



George Conrad Parker
February 2, 1912 – May 28, 2005

“... what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” This passage from Micah 6:8 (KJV), a favorite of George Parker’s, was referenced often as friends and family gathered in the days after his death. His was a life of seeking to live by this query.

Early years

Born to William Edgar and Ruth Peele Parker, George Parker was the oldest of six children, Mary, Ruth Eleanor, twins Jesse and James, and Esther. As a birthright Quaker, he grew up in the Cedar Grove Friends Meeting of Rich Square Monthly Meeting. Growing up on the small family farm, his early years left deep impressions from which he developed a lasting love of and enduring appreciation for farming life, those who work with their hands, and the people who lived between the Cutawhiskie and Urahaw Swamps. He often described the area as “God’s country”.

He and his family lived active lives that involved a healthy blend of school, work, Friends Meeting, and recreation. At an early age, George’s ability to memorize and quote long passages of literature and scripture was recognized by his mother, siblings, and friends. This ability helped him achieve success as a student at Woodland-Olney School. His academic abilities were complemented by his love of athletics and a quiet determination to compete

When he was twelve years old, his father died, leaving George as the father figure with a young thirty-seven year old mother, and among brothers and sisters of ages ten, eight, four, and two. The burdens he must have felt during the years after his father’s death comes forth from Ruth Eleanor’s description of a frightening time from their childhoods. Brother George went out to start the generator and ignited a fire that quickly engulfed the generator barn and surrounding structures and threatened the farm house. She recalls that she and Mary began screaming and the twins ran under the house when they saw him running from the barn with flames closely following. The type of support attendant to them is also evident from her description of what happened next. Neighbors and friends quickly came to put out the fire and ensure that the family was all right.

When he was eighteen years old, the extended family and community support for the Parker family allowed George to go to Westtown Friends Boarding School in a western suburb of Philadelphia. His mother’s brother, Uncle Henry Peele, was a veterinarian in Woodstown, New Jersey, a nearby community. The combination of the academic challenge and chance to play sports on another level blended with the opportunity to spend time and learn from a respected uncle and his family at a place far from home played an important role in his development as an older teenager. The friendships formed at Westtown lasted him a lifetime as he returned for reunions there every five years from 1936 until 1997.

Upon returning from Westtown, George went to Guilford College. His mother had gone to Guilford when it was known as New Garden Friends Boarding School. He thus became the second in what is currently four generations of his family to go to school there. As with the Westtown experience, his time at Guilford made a lifetime impression. While maintaining a high academic standing, he was active in all aspects of college life, serving on the Student Government Association and lettering in football, basketball, and baseball.

In 1935, upon graduating from Guilford with a major in chemistry, he had opportunities to go to work with a Texas oil company and to go to South Carolina to teach and coach; however, his family needed his presence at home and he felt an obligation to family and Friends who had helped him go to Westtown and Guilford. As a result, he began his professional career as a bookkeeper with Riverside Manufacturing Company in Murfreesboro. By doing so, he helped ensure that his sisters and brothers

furthered their educations and gained the benefits of some of the same opportunities that had helped his growth and development. George, along with younger brothers, Jesse and James, played for Woodland in the Goober Belt Basketball League that was quite popular in small northeastern North Carolina towns.

“George and Lib” have a family

While a Junior at Guilford, George met and began courting an attractive and personable freshman co-ed from Sanford, Elizabeth Gilliam. Lib, as she was known by friends, was from a larger North Carolina industrial town, but they shared a number of common interests. She was the middle child of a six sibling family and her Presbyterian family had roots in rural Lee County. Like George, she was a good student and an athlete, having played field hockey and basketball in high school. Unlike George, she had musical talent and sang in the Guilford College choir.

The same year that George graduated from Guilford, Lib returned home after her sophomore year and took a secretarial job. Even though they were 150 miles apart at a time when roads and convenient transportation were not conducive to maintaining a lasting relationship, Lib and George continued to see each other regularly. In March of 1937, George came to Sanford and proposed. As Lib remembered, when George asked Mr. Gilliam for permission to marry his daughter, he advised him, “Don’t let Lib rush you into something that you’re not ready for.” Despite this counsel, the love-smitten couple, accompanied by her sister and brother-in-law, Lou and Harry Dalrymple, went to Dillon, South Carolina and were married by a local justice of the peace on March 20th. They returned to Woodland and settled in with George’s family and began a married life that lasted until George died sixty-eight years later. The strength of George and Lib’s commitment to each other as parents and supportive siblings within their respective families has been reflected in the families of their five children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

While Lib was adapting to life with his family and the farm life, George established a professional presence at Riverside, soon becoming office manager for Northeastern Oil Company, a subsidiary of Riverside Manufacturing. In later years when George spoke at yearly meeting about the times during World War II, he expressed his inner struggle as contemporaries were conscripted. One Friend who was at that yearly meeting later remembered how George described a sleepless night as he faced a crucial decision concerning his role during the war years. The matter was resolved for him as his employment was deemed crucial for the local farm economy and he was given an exemption.

In 1940, the first of their five children, William Conrad, was born. Two years later, Elwood Gilliam was born. As Conrad and Elwood were growing up, George Edgar (1946), John Gurney (1950) and Elizabeth LeMay (1954), were born into the Parker household. With the help of George’s mother, first called Mamma Ruth by Conrad, George and Lib looked after a household of five children with the constant presence of extended family. Lib used her boundless energy to manage day-to-day affairs that ensured all of their children experienced a healthy blend of school, Meeting, and athletics while George occupied the traditional role of breadwinner.

Even though their mother was the more dominant daily presence, all of the children developed a deep and abiding respect for their father. As his children would

learn through his guiding hand, participation in “waiting spiritual worship” as practiced by Friends required a special kind of discipline, a discipline that he appreciated and felt a commitment to share with his family and beyond. As Edgar described in an essay written in his father’s honor on his 90th birthday, “Dad had high expectations without making demands.”

The patience and resilience that George learned as the father figure during his teenage years and that carried over to leading a family of his own was grounded in his spiritual seeking to translate Quaker principles to his everyday life. In the fifties and early sixties, the Parker backyard was one of only a few places in the Woodland-George area where African-American and Caucasian young people played together. Some friends of the children were forbidden from coming to visit the Parkers because this was common practice.

Mentor and Civic Leader

The fulfillment he felt through his own education blended with the recognition of its potential importance to those around him led to a lifelong commitment to the local public schools and youth recreation programs. Although George never ran for the Northampton County School Board, he was described by Henry Campbell, principal of Northampton County High School - East for over twenty years, as “the strongest non-political influence on public education in the county.” In the early years of full scale racial integration in the public schools, many parents chose to send their children to the emerging private schools in the area. These schools were created for the fundamental purpose of avoiding mixing the races in schools. This was especially true of female students, who were perceived by many Caucasian families as being subject to advances from African-American male students. As Elizabeth went through school in this context, George and Lib provided the same whole-hearted support to be a full participant in school life that Conrad, Elwood, Edgar, and John had received during their school years. In looking back at those years, Elizabeth considers that as the most positive decision her parents made in influencing her future life and education.

After his children graduated from high school, George maintained his active support of public education. He served on the Northampton County Education Foundation and the Northampton County Ministers’ Council on Education from the times of their inception until his death.

Most importantly, the parental influence of George and Lib led all of their children to become educators. George was often asked how all of his siblings and children could become teachers while growing up around a successful businessman. His pat response was that someone had to make the money to support careers that did not pay what they should. His children unanimously attest to their parents’ strong belief in education as the primary reasons they sought to positively influence the lives of thousands of young people.

In addition to supporting public education, George and Lib’s community life was one of the most active among their generation. He was a member of the Woodland Lions Club, the Woodland Men’s Club, and served on the Boards of the Regional Mental Health Center, Roanoke-Chowan Hospital, Pine Forest Rest Home, and Woodland Farmers’ Bank. He was typically called on to be treasurer of these organizations because of the pervasive trust and confidence that community members had in him. When there

was no volunteer coach available for the Woodland Lions Club Little and Pony League Baseball Teams, he would always fill the void. The Town of Woodland baseball field and the Northampton County High School- East baseball field were named for him. The dedication plaque at the high school, dated 5/1988, reads "in honor of George C. Parker for Booster Club leadership 1964-1987.

George kept his competitive spirit alive and provided his family with opportunities to learn to swim and play golf by becoming a charter member of Beechwood Country Club in 1948. If garden chores had been done and there were no baseball games to be played in the afternoon, it was a standard summer ritual for him to let his sons off at Beechwood on his way to work in Murfreesboro and pick them up when he returned in the afternoon. It was a rite of passage for each boy to learn the game of golf by caddying for him in his regular weekend matches. After he retired, he continued to play golf well into his eighties at Valley Pines Country Club. After two sets of hip replacements, he considered giving up the game; however, his friends at Valley Pines gently encouraged him to continue playing and always offered a helping hand in teeing his ball or retrieving it from the hole after a made putt. Many young people who had the opportunity to play with "Mister George" in those years fondly recall his counsel on sportsmanlike behavior and personal discipline as a preparation for life.

Even while investing so much in the Woodland Community, George and Lib maintained strong ties to Guilford College. They jointly served on the Board of Visitors, actively supported the Quaker Club and established the Parker Family Scholarship Fund. In 1969 Lib and George were honored with Guilford College Alumni's Distinguished Service Award. All five children graduated from Guilford with academic and life stories that are now passed to two other generations of Parkers.

Service to Friends

George was a faithful member of the Religious Society of Friends. This was evident in his long years of service to Rich Square Monthly Meeting, to North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) and in the wider Society of Friends. He began carrying responsibilities for the meeting as a young adult. The year after they married, he and Lib joined a few older members of the meeting in travelling to Ohio Yearly Meeting in Barnesville. Lib recounts that visit as being memorable because the young couple was separated and housed apart in men's and women's quarters with much older Friends. Rich Square Monthly Meeting appointed George an overseer in 1940. He began serving the meeting as treasurer in 1941 and continued in this role for more than sixty years.

The meeting recorded George as an elder in 1959. During the 1950's and early 60's he served as "Clerk for the Day" whenever the monthly meeting clerk was absent, alongside his mother who was recording clerk. The following extract from ninth month 1959 minutes notes a concern George brought to the monthly meeting.

"George C. Parker spoke on the quotation, "How good it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." [Psalm 133:1] Next sixth month will be the 200th Anniversary of the founding of Rich Square Monthly Meeting (1760). He expressed a concern that we should as a group and meeting look forward to a planned program and celebration and homecoming for this great event."

In 1968, George was recorded as a minister by the Rich Square Monthly Meeting. He understood the important responsibility that this role carried. For several years prior

to that time, when approached by meeting members, he had questioned whether he was ready for such service.

As elder and minister he carried the concern for weekly meetings for worship, weddings and funerals in a quiet and respectful manner that made a lasting impression with members of the Meeting and the community at large. His humble and quiet deference to a waiting spiritual ministry has been conveyed through a number of testimonies from friends and relatives. Typical of these is an exchange between his son, John, and a non-Quaker friend of his who had just attended a funeral at Cedar Grove. The friend shared that, "this was the most moving and genuine testimony to a person that I've ever witnessed. I did not know that your father was a preacher, but his *conduct* of that service was inspiring." John responded that, "he had never considered that his father was a preacher or *conducting* a service. I believe that Dad has faith that the constant strength he finds in the manner of Friends' worship will be communicated through the collective presence of God in all those attending."

George C. Parker and Dorothy H. Brown served as clerks of the Yearly Meeting in 1961 with Elizabeth G. Parker serving as assistant clerk. In 1962 the Yearly Meeting approved George's suggestion that yearly meeting procedures might be improved by dividing the work of the clerks into presiding clerk, recording clerk and reading clerk. Beginning that year, he served as presiding clerk and remained in that role until 1977. During those years Lib served as recording clerk.

George also was active in the wider world of Friends. Between 1963 and 1966 he was a yearly meeting representative to Friends World Committee for Consultation. During that time he and other yearly meeting members worked with North Carolina Yearly Meeting (FUM) to host the FWCC Fourth World Conference at Guilford College. In 1966 George expressed a concern to the yearly meeting about the need for follow-up of the general meeting for Conservative Friends which was held in Barnesville, Ohio the previous year. He continued with this concern for over a decade, sometimes providing committee leadership, to seek further general meetings. By 1978 additional general meetings of Conservative Yearly Meetings had been hosted by each of the Conservative Yearly Meetings. He worked on plans for the 1972 concurrent and joint meetings of the two yearly meetings (Conservative and FUM) in celebration of the 300th anniversary of Friends' arrival in colonial North Carolina.

The years when he served as Yearly Meeting clerk, 1961-1977, were remarkable in terms of changes happening within the yearly meeting as well as the broader American culture. We see in the minutes that the young adult Friends in Rich Square Monthly Meeting as well as other monthly meetings brought concerns to the yearly meeting sessions which were heard. As his son Edgar noted, "Dad was a man of his time, as we all are products of the times in which we live. We did not always see eye to eye. But he was willing to listen and allow us to follow our own convictions. I always will admire and respect him for that."

A life marked by a quiet, steady determination to live and act consistently

Even among those who know someone best, it can only be imagined what occupies any human's mind during those times of happiness or challenge that are sheltered from the observations of others. During one brief stretch of delirium accompanying illness several weeks before he died, George uttered the classic John Milton quote, "they also serve who only stand and wait." After a brief pause, he began describing the pace and movement of a fast ball thrown by a baseball player he obviously respected. These moments became symbolic to those around him of a life of diverse interests and profound quality.

A constant later life wish of George's to see the Cedar Grove Friends Meeting House filled by worshipers as it had been in his childhood was satisfied on the day of his memorial service. The testimony expressed in that gathered meeting was to a life marked by a quiet, steady determination to live and act consistently with the virtues of mercy, justice, and humility, and the Quaker principles of respect for others and of trust in the eternal goodness of God.