

Untitled

by Elizabeth Giangrego

“God hates those who do not take care of their teeth.”

—Edgar Randolph “Painless” Parker, DDS (1872-1952)

Painless Parker was a flamboyant dentist who used show girls, circuses and whatever other distractions he could think of to bring dentistry to the masses. He also fathered the modern concept of a group dental practice, in which all services are available under one roof.

Dancing girls aside, Parker was a 19th century proponent of preventive dentistry, a tireless promoter of dentistry for the working class, and a man who believed in advertising.

Attired in a top hat, crisp white coat and a necklace made of teeth he'd extracted, Parker once operated a traveling circus/dental clinic and hired brass bands to play as he extracted teeth. However, in the end he operated 30 West Coast dental offices, employed 75 dentists and grossed \$3 million per year. Labeled “a menace to the dignity of the profession” by the American Dental Association, most of his colleagues detested Parker, considering him a quack—whether it was because of the outrageous promotion of his business or because of his success remains unknown.

pp03_234ParkerCanadian by birth, Parker entered Philadelphia Dental College in 1890. The school, now the Temple University School of Dentistry, is the proud owner of a wooden bucket of teeth removed by Painless Parker.

Parker believed that patients avoided dentistry because of pain, ignorance, procrastination and lack of money—and of these, fear was the strongest deterrent. Working with a local druggist, Parker developed hydrocaine, an analgesic that contained cocaine. After testing the drug on himself, Parker took his show on the road—literally. Parker began as a “street dentist,” setting up a dental chair on the back of a wagon. He offered to extract teeth for 50 cents, and he guaranteed patients that if they felt pain, he would reimburse them \$5. He billed himself as “Painless Parker, the famous dentist,” promising to fix teeth at a reasonable price using the “E.R. Parker System,” which sometimes meant that he contracted with a bugler who stood behind the patient and let fly with a mighty blast at the precise moment that Parker extracted the tooth.

Parker's bombastic methods did not endear him to his colleagues. The Canadian Dental Association, for example, passed a rule designed specifically to put Parker out of business. Authorities arrested him for practicing without having paid a \$2 registration fee, a requirement which had become effective two days before Parker's apprehension.

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Parker eventually opened shop in Brooklyn, NY. His public demonstrations often began with fervent dental health sermons and poetry readings. He frequently extracted teeth to the sound of drumbeats, which drowned out any yelps of patient pain. By 1904, Parker was worth a half-million tax-free dollars and owned an estate on Long Island. However, when New York state law forbade dentists the use of an assumed name, he packed his bags and moved to California.

Parker opened shop on a Los Angeles street in 1906, beginning with his usual vigorous lecture on the evils of tooth neglect and the horrors of decay. Within four years, Parker amassed a fortune well in excess of what he earned in New York and earned the ire of his California colleagues.

Attacked as unethical and incompetent, Parker retaliated with a series of advertisements in which he alleged that other dentists charged exorbitant fees, catered to the wealthy and ignored the needs of the indigent. By 1914, with his successful dental circus on the road, Parker's advertisements painted organized dentistry as a trust that would prefer to see an edentulous nation rather than lower its fees. Hauled into court innumerable times, Parker beat every case. However, in 1915, he officially changed his name to "Painless" so that he could use the name "Painless Parker." He founded the California Dental Supply Company, in his wife's name, and every dentist who worked for him had to lease space and equipment from him.

By the time he died in November 1952, Parker, who had diversified into real estate, was a multi-millionaire. During his life, he popularized dentistry, convinced people that oral health was important and created the modern group practice concept that became the model eventually adopted by the military during World War II.

He is also the only dentist to have extracted 357 teeth in one afternoon on a vaudeville stage.