



# The saga of Painless Parker

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I am a **BIG FAN** of biographies of **successful people** from all walks of life. So when I happened to find one floating around on eBay from our profession, “*The Early Adventures of Painless Parker*” by Peter M. Pronych and Arden G. Christen, I jumped at the chance to read about a dentist who — at one point — was more famous than the president.

Early in my career, I remember working on a female patient who, after a painless extraction said, “Wow, you are a real Painless Parker.” I thanked her for the compliment, but asked her about the expression since I had never heard it previously.

She went on to tell me about Painless Parker, a dentist from the turn of the century, who was world-renowned for performing painless extractions. This made no sense to me. My dad had practiced dentistry since the early 1960s, and he told me how unreliable Novocain was then ... let alone 60 years earlier. Whether his extractions were painless is debatable, but he truly had a passion for bringing dentistry to the working class at an affordable price.

Whether you love or hate his tactics, I don’t think you will be bored with the trials and tribulations of Painless Parker. Incidentally, when the dental board of California told him he could no longer call himself “Painless Parker,” he went to court and legally changed his name from “Edgar” to “Painless.” Believe it or not, this is one of the least controversial things he did.

In May 1892, Parker graduated from Philadelphia Dental College with a DDS degree. His graduating class included four other students. After graduation, he decided to practice in his hometown of St. Martins in New Brunswick, Canada.

While he wanted to tell the locals about his skills, he had been taught in dental school that it was unethical to solicit work directly. Parker had been taught that it was acceptable to solicit work by joining clubs, and to never decline an invitation to be seen at a public place.

Six weeks after opening his office, he still had not seen a single patient. Hope finally arrived in the shape of a local sign painter whom Parker knew hated his dentures. Parker offered him new dentures in exchange for a sign for the practice.

The painter wanted Parker to make the dentures first

so he could try them, and then he would make the sign. Parker agreed since he had no money. The painter loved the dentures and, with much appreciation, made a huge sign with gold paint for the practice. Parker was somewhat embarrassed by its size, so he instructed the painter to put the sign up at night so no one would see it.

The next day Parker expected there to be a line of patients around his office, but it never materialized. In fact, when Parker showed up to work the next day, he found the sign was missing! Later that day he found the sign: it had been nailed to the train station’s outhouse door — most likely by one of the town’s other dentists!

Embarrassed to be seen taking the sign down, Parker again waited for the cloak of night to remove the sign and replace it at work. The sign attracted one patient in his first 90 days of practice, a tourist who needed an extraction. Parker removed the tooth and charged him \$1 (that’s \$21 today when adjusted for inflation). Although the patient only had 75 cents, Parker was happy to accept the money. Finally, he had been paid for performing dentistry.

While I certainly wouldn’t want to follow in Parker’s footsteps, I was drawn to the story of his personal struggles. Parker started his practice with dignity, but soon found that dignity wouldn’t pay the bills. Unlike most dentists, he found he enjoyed being a dentist and a salesman at the same time. This drove his decision to take the story of preventive dentistry straight to the people.

Armed with an aqueous solution of cocaine he called “hydrocaine,” Parker shared his message on street corners where he offered painless extractions for 50 cents. He promised that, if the extraction hurt, he would pay patients \$5! The first night he extracted 12 teeth and didn’t have to give anyone the money. He found this surprising because, after the seventh patient, he ran out of hydrocaine!

Painless Parker is certainly the most fascinating dentist I’m aware of. His story will entertain and educate you. One of the authors, Dr. Christen, still has copies of the book available, even though it is technically no longer in print. To obtain copies, contact Dr. Christen via e-mail at [achristen@iupui.edu](mailto:achristen@iupui.edu). **DE**

*Dr. Michael DiTolla is the Director of Clinical Research and Education at Glidewell Laboratories in Newport Beach, Calif. He lectures nationwide on both restorative and cosmetic dentistry. Dr. DiTolla has several free clinical programs available online or on DVD at [www.glidewell-lab.com](http://www.glidewell-lab.com). For more information on this article or his seminars, visit [www.drдитolla.com](http://www.drдитolla.com).*