

I/O Statesman and Pillar Charles Paul Sparks 1915-1995

January 01, 1996

On October 16, 1995, having fought the good fight, having lived 80 years, having finished his course, and having kept the faith, Charles Paul Sparks, psychologist, mentor, father, and friend, finally lost his battle with lung cancer. His memorial service was held October 20, 1995, at the Houston, Texas, Bellaire Christian Church, in which he had served so well.

Sparks was born on October 9, 1915, in Charley, Kentucky, to Fannie France and Charles Clarence Sparks. He married Jean Case on November 19, 1941. A respected psychologist, mentor to many, and devoted family man, he had retired as Coordinator of Personnel Research and Chief Psychologist, Exxon Corporation in 1982, remaining active in his field as a consultant with his own firm called "Serendipity Unlimited."

Paul completed his BS in education (with distinction) from Ohio State University in 1936, followed by an MA in psychology in 1938. His career path began as a school psychologist for the Mansfield, Ohio, School District, followed by military service as an officer with the adjutant general's office.

Discharged in 1946, he joined the consulting firm of Richardson, Bellows, Henry, & Co. in New Orleans, later becoming president of the company in New York. He resigned in 1964 to join Standard Oil of New Jersey, later Exxon Company, U.S.A. He was a fellow of the American Psychological Association, a past president of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Inc., co-founder of the Houston Area Industrial-Organizational Psychologist, a member of the Equal Employment Advisory Council, and a member of the American Petroleum Institute. He became the first honorary lifetime member of the Houston Area I-O Psychologist in 1984, and received the Professional Practice Award from the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology in 1987.

In addition to being co-author of a text on psychology, he also maintained a continuous association with appropriate local universities, last as an adjunct professor at the University of Houston. Away from work and family, his loves were for anything involving Ohio State University, golf, and Bellaire Christian Church, where he was an Elder and Elder Emeritus, as well as church historian.

But Paul Sparks is best remembered as having guided hundreds of surrogate "sons" and "daughters" in the profession who always will owe a substantial portion of whatever successes they achieve in their lives to the guidance and spirit and example of this extraordinary man. Without hesitation, he gave much more of his knowledge and self than anyone ever could have had reason to expect and he did so for all of his life. What's more, he never asked for anything in return from those to whom he gave such gifts. This man, who had honors sufficient to spoil the rest of us, never let it get in the way of his lending a hand to whomever asked for it. Perhaps this giving nature grew out of the completely applied nature of his work. To be sure, there were many other accomplishment areas in his professional life, and he was totally familiar with theory, but Paul didn't spend much of his time on the high mountains of theory. Paul came from the Friden and tally-marks-on-spreadsheets era and spent at least half of his life working in the

vineyard of test development and validation—something one seldom finds reported in the journals.

Like all respected applied researchers of his generation, he easily adapted to new computer technology as it took quantum leaps in behavioral measurement applications. But Paul never removed his hands from the raw data soil of his vineyard, and he always knew what the computer output would be and should be before it came out. One of his major concerns, in fact, was the extent to which new graduates were increasingly in haste to get to the computer and decreasingly inclined to get their hands dirty in the raw data collection and familiarization which he believed should precede. The consequence, as he saw it, was a lessened ability within the profession to judge the rightness and reliability of machine output because there was a lessened knowledge about the input.

Paul Sparks also could describe measurement theory and practices in terms which managers, bureaucrats, politicians, and personnel practitioners could understand. Much of what he accomplished in this regard also was quiet and steady vineyard work. Those who worked with him during the *Uniform Guidelines* draft skirmishes of most of the 1970s know that much of what was good in the 1976 and 1978 products was “Sparksonian” in origin. He could walk the federal drafters through the pitfalls of what they were writing, because he had been conducting the unsung, unpublished work of validity investigation for longer than most of them had lived.

Even earlier, in 1968, on a particular occasion of which very few knew, Paul Sparks was the lone intervenor for the I/O profession, and, in a one-day confrontation, he succeeded in stopping what would have been a destructive Office of Federal Contract Compliance Testing Order draft from seeing the light of *Federal Register* day. Again, it was his ability to translate and explain the personnel testing and selection issues that averted the potentially disastrous consequences. He was able to convince the then Undersecretary of Labor that what was being proposed was fundamentally wrong. Paul won the day for industrial psychology, because he was clear and he was right.

While no effort to capsulize the life of Paul Sparks ever will be truly sufficient, there is in John Wesley’s *Rule of Conduct* one credo which at least does so in part:

Do all the good you can,

By all the means you can,

In all the ways you can,

In all the places you can,

At all the times you can,

To all the people you can,

As long as ever you can.

Paul Sparks did that as long as ever he could. His legacy to his profession and to those who knew him, working with him, and loved him, is enormous. We will mourn the death of Charles Paul Sparks and

will miss him terribly, but we will also always celebrate and remember his life and be thankful that we had him with us for as long as we did.

Paul is survived by his wife of 54 years, Jean Sparks, sister Charlene Shupe and her husband Charles, two nieces, Ann and Jeane Shupe, son Paul Edward Sparks and his wife Linda, son Steven Douglas Sparks and his wife Kaye, and five grandchildren, Kimberly, Frank, and Justin Sparks, Mark and Kandice Hayes.

(I wish to express my appreciation to Jean and Steven Sparks for their gracious assistance with the tribute to Paul Sparks)