

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 – Channing Bacall (2 of 3)

Interviewer: John J. Fox

Interviewee: Channing Bacall

Date of interview/recording: November 6, 1986

Transcription by: Victoria Gray, Zuzu Boomer-Knapp

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John J. Fox: Okay, we're on side two of the tape now. Who were some of the more interesting people who worked at Parker Brothers in the years that you were there? Tell us something about them.

Channing Bacall: Well, there certainly were a number of interesting ones, I'm just trying to decide where to start. Of course, people who are engaged in development work are frequently unusual types. I don't know whether any of the other people who you've talked to have ever mentioned to you the name of Lou Green—

JF: —no.

CB: He was an addition to the Development staff, to the one person that I'd spoken of earlier, he was the second man in the department. He, for many years, had been a game demonstrator for Parker Brothers—he'd worked at Macy's in New York. In those days, it was not at all unusual for companies to have their own employees behind the counter in department stores pushing their particular products. Lou had worked in Macy's for many years, but at one point—the course of reorganization—it was decided that Lou would have to join the union, and I guess he didn't want to join the union. We certainly with our history didn't want to make him join the union. We didn't want to have an employee who was a member of a union. So, we brought Lou to Salem and put him to work in the Development department. He was a very unusual person. Full of enthusiasm, and I could see him behind the counter at Macy's—he must have been a whirlwind. But he was very limited in a number of ways, in that we always suspected that Lou came up with a lot of good ideas, particularly in the new product area. He seemed to come in with most of them on Monday mornings, and we always theorized it was really his wife who was doing the work for him!

JF: Were you ever able to determine if that was the case?

CB: No, no, never did. But Lou worked for the company for a great many years and actually reached retirement age. And, as far as we could tell, performed well. There were a lot of things he couldn't do, and one of the things he couldn't do was *spell*. When I first came

back to the company after my time in the service, they were developing a spelling crossword board game to compete with Scrabble. And whenever Lou would put down a word on the board—and actually if somebody had put down a word that had not been spelled correctly, it could be challenged—so if anytime you wanted to get Lou to withdraw one of his plays, you would—when Lou would spell the word—you would look at it and say, “Well, Lou, I don’t know. I’m afraid, and I just....” [and Lou would say], “Okay, I’ll take it back!” [*chuckling*].

JF: Now, you mean, the people at the company would play games?

CB: Why, sure! How else would you find out if the game was any good? We had great faith. Well, just the way people at publishers read manuscripts and somehow or other decide if they’re worth publishing. Naturally, it was a pretty subjective approach. But one time, late in my days there after the General Mills acquisition, we had some sort of a marketing expert come to talk to us about what problem I forget now, and he was asking Ed Parker—who was a very open, enthusiastic kind of person—how we had decided to promote this particular game that they happen to be talking about. Ed said, “Well, we got the idea in here, we tried it out, sat down, we thought the idea was great, we thought the topic was popular, we played the game, and we thought it was terrific and we decided we’d take it on, and spend money promoting it and really get out there and push it.” And the guy looked at him for a moment and said, “You know, it’s a good thing you guys don’t make dog food.”

JF: [*chuckling*] Obviously though, it worked for you.

CB: It worked for us.

JF: Did you ever bring children in or anything like that? Did children have a chance to play the games?

CB: Yes. We used to bring younger kids in to play the games that were designed for their age group. They used to work on submitted ideas, as well as polishing products that we were getting ready to put on the line.

JF: Where would you find these kids? How would you get a group of children to come in?

CB: Well, of course, we had other groups coming in. We had groups of ladies, for the most part, that used to come in and work on submitted games, and frequently they had children or knew somebody who had children. I suppose otherwise we would have simply gone to the local school and asked for volunteers. They got paid a little something, everybody did.

JF: Actually, a moment ago we talked about Lou Green from the interesting people who worked there. Everyone I've talked to, mentions with a great deal of respect and friendliness, about Ed Parker. And you happened to mention just a few moments ago—

CB: —yes, the people that worked in the factory practically worshipped him, I think.

JF: Well, why would this be the case?

CB: I just don't know. He was that kind of a person. As I said, he was very open, enthusiastic, honest, he liked people. That was all. He was a tremendously *bright* person, one of the ablest executives I have ever met. And with a mind that could go right to the heart of the problem like nobody I ever saw. So, he wasn't just a jolly good fellow, there was a lot more to it than that. The people who worked in the factory thought he was just wonderful.

JF: Was he President?

CB: He became President when Bob Barton retired or became Chairman of the Board.

JF: Now, Bob would have been his father?

CB: No.

JF: Oh, okay. Well, that's right, we're talking about a Parker.

CB: We're talking about a Parker now. Ed was like me, he was a grandson of one of the original brothers. He was the grandson of Edward, who was the oldest of the three brothers—though he and I were of the same generation, we were 15 years apart in age.

JF: Okay. So, when Robert Barton stepped down, then the company decided to ask Ed?

CB: Yeah. Ed had been the Executive Vice President for a number of years, and he was obviously the candidate to step in.

JF: How long did he serve as President, do you know?

CB: I don't remember. It was a relatively short time because he became ill and died in his early sixties.

JF: Could a president have any real impact on the operation of the company in terms of the games that were being made [*inaudible* (8:05)]?

CB: Oh, yes, I think so. It was a small organization. The president really was the ultimate authority for making any major decision.

JF: So, he would have to be convinced that something had a good possibility?

CB: Yeah. If manufacturing people wanted to buy an expensive piece of machinery or build an addition to the building, they couldn't do it unless the president approved. Sales department wanted to open a new sales office, they couldn't do it unless the president approved.

JF: The financial security of the company, the financial wellbeing, was it really based on Monopoly being such a popular game?

CB: Yes, it really was.

JF: And if you didn't have Monopoly it would've been...?

CB: Well, it certainly would have been a very different kind of company, and it would have been a very—less prominent.

JF: It's one that's been connected, though, with Monopoly for a good number of years. What do you think is the popularity? Why do people keep turning back to that game?

CB: I don't know. We've been wondering about it! [*laughing*] If we'd really known, I suppose we would have done it again, but that's the hard part. Naturally, up to the time that Monopoly came along, practically every successful game, especially every *hugely* successful game, had a fairly short life. And I think everybody expected that the same thing would happen to Monopoly. It would be a quick couple of years, a chance to do a lot of business, make a lot of money, and then the sale [of Monopoly] would probably decline fairly rapidly. I know that somewhere around the place, there used to be a framed memo from George Parker saying—it was written, I think, in January 1937 or something like that—saying that we should cut back on our production to guard against a fairly rapid drop-off in Monopoly sales, and not make more than 5,000 more copies, or something like that. But, instead of falling off—and all of these crazes that I speak of have been adult game crazes, really, as was Monopoly—but somehow Monopoly got taken up by the kids, and there's a new generation of them every year just about. And so, that had something to do with preserving it. What made it so hugely successful from the beginning, I really can't say. It was a departure, it was quite different. The idea of most games up to that point had been games where you started from point A and worked your way somehow through to point Z, and the first person to do it, or to reach some other goal, was the winner. Whereas Monopoly really introduced the concept of going around, and around, and around that

board, so it was really, in terms of its play, it was quite a radical departure from most games that had been marketed up to that point.

JF: I'm sitting here listening to you talk about Monopoly, thinking back to summer days sitting on a front porch when I was—I must have been seven or eight years old—playing Monopoly, and my son sits at a computer today playing Monopoly at 15. I guess his mother got him about four or five Monopoly sets when she worked there, including the anniversary edition that they came out with recently. My son's generation, obviously, finds it as—I mean, he frequently, at 15, still says to his mother, "Let's sit down on a Sunday night and play Monopoly" or something of that nature. And I can see obviously he'll pass that feeling for the game on to other people. And I certainly can't explain its popularity, because it's a relatively slow game to begin with—it takes some time to play.

CB: Yeah, it takes a long time to work into it. And that was a thing that used to bother *us* some, and I know Bob Barton in particular. Development people tried to develop shortened forms of the game in an effort to speed it up and to keep it from dragging on, but nobody seemed to be that interested or that concerned about the fact that it did take a long time to play.

JF: Were you there when the company introduced Nerf?

CB: Yes, I was.

JF: How did that come about?

CB: I'm not quite sure of the format of the original submission, but it was a submitted idea, and I think it was—came in the form of a game that was played with this ball. With the small-sized foam ball which became the Nerf ball. And our R&D [Research and Development] people came to the conclusion that the game really didn't have much to offer, but the ball *itself* had promise, and that they should try to market the ball by itself rather than as part of a game.

JF: Now, when somebody would submit an idea like that, and you found that most of it did not serve your purpose, was some financial arrangement worked out with them? Did you buy the idea and then just simply dismiss it?

CB: No, we did it on a royalty basis, and the basis was that anything that came out of their original idea was, in essence, to pay a royalty to them.

JF: So, even bad ideas could sometimes make people a little bit of an income?

CB: Yeah. Oh, that's right. I guess this was much more than a little bit of an income, it was a whole lot because we sold millions of those things.

JF: Well, that's one of your more popular items too, isn't it?

CB: Yeah, and that's gone on. Of course, since then, they've expanded on the idea, and they've put out other products made out of the same material, but the basic ball was how it all began.

JF: Again, I watch my son at 15 playing basketball over the door with a Nerf ball in the house.

CB: Right? Sure. We put out one with the basketball marking on it and a hoop. We still got a hoop in our back hall. It was kind of an interesting story, I don't know whether anybody's ever told you or not about the original ball. First of all, we had a terrible time naming it. We kept coming up with ideas and submitting them to our trademark attorneys, and they kept coming back saying, "No, you can't use that name, it's already been used" or "You're too close to something that's already in use." We must have had a dozen names, any one of which we would have been happy to put on a product and market it, until finally, one of the R&D people came up with this "Nerf." Which was probably the luckiest thing that ever happened. I think it was indeed a terrific name, and if our trademark attorneys had been a little more courageous, we probably would have called it something less good, but they kept scaring us away from using these titles. So, when we finally did put it together and put it all by itself in its little box, we started taking it around to major buyers. This was before Christmas, but it was intended to be an item for the following year, but big buyers or the big companies are looking around before Christmas to see—especially those people with catalogs like Sears Roebuck—they're putting their Christmas '87 catalog together right now.

And so, we took it to some major buyers and one of them was Woolworth's, I think, and he took a look at it and said, "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen in my life." He said, "I wouldn't insult my customers' intelligence by putting an item like this in my stores. Just take it away and forget the whole thing!" And some other people were not too enthusiastic about it, so we said, "Okay, we've got to get something positive going here!" So, we agreed with Jordan Marsh to make a test at some of their local stores by putting it at the cash registers in their toy departments, and the thing just walked away. People were picking them up by the hundreds, so we had a success story to tell. When we went out in January to try to market it, it took off immediately, and the Woolworth buyer was, shortly, on the phone pleading for a thousand dozen of the balls.

JF: We're talking about going outside—did you go to the New York toy show every year with your product line?

CB: Oh, yes. We had an office in New York at 200 Fifth Avenue—I guess that was a building where a great many toy companies had offices—so that was always our headquarters during the fair. We didn't have to rent hotel space or anything like that to show our products, but the Toy Fair was always a big thing.

JF: Did you attempt to have games ready for the Toy Fair?

CB: Yes. You didn't always have the finished product ready for the Toy Fair, but as long as you had something that *looked* like the finished product, that was all that it took. New products were typically not ready in production at that point, but they were, one hoped, fairly well along anyway.

JF: So, would the name Parker Brothers mean anything to a buyer? When you're at the Toy Fair, did the name have something to say to them?

CB: Oh, I'm sure it did. It probably said a lot of different things to them.

JF: But I mean—do you think it was a positive name in the game industry?

CB: Oh, I would think so, yes, because we had a pretty successful product line, and we always felt that our quality was good. And at the same time, a lot of buyers probably would've felt that we were pretty conservative, too, that our pricing policies were old-fashioned. But on the whole, I think it would've been a positive image.

JF: Did you have any failures with games? Forgetting the video.

CB: [*laughing*] Yes, you're right. Well, I'm not qualified to talk about that anyway! Oh sure, sure, we had some failures. Back when I was first with the company, it didn't really matter that much because everything got started on a pretty small basis. So you'd start out putting together five or ten thousand copies of a product. Of course, you did have your investment in printing plates and artwork and R&D time and all those things. But even if the thing fell completely on its face, you couldn't lose a whole lot of money. However, all this changed with the advent of a number of things such as one, almost necessity of providing *some* advertising for new items in order to get people to take them, especially TV. And larger production runs.

So, on the heels of the success of the puzzle Instant Insanity [introduced in 1967], which you may have heard of, which was a *huge* success, everyone was, naturally, trying to come up with something that would duplicate that success. And we got, from an inventor that ran a sort of stable—I think you may have heard of him, Marvin Glass, who had a toy and game development organization of his very own and used to develop ideas and sell them to manufacturers, or license them to manufacturers—came up with a plastic puzzle. It was a sausage-shaped thing consisting of a number of different slices that could be fitted together only in certain ways to form the complete sausage. He called it Phony Baloney, and we thought that this would be the ideal product to introduce behind Instant Insanity when that began to drop off. We introduced it at the Toy Fair, and everybody loved it, all the buyers thought it was great. I can remember talking to a printer during the Toy Fair, he was running 100,000 labels on our press run. And he said, “Wow, this is an awful lot for a new item,” and I said, “Yeah, but they’ve all been sold already.” It was about three days into the fair. So, it [Phony Baloney] rolled along like that for a while and then I guess it got out to the stores [around 1970], and it was an absolute dud. And in the meantime, we had, of course, TV commercials made, all ready to put a lot time—buy a lot of TV time for it, a huge warehouse full of inventory, and we were putting it together everywhere, we had to buy additional plastic molds to get the production up to where we thought it ought to be, and suddenly we didn’t need any of it.

JF: Could you ever tell *why* something failed? I mean outside the fact that obviously it didn’t go over with the consumer, but—

CB: —yeah. Well, maybe it just simply wasn’t a good enough idea. If you look back, maybe it’s a mistake to assume that if you have a successful plastic puzzle, the best thing to follow it up with is another plastic puzzle! Instant Insanity had the beauty of being, at once, a very simple, easily understood puzzle. Not simple in the sense of easy to do, [but] easy to understand, easy to comprehend what you were trying to do, and at the same time, rather difficult to do. And this one was too easy, I think.

JF: Talking about things being easy to understand, not necessarily easy to do—a thought just popped into my mind. Was there any discussion at all about the intelligence level of the people who would be buying the types of games or their ability to understand what was being done, did that come into play?

CB: Well, we talked more about age levels, really, than intelligence levels. We know there are all types of people. We know there are some people who play more involved games. Monopoly is a pretty involved game. If somebody sat down knowing nothing about the game, as people had to do back in 1935, it’s not an easy game to get to understand.

JF: Alright. So, games would be then developed in term of age levels rather than other types of criteria?

CB: Yeah.

JF: Obviously, you must have paid attention to demographics, too. You would have had to know what the population was out there to determine the types of games that you were going to develop to spend a great deal of the money on, I would assume?

CB: Well, we didn't probably know a whole lot about demographics or give it a whole lot of thought. Perhaps we were too much concerned with what I was telling you about before—if we thought it was a good idea, we figured people would buy it!

JF: When you were in the company, and since you've retired, if you could've, would there have been some things that you would have changed in terms of how the company operates?

CB: Well, I've thought about that, I think that.... I think that I would've resisted the people from General Mills a bit more than I did, which perhaps I might or might not have been able to do successfully. Oh, sure, there were some things, little things, you might have done differently, but on the whole I don't really have any great regrets.

JF: When the company stopped being a "family company," it became part of a conglomerate, did things change in terms of management in the workforce?

CB: Well, of course, things changed some in terms of management because we did get some people from General Mills. Openings tended to be filled more by people from General Mills, but as far as the general workforce was concerned, it really didn't change much. Naturally, we got more and more—we were told what to do in various situations by people from General Mills. There was greater pressure to achieve that particular kind of earnings curve that General Motors [sic] desires, but it didn't all happen right away by any means. And the development was slow. I think, really, as long as—I don't want to point any fingers, but—as long as Ed was around, things went on much the same way. I can remember one time, somebody who had come to us from General Mills as the Controller—which they liked to have their own people in in that job—after he'd been with the company for a couple years, I guess he had an opportunity to go to General Mills' headquarters in Minneapolis for what would've been a promotion, and he felt that he couldn't turn that down. He went in to tell Ed about it, and he said, "You know, I've never worked for a company like this before in my life, and I know I never will again." So, he felt it then, and this was some time after the acquisition.

JF: Do you think the people on the floor, the workers, felt any change? Did their attitudes change, do you know?

CB: They did in time, I think. You talk to somebody like Louis, he certainly felt it in time.

JF: I have a feeling talking to Louis, and I get a sense from you, and with Angie I got a little bit before that, as I was saying. But I get a sense that there may have been a willingness to stay on a little longer if it was still a local business.

CB: Yeah, I think that's true. I've talked to a number of people who retired early because they didn't feel it was the company it used to be.

JF: Well, mister, I've got a whole lot of questions, but I have bothered you for about an hour. Unless you're willing to sit for about another half hour, we can end the tape here or...?

CB: I don't mind, I've got a half an hour.

JF: Alright, because there's still a few more things that I want to—but I know the tape is running out, so what I'm going to do is I'm going to push that one right off and put another one on there.

[Tape ends here.]