

Painless Parker

Article to accompany 2023 exhibit at Cupertino Historical Museum

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Thanks to Henrietta Marcotte, a founder of Cupertino Historical Society and Cupertino Museum, the story of Painless Parker saw the light of day many years ago in a Cupertino Scene "Roots" article. Parker's story is the stuff of unbridled hyperbole but as the inimitable humorist Dave Barry used to say "am NOT making this up!"

Painless Parker was a real person and he really lived in Cupertino in the early 1900's. Born in New Brunswick, Canada in 1874, Edgar R. Parker must have been a handful as a child and young adult. His parents decided his loud voice and outgoing demeanor would perfectly suit a Baptist preacher. He was dispatched to a seminary where his escapades did not go well in such a staid atmosphere, and he was asked to leave. Fearing parental displeasure, he went off to sea instead, which only increased his worldliness. Upon returning home, he was again sent to seminary - where his behavior so affronted the educators that once again, he was asked to leave. He then went to dental school - where his academic prowess was not impressive - nonetheless he began to practice dentistry in people's homes, before getting his certificate of proficiency. Once again, he stood in danger of being expelled, but somehow convinced the dean to let him continue and he finally graduated.

His ensuing career is the stuff of Hollywood at its most fantastical. He was not making any money in his new career so he went into the Canadian wilds with his small bag of dental tools and a coronet (a type of trumpet). He went to logging and mining camps, loudly blowing his horn to gather a crowd and then pull teeth for the inhabitants, including ladies of the evening. While in the Canadian wilderness, he once was captured by a local indigenous group and despaired of his life. Rescue came in the form of the tribal chief, an elderly fellow with a horrible toothache. Parker saw his chance. He convinced the chief's tribe that he could cure their chief. Reluctantly, they assented. Parker began to blow his trumpet - which only made the tribal men more agitated and hostile. He explained he was summoning the great spirit of dentistry – which

was necessary to his curing procedure. As the men became increasingly agitated, Parker blew with all his might and holding his teeth pulling pliers with his other hand, proceeded to yank out the chief's offending tooth - at which point the man fainted. Parker assured the tribe that the chief had merely fallen asleep, and the great spirit of dentistry would wake him when he felt better. Somehow Parker managed to steal away and lived to pull teeth another day.

It was a happy day for Edgar R. Parker when he met up with Bill Beebe - a former pitchman for Barnum & Bailey circus. Beebe convinced Parker to change his name to "Painless Parker" and claim that he and only he - could pull teeth with no pain. Parker's billboards carried his huge picture with the statement. Of course, a mixture of water and cocaine (hydrocaine) usually rendered the patient insensible during the procedure, though Parker also employed a brass band on his public teeth pulling excursions - to drown out any yelps from his "patients." He became increasingly wealthy using his highly unusual self-promotion methods and incurred the wrath of fellow dental practitioners - necessitating Parker hiring a battery of lawyers to manage the ensuing lawsuits - which only increased his visibility. His huge painted signs on buildings proclaimed, "I am positively IT in painless dentistry." He moved from the east to Los Angeles where his fame and notoriety grew greater. Painless Parker is most assuredly the only dentist in America to have his own circus. Riding elephants from town to town, drawing large crowds wherever he went, he pulled teeth in a horse drawn wagon carrying a dental chair. There is an amazing publicity photo of him filling the teeth of a hippopotamus.

In the early 1900's, Parker, his wife and children moved from Los Angeles to Cupertino. He bought Henry Farr's large home and property on Prospect Road, known as Grandview. While wife Frances and the children stayed in Cupertino, Parker commuted by train to San Francisco, painted a huge sign proclaiming his painless dentistry and flamboyant claims on the sides of the building and set up business. Claiming to have pulled 357 teeth in one day, he wore the teeth in a necklace. Painless Parker did so well in San Francisco that he established twenty-eight franchise dental offices in California, Oregon, and Washington. He bought a yacht and sailed the Bay, enjoying respite from the pressures of his dental practice. Collier's Magazine did a 3-part story on Parker's life. He was the most well known dentist in America for many years but after his death in 1952, his franchises, for the most part, were shut down and every effort was made to

more or less erase his name. He and his wife Frances lie at rest under small plaques at Madronia Cemetery in Saratoga. Parker Ranch on Prospect Rd. Is the only reminder of the most flamboyant dentist that ever practiced in America.

Photographs and text on Parker's outrageous life, exploits and the "tooth necklace"(replica!) are on display at the Cupertino Museum. Also on exhibit are a life-size Painless Parker and a Cupertino farmer seated in a vintage dental chair - about to experience "painless" tooth pulling and drilling accompanied by a vintage foot powered electric drill.