

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.

Transcripts:

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Language Warning:

Please note that offensive language may be present within these interview transcripts. These oral histories are expressions of the views, memories, and opinions of the interviewee; transcripts were not altered or censored in any way.

Audio File Transcript: Parker Brothers Oral History Project – Randolph Barton (2 of 3)

Interviewer: John J. Fox

Interviewee: Randolph Barton

Date of interview/recording: December 2, 1986

Transcription by: Michelle Parnett-Dwyer, William Foster

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[*Conversation begins 42 seconds into recording.*]

John Fox: Okay, you were talking about your father and Risk.

Randolph Barton: His ability to recognize La Conquête du Monde as a great property and bring it out here under the name of Risk, to recognize the value of something even as far out as Instant Insanity, which were four blocks, and perhaps his greatest single achievement in the line of acquiring great properties was only a year before we sold the company to General Mills, was he acquired the rights to Ouija, which he bought and the next year, it outsold Monopoly. It was an incredible timing, but that, number one was a great contribution because... Number two was his great interest and concern for the employees of the company, and a determination to bring a sense of fairness and fair play to the entire organization. And he was instrumental in setting up the profit sharing, the first profit sharing plan the company ever had—the *only* profit sharing plan the company ever had for all of its employees, the first pension plan. He took it upon himself to know a vast number of the employees, not just the majority of them, but he probably knew for many years the first names of everybody who had worked there for more than a year, and could walk through the plant and say “Hello, Jane,” “Hello, Bill,” “Hello, Don,” and he would—unlike my grandfather who would walk through the plant hardly ever speaking to anyone or looking to the left or the right, my father would go through the plant and stop and talk with anybody about anything, from the company to their personal life, to his personal life. And he knew his labor force, he knew them intimately. I would have to put that down as his second biggest contribution to the company. I think that really says most of it. It was the great properties, which you had to have a successful company, and his tremendous interest in the welfare of the employees.

JF: What motivated that interest? What would be the reason he was interested in his employees?

RB: I think my father had a very deep sense—from where it came I don't know—but that in order to have a successful company, he had to know his people and understand them, and he had to create a sense of a fairness... amongst them.

JF: Was that... Did he somehow translate that—not translate, translate is the wrong word—did he somehow pass that type of an attitude onto you? That's a tough question by the way.

RB: Oh, I think I very much had that feeling. I had some—I had some strong disagreements with what had transpired by time *my* watch came along.

JF: Well, I must say I hear—I've heard good reports [*laughing*]. So the disagreements could not have been of a serious thing! Another person I've heard *nothing* but praise about in terms of the company, the family, Ed Parker. I mean, people talk about that man as if he was a saint.

RB: Ah yes, Ed Parker. If my father had those feelings about the labor force, Ed Parker had them even more strongly. And Ed, of course—Ed Parker was, what, 15 years younger than my father, and as my father got older and Ed was the number two man, they would naturally tend to look to the next leader coming along. And Ed was a marvelous person. I lived next door to him for a good many years, and rode back and forth to work with him right up until his demise. Marvelous man who... Well incidentally, when I came to work for the company, my father very wisely said that I would not be reporting to my father, I would be reporting to Ed Parker. That was a great opportunity for me, because—it's interesting I think my father would have been *brutal* on me, and I think Ed Parker was very fair—he wasn't quite as close.

JF: Well, when you went to work, did you go into management?

RB: John, when I went to work for the company, the first thing that I was asked to do was to take about six weeks and work in the labor force— [*phone ringing, possible pause in recording (07:30)*].

JF: So when you came into the company, you went out to the factory for a period of time?

RB: I went out to the factory for six weeks, and I worked for approximately one week in each of the major manufacturing departments from Receiving to Shipping, everything in-between. I got in there when everybody else got in there and went home—it was an eight-to-five day, and that was a fun experience. Number one, I got to know a lot of people, and at that point in time, when I joined the company that year we did about 6.2 million in volume.

JF: Now what year would this have been?

RB: That was 19—that was October of 1957. But I got to know a lot of people, a lot of the old timers, particularly during the lunchtime, took the time to tell me a lot of stories. And they were generally a fun group. Some of the departments, they really worked the living daylights of me! God, they had me in the Receiving department unloading boxcars of what we used to call board, which was the heavy paper, the cartons and stuff like that—it was backbreaking work! And some of the manufacturing departments, because I was obviously *unskilled* labor, and they'd put me on a slicer machine, and in about 30 seconds they yanked me out of there because I had the stuff being, you know, I was wrecking raw material, I just didn't know how to—I wasn't trained, and they couldn't do much with me.

I guess perhaps my favorite story was the day came when I was to go to what was then called the Collating department, or Assembly department, where all the finished games were put together, and that department was run by a female, a forelady, by the name of Agnes McGee—

JF: —oh yes, Agnes McGee.

RB: Who I believe, bless her soul, is no longer in this world. I got up into Agnes' department, and she didn't want any part of me, because I was not up to the quality of properly filling those games, and she was afraid I'd put 34 houses in Monopoly instead of 32—I think that's the right number, John. She, that morning I reported to work, as soon as she knew she had me, she got on the telephone and she called *every* other foreman in that plant to find the worst job she could for me in the place, and it was back into the Receiving department. They had another big railcar of heavy, heavy stuff that came in. But she didn't want to fool around. I wasn't qualified.

JF: I've heard some stories about her [*laughing*]. Sounds like an old-time principal of the school, in some ways. Now, I—

RB: —a little aside on this, John—at that point in the company's history—this is in 1957—over half of the foremen's group were females, and shortly thereafter, the company made—the management made, the family made—the conscious decision that as expeditiously as possible—they didn't want to fire anybody—but that they didn't want any more of these women running anything in the company. We even had, our Head Accountant, Bookkeeper as she was called, was a female, and the idea was over the next few years: Let's get rid of all of these female managers, 'cause they're no good. It's funny because at that point, you know, the company was like you know how it would be today, just then they made the

conscious decision to begin phase them out. Then of course, that all changed as we got into the late '60s and early '70s.

JF: I was going to mention, I knew that you had been in the factory. Everybody I talked to, when your name comes up, will mention that's how you started off, and obviously, made an impression upon them. It was all said in good tone—the fact that you had to at least go out there and be made familiar with how the people had to work. Of course, management wouldn't do that today—they would hire somebody out of college, and they'd say we got a job for you and this is where we're going to put you. So obviously this made some sort of an impression. I don't know if you want to answer this question, but I'll ask it anyways. Why did the family decide to sell Parker Brothers to General Mills?

RB: Oh, the family... By the time we got up into the mid-'60s, the company had had some pretty rapid growth. We were getting up into the 15 million range, in fact, ultimately when we sold the business, my recollection was that we were doing 18.5 million in sales, and the stock of the company was all very closely held by the family and principally by my mother. And there was obviously one day going to be an impossible estate problem. That was one consideration. The second consideration was that except for the company, the family really didn't have any other significant assets, other than their homes, and it was the case of having *all* of your eggs in one basket, and we should think about diversifying. So that had been on our minds, actually, probably as early as I joined the company back in 1957. This was—we talked about it, we thought about it, so there were these two considerations. One of potential estate tax problems where we would have been *forced*, at some point, to have sold the company. Fortunately, my mother is still very much alive and well and healthy.

But then in 1967, it was a period of time when the market, stock market, was booming, and toy stocks were selling at tremendous price earnings ratios. Twenty times earnings or better. And my father was perceptive in—I remember him saying, “Oh, you're never going to see a time like this again, where a company like this can command that kind of premium.” And he's right. I don't know of a single toy company stock today that's—ah, there may be a couple of little ones, but that's a tremendous P.E. interim for a toy stock. And so, there were all of those things.

We had, since about 1965, been approached by a number of companies. And in fact, we even used Lehman Brothers in New York to act as our investment banker and screen these people out. But around that time, we had received our first approach from General Mills, and of all the people who had approached us, Ed Parker, in particular, and myself, the two of us were *most* impressed with the caliber of the people that we met from that company. And I had especially gotten to know a man by the name of Craig Nalen, who was pretty high up in the hierarchy of the company, and I met with him for dinner several times in

New York—just to get better acquainted. And I would say by sometime in 19—early '66, we came to the conclusion that, well we really didn't want to do anything for the moment, but that if we did, we would certainly want to contact General Mills. And it was in '67—I suppose it was probably in August or September of '67—when we said, you know, this really is an incredible moment to do this, and my father's saying, "Gosh, if your mother and I could have a little something put aside, we could enjoy our retirement years and relax and not worry," and what did I think? Well, I was excited by the idea of joining with a big consumer goods company, because in 1962, I believe it was, I had been prevailed upon by my father and Ed Parker to go to the program for management development course at Harvard Business School, and I had had my eyes really open about what marketing was all about. It was something that Parker Brothers absolutely did not have, and we really had nobody in the company, with the possible exception of Ed Parker who really understood what marketing was all about, and it excited the living daylights out of me to think that, you know, if we get with them, with General Mills, and near the good people that I thought they were, that this could be a very tremendously exciting opportunity for the company.

So all of those things kind of—you put them in a pot and stir it and eventually the pot came to a boil. It was, in fact, I that made the call to General Mills, to Craig Nalen, and said, "Hey, Craig, we'd like to talk to you. When would be a convenient time to get together?" He said, "Bo Poke," who was the Chief Financial Officer of the corporation at that time, "and I will be in your offices at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning."

JF: *[laughing]* No waiting!—*[phone ringing, possible pause in recording (19:43)]*.

RB: At least these have all been short!

JF: When you made the decision to go with General Mills—was it a difficult decision to make in terms of having had held the company for so many years, and having some commitment to employees, and stuff like that?

RB: Oddly enough, John, there were—I would say that it was a relatively simple decision at the end. I indicated that as early as 1957 when I joined the company, it had first been talked about, so that I think that any of the emotional issues had long since gone by. And we were thinking of the practical aspects of the matter. There were four members of the family who were still in the business at that time: my father, my cousin Edward Parker, another cousin Channing Bacall. They're all older than I was, and they were interested in protecting their future, and thinking of their families. I think I was certainly interested in seeing my parents provided for in their retirement. And I think was—I don't think, I will say I was enormously excited by the prospect of doing some really exciting things with the company. You got to remember that there was another major factor in this—the company was totally

family-owned. There were a few outsiders, but they didn't have one percent of the company, so it was really 99 percent in the family, and that meant that risk was something we were very averse to, and there were many, many opportunities, which we turned down simply because we didn't want to take *our* money and stick our necks out. We were *not* making the kinds of investments in plants and equipment that we should make. We were not, because we were a family company, we were not, in my opinion, not making the investments in people that we should be making. Again, because it was our money. You go out and you hire—you got to remember the timing—back in those days, you go out and hire a \$50,000 marketing vice president, it was \$50,000 off the bottom line. And even though the family was taking out very little in dividends, it was against the profits because we kept plowing the money back in. We didn't want or have any debt when we sold the business, because the family was averse to debt. And every so often we'd see—we younger guys would come up and see an opportunity to buy something and feel we could do a terrific thing here for a million bucks—well, you know great reluctance to go and play with a million bucks, but gosh, if we could get to be a part of a big corporation, we could play with their dollars. And that was exciting to me. I was a young man then. I was—gosh I was in my late 30s.

JF: Did you major in business by the way?

RB: No, I did not. I majored in history. [*Sirens in background.*]

JF: You and Channing, huh? Okay... I was wondering what that noise was out there. Did General Mills make any commitment to stay in Salem?

RB: None whatsoever.

JF: And you didn't ask for one?

RB: No.

JF: Obviously, whether they made the commitment or not, while the company—the family owned the company, it appeared that there was some commitment on a part of the family toward Salem. Was there any reason why you stayed in Salem versus going someplace else to operate?

RB: Oh, sure. The *only* reason we ever stayed in Salem is because we had that tremendous investment in a plant which was a value to us, but probably of very little value to anybody else. Salem was the worst place in the country to operate a games business set-up.

JF: Why?

RB: Because it's way out of one end of the country, and you're dealing with a product that's filled with air, and you're shipping it from here to all over the country. You ideally, probably ought to be located somewhere in the Midwest.

JF: Like Des Moines?

RB: Like Des Moines, which is one reason we went there at that point in time. You had to go back to what was going on then in the transportation. See, a lot of it has changed. We were doing a lot of railroading in those days. Now the company—I don't think today there's any shipments by rail.

JF: So you just stayed here because you were located here, and you had your investment there. There was no other sense of...

RB: Oh, the other sense was that we had our homes here. I was, at one point prepared, if I had to, to move out of here, but I mean, my parents, they weren't going to move out of here, and Ed Parker wasn't going to move out of here, and Channing Bacall wouldn't move out of here, and I wouldn't have wanted to move out of here long-term. But, I think—it never really occurred to us that General Mills would do anything *physically* with the location of the company, that the management, some people out there at the head of the corporation in Minneapolis, never entered my mind that they'd pick the company up and put it down in Cincinnati, or it was just not a good business way of...

JF: The feeling I get when I talk to other people, and I mentioned this to you before, that there was a spirit or a degree of pride on the part of the employees and Parker Brothers. Did you experience that? Do you understand what I'm talking about?

RB: Absolutely.

JF: How do you explain that?

RB: The feeling of pride—I think, John, that you have to, in all of this, consider—you have to consider the size of the company, and the fact that back in those days, we talk about the pre-General Mills era. It was still a relatively small company, an 18 million dollar-business in 1967 was a small business. People knew everybody else, and a lot of people had their fingers in a lot of pieces of the business. It was easy to know where everything was. It was easy to have your finger on all of the pulses of the business. There was—there also—there had been, and I don't know how this happens, but there were, up until that point in time,

there were a *lot* of old-timers in the company. There were a lot of people around who had been there for over 30 years. A *lot* of people who had been there for over 30 years. Some had been there for over 40 years. And there were even a couple who were pushing the 50-year mark—a couple of men—Johnny Hubbard was a guy who that I remember did it.

As the company grew, and the number of employees grew, the percentage of old-timers to the total package dropped dramatically. Dropped *very* dramatically, so that old camaraderie between many of the workers and their bosses and their bosses' bosses—it was something that had always been there. And I think another thing is that up until 1967, the company had rarely, rarely had the company *ever* fired anybody, and even more rarely had the company ever thought about moving people from one position up to a better position, and the guy who was employed to be the Purchasing Agent, today you'd call him the Vice President of Procurement or the Vice President of.... The Purchasing Agent was hired, I think when he was about 28 years old, that hey, you know this is a job for life, my guy. There was never any other opportunity. That's your job. Just do a good job for life, John. There's no other, there's no other opportunity. So you had—

[*Tape runs out here (31:24).*]