An Interview With “Deak” Parker
Scripps-Howard Chief Discusses Group Ownership

By Earl Sparling, of the New York Telegram staff, Author of “Under the Levee”

ROM behind a breastwork of books a tall, lank, easy-jointed Southwesterner, up to welcome you. His form blots out the Mayan piles of Manhattan that tumble beyond his windows.

One would know instinctively that he came from a cline where the skies are more filled with cottonwood than with soot.

To gain attention, Easterners tilt their heads upward, pointing their chins. This man lowers his head and observes you, as it were, from under his horn-rimmed spectacles, but one which you, being romantic, are certain was learned in a land where the wind blows, the sun is white and a man must see far. And his body bends forward slightly from the waist, and though, perhaps, like many another Oklahoman, he knows more about garages than corals, that posture, you like to believe, was achieved in a country where saddles still have lingering effects on anatomy. (As a matter of fact, he does take to a horse two or three times a week, even here in Babylon). As he listens to you, his entire face is concentrated on the task, a trick inherited unquestionably from pioneering forebears, for only men who have lived in the open know how well the eyes and mouth can help the ears to hear, easy-listening gentry thrive only in communities where words do not count and sound is shattered by walls.

O, you have come to talk about newspapers and their mission, about group systems and their results, about the where and wherefore of public print. Well, have a seat. There by the window. Will you have something to smoke? George B. Parker, editor in chief of the 25 Scripps-Howard newspapers, tilts back in his chair and begins talking about looming problems as casually and conversationally as though he were discussing the weather.

No fumbling rigamarole. No protective ritual. No profound reticence. He knows newspapers, this man who graduated from the University of Oklahoma twenty years ago and rose to one of the greatest journalistic jobs in the world, and he is willing to discuss them, candidly, frankly. Only one who has promiscuously interviewed other professional and industrial leaders of America can appreciate the rarity of this attitude. Without artifice George Parker, editor in chief of twenty-five newspapers, plunged into the question of group ownership.

This article about a great Oklahoma editor is written by one of the most successful journalistic graduates of the university. Earl Sparling has had a remarkable career of success—first on the Oklahoma News, then in New Orleans and now with the New York Telegram. A brilliant newspaperman, he has a literary bent that promises a wider public than that of the newspaper. If you haven’t read Mr. Sparling’s “Under the Levee” (published by Scribner’s), do so; you will find this book of short stories fascinating.

Publishers of group systems are not better or worse than publishers of individual newspapers,” are his first words.

“The chief point sometimes raised is possibility of the group dominating the newspaper business and the thought of the nation. As a practical proposition that has never appealed to me.

“Despite the growth of groups, the percentage compared with individual newspapers is negligible, and will remain so. The growth of groups, as the growth of any individual newspaper, depends on the publisher’s recognition of and ability to perform his own job. There is no magic formula and the field will always be open. Anyone with sufficient experience and capital can start a newspaper anywhere he wishes.

“The mission of any newspaper is to tell the news impartially and without coloration. That is primarily what the newspaper business is all about. But a good newspaper must go beyond that conception. It must speak fearlessly for the good of the community. A good newspaper, in other words, must wear no man’s collar.

“That complete conception is necessary for newspaper success. If a group of newspapers succeed they do so only on that basis. If a true conception is not present the newspaper or the group, ultimately collapses. A group of newspapers, is of course, no stronger than its individual members.

“If a publishing concern has the necessary qualities of success, there is no reason why it should not push out to new outposts. Horace Greeley was one of the great newspapermen of America. His ability was of value chiefly to New York. Wouldn’t it have been a good thing had he been able to do for St. Louis and Chicago and Philadelphia, and smaller cities, what he did for New York. If a newspaper publisher or editor has something of value to one community why shouldn’t other communities also he given an opportunity to use his ability.

“To draw an analogy, wouldn’t America as a whole lose very materially if only the people of Rochester, Minnesota, were able to avail themselves of the medical skill of the Mayo brothers. A fine lawyer does not confine his business to one community. He helps wherever his ability is needed. Why should a publisher help only one community?

“This country is a field of opportunity, with no barriers. That doesn’t mean that any newspaper monopoly can be established, however. Nowhere in America is there a large city with only one newspaper publisher. If you could conceive of a Scripps-Howard newspaper in every large city in the United States, even that would not constitute a monopoly. There would still be competition and the field would still be open for anyone with sufficient ability.

“A group of newspapers such as the Scripps-Howard group is success-

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ful only as the qualities built into it by its founder, E. W. Scripps, have made it successful. It should be borne in mind that group publication isn't merely carrying a manufactured article into new communities. It is the supplying of an achieved character, the supplying of a proved type of public service. Its arrival in a community is a good thing for the community. And each paper must stand on its own feet.

George B. Parker was graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1908. Though his hair is beginning to gray and though his face has long since assumed something of the austere expression that is the toll of great authority, you would never believe it. For "Deak" Parker's mind is still the curious, searching, ever-inquiring mind of a college boy. A fire, a new book, a novel idea, a presidential campaign, an unexpected sequence of words, an exotic face, a conflict of ideals: these things arouse in him an enthusiasm that only comes from an eternal youthfulness and mobility of mind. In other words, George B. Parker is the born newspaperman, as interested in a beggar on a street corner as in a steel baron in an exclusive club corner.

When interviewed recently for Editor and Publisher he was asked what part of newspaper work he liked best. He answered typically that he preferred, first, reporting; second, interpretative and editorial writing; third, executive and administrative work. "A truly great reporter," he has said, "possesses so much information and such intense curiosity and ability to observe that he can one day report a meeting of a medical association in such a way that the physicians believe it and the general public understand it and the next day turn to a meeting of the tax board with sufficient ability and knowledge to deliver a story that is both accurate and readable." It is that kind of curiosity and ability, and his power to impart it to others, that has made Parker a great newspaper man, and there are those who know him who will always be sorry he had to stop running a typewriter to run a far-flung system of newspapers.

As a newspaperman he is proud he got his first training in Oklahoma. He started on the Oklahoma News in 1909 at $10 a week. Oklahoma was a good training field, he believes, for two reasons. The state was new and gave something that an older established state could never have given. It would be difficult for any Oklahoman to grow prematurely old in mind or viewpoint. Conditions and circumstances have changed too fast. In addition to that Elizabethan atmosphere, the growth of the cities of the state has given opportunity for newspapermen to learn all sides of newspaperwork. In the space of a few years the papers of the larger cities of the state have developed from small, almost country, papers to large, dignified metropolitan publications. Any newspaperman who grew up on such papers would necessarily have better training than men who learned their business on papers already matured and departmentalized.

That, Parker believes, is the reason why Oklahoma has produced a relatively large number of newspapermen who have achieved success through-