—kinds of things. So it was these things that they—you needed—I was buying my first house, thirty years ago. I bought—you know the house down in [*inaudible* (15:56)], tried to buy a condo there for my daughter and had more damn trouble—and everything else, with banks, and everything else. Eddie was on the board of directors at the bank. [I tried to] buy a house. I had \$1,000. He'd call the bank. “[I] want him to have a loan.” You probably can't do that, but the President of the company today, I doubt very much that if somebody that had been with the company for three, four, five years would even call the bank for a recommendation. But those were the things that went on back in those days.

JF: Would that have been true for Eddie Parker, and for [Robert B.M.] Barton, and for Ranny? Were they all—they all acted that way?

GF: Sure, sure. Yeah, yeah. You know, Ranny—I can't cite examples, but there are things. Let's see... I'm talking sort of a personal... And I know of other people, the same things happened to back in those days.

JF: Louis Vanne told me a story about [how] as a young man, as a young employee here he tried to start a union. They failed by one vote. And Eddie Parker called him. I guess it was Eddie. Yeah, it was Eddie. He called him to the office and said, “Louis,” who was frightened that he'd lost his job.

GF: It was Barton that called him.

JF: Was it Barton that called him?

GF: It was Barton.

JF: Okay. And told him, “You lost by one vote. Go ahead, go back to work.” And he ended up in management in the end.

GF: That was Louis. That was Louis. That's right. Sure.

JF: That says something about that type of attitude. I'm sure he must have been frightened, that he was going to lose his job.

GF: Oh, he was, you know. But those are the things, back there, that—you know, times have changed. Times have changed and—but you know, when you say it was a low-paying company? Yeah, it was a low-paying company. And there are stories that go back, that when the banks closed—that when the banks closed, that G.S. Parker talked to the merchants uptown, and the people gave them scrip money. “Take this up if you need food. Take it to certain merchants,” and that they would cover it when the banks opened. I guess that actually happened. So that when he couldn't pay the employees, that's how some of the old, old employees got stock in the company. When G.S. Parker couldn't pay them, he gave them stock in the company. And there were some that held on to that stock, and they made out all right on it. The Frank Fitzpatricks, Agnes McGees, the Hollis Buxtons—that go way back, they got stock from G.S. Parker at the time.

JF: Did you know Agnes McGee?

GF: Yup.

JF: Was she tough?

GF: She was tough!

JF: Tell me about her.

GF: Agnes?

JF: Well now—let's establish her [*inaudible* (18:56)]. She was basically the Head of Assembly?

GF: She was—back in those days they called them a “forelady.” All right? They had a long, big room with long tables laid out, and they would—no assembly lines, everything was hand put in, into the game [*sneezing*]. Agnes would—had her sneakers on, and she'd be running up and down that floor like a wild woman. Nobody talked! Nobody talked in her assembly room. You went in there, and it was just like a morgue. And they were all scared spitless of her! And us young guys, we were the floor boys at the time, we would have to bring stock in there. And there'd be some cute chick on the line, and we'd try and stop and talk or something. And Agnes would be right on us, you know. Get us out of there. Yeah, she was tough, but she was fair. She was fair, but she was a terror but she had them all scared spitless.

JF: Why do you think she had that type of an attitude? Any reason? Was she on [*inaudible* (20:11)] work, or was she working on a bonus plan, or anything like that? Was there any incentive for her financially to do that?

GF: No. No, that was just her way. Agnes—when Agnes finally had to retire, because in those days, you had to retire at 65—and she was put into forced retirement, she truly thought that Parker Brothers would come to an end because she just did not feel that there was anybody that could carry on in her shoes. Because Louis Vanne was the one that carried on! Yeah! Yeah.

JF: Of course, Louis told me something about that, and I thought, *Now I've got to see the other side of it*. But he established for me also that there was no talking. And he went in, I guess and he said, "That's not the way I'm going to operate that department." When that switch took place, did production—did Louis's system work as well as Agnes's?

GF: Of course it did. 'Course. But think—now things were fine, in general. There was never any radios allowed in the plant, and I always remember that the World Series in 1952, that Charlie Phelps who was the superintendent at the time said that they could have radios during the World Series. But, when that last out was out, Charlie was like the general. He came walking right straight through the plant to make sure all those radios were turned off! But people accepted these kinds of things.

JF: Got a few minutes left. Before I finish the tape, George, you have so many things to tell me, would you be adverse to my doing another hour with you?

GF: No, no [*inaudible* (21:58)].

JF: Not today 'cause I got to—but what about [the] day before I leave? But you're telling me stuff that's better stuff than any...

GF: You talk about people, Charlie Phelps he was Superintendent of the plant. Now Charlie would walk through the plant every morning. He would walk through again at ten o'clock. He would walk through at one o'clock. Now in the days when things were slow, and we had nothing to do—and he knew it—but out of respect for that guy, if you saw him coming through the door, you'd do something. You'd pick up a cloth, or you'd pick up a broom. But you wouldn't just stand there and say, "Hey." You know. That was the kind of respect that we had for the guy, the company and everything. We appreciated that fact that he's letting us work! Even though there's no work! So [*inaudible* (22:50)]...

JF: Tell me something about the manufacturing process. Now, they made their own board, or they put their boards together and stuff of this nature. But did they do their own printing? They did their own printing, I know that.

GF: Always did their own printing.

JF: Did they do their own artwork here, or...?

GF: No. The artwork was sent out. Another fellow that you might want to talk to that's here, is Jack McMahon. Jack McMahon is upstairs. Jack McMahon was a freelance artist that did a lot of the artwork and graphics for them. He was working out of New York. He came to work for the company, and Jack's been here not quite 25 years. But he's still working here, in a design capacity. And he could probably tell you a lot about that side of it.

JF: Yeah, that would be the kind of [*inaudible* (23:57)] for the Parker family [*inaudible* (23:59)].

GF: Oh, yeah. Because he worked as a freelance [artist] out of New York. I remember Jack coming in on the shuttle, and spend five or six hours, and then go back to New York with his big portfolio that carried all his drawings in. And then eventually he came here, working full-time.

JF: Alright. So they do their printing here. And they would make the boards for the board games, and stuff of that nature. And then the assembly room people just took parts and put them in boxes? Did they—at any time, did they go to an assembly line at all in that assembly room?

GF: The assembly—what the assembly line was, was long tables with probably 10 or 15 girls standing in front of it, and they would have a section—so many games laid out in front of them, whether it was 10, 12, 15. And they would count in by hand, 32 houses, 16 hotels, then put in the Monopoly money, put in the title deed cards, put the playing board on top, put the cover. And before they put the cover on, an inspector would come along and make sure that all the parts were in there correctly. And then they'd put the cover on, stack them on skids, and they'd take them away to be wrapped. And back in those days, they never pre-packaged anything in cartons. They—the games were all stacked up, and they were individually wrapped in paper, and then stacked up in the storage room. When "John Fox" sent an order in for 12 pieces of Monopoly, a picker would go up, take 12 pieces of Monopoly off the stack, bring it from the 3rd floor down to the 1st floor to the shipping room, and somebody would cut a carton, put those 12 Monopoly games in, and write out

the name on the carton and put it over on the dock for the truck to pick it up. That was the assembly. That's how the whole process worked!

JF: Was the company adverse to making—modernizing?

GF: I don't know what the answer—or who it was. When the first new shipping room was built, they then went to pre-packing the games in standard cartons and storing them in cartons. But prior to that, they used to sit—they stacked the games in what they called “chimneys.” Alright, you have a Monopoly game, and they would go up six. They'd go up six, go across six, and they'd end the lot. And then they'd reverse it, so they'd build a chimney, from floor to ceiling!

JF: Oh my God!

GF: Alright! And that's what the order picker would pick from. He would get an order written out on a piece of paper and needed 12 Monopoly. He would go to the stack and take a chimney off and put it on a skid. Then he'd go and get six Sorry! and put those on. And he'd get a half a dozen Cat and Mouse. Now he's got 20 or 30 games on this skid, and he'd take his hand tractor and—mind you some of this would be stored on the 2nd floor and some on the 3rd floor, so he's up and down an elevator trying to get it—gets everything, bring that down to the shipping room, and leave it on the floor. Now you had people who would come along and would pack those. And you'd pack it in any kind of a case that you had. It might be a small carton that would weigh 30 pounds, or they'd pack in what we called a shook case that was kind of a light plywood type box that looked like a casket. By the time you got it filled up, and you'd stuff it with [inaudible (28:08)] in there so the games wouldn't move around in transit, and the damn thing would weigh five or six hundred pounds. And two people would come over with a two-wheeled truck and tip that up on the end and stencil it up and put it out on the shipping dock. And then the Monroe and Arnold Express would pull up in the afternoon, and you'd get a couple of sweat hogs that would try and roll that big, big box onto a Monroe and Arnold's truck and go on up to—go on out to F.A.O. Schwarz or something. That's the way the thing worked.

JF: George, I'm going to have to end this before we're out of the tape, but I am going to set up another date with you for the next [inaudible (28:49)] interview, and I appreciate your help.

GF: Yeah! I'm glad that I could, and as I say, I'd be glad to do another one, John.