

DONOR STORIES

JEAN AND CLAIR PARKER “Jean and Clair Parker Fund”

With privilege comes responsibility.

Jean Parker is a woman who always understood that her community was her responsibility. She felt privileged to be raised in a family that, in many ways, had more than needed and was proud to share what she had with others. Jean was born in 1923 in Waterloo to Douglas and Anita (Rath) Donnell. Her family was a close-knit family of six with two boys and two girls, all of whom were raised in the Highland Neighborhood area of Waterloo.



JEAN PARKER

Douglas, a veteran of World War I, graduated from college with a degree in electrical engineering and came to Waterloo for a job with the Illinois Central Railroad. It was in Waterloo that he met Anita Rath while attending the First Presbyterian Church. It was this same church that remains such a large part of family history today.

Over 150 years ago, Jean's Grandfather Rath and his friend, James Black, helped to raise the money to build the First Presbyterian Church. Soon the church community grew, at what seemed to be the same rate as the family's business, Rath Packing Company. This same church was the place that also drew Jean and her husband Clair together years later.

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Growing up, Jean remembers the wonderful community she lived in. Walking through the Highland Neighborhood, all of the children felt so safe and loved. She didn't realize until she was older how truly blessed she was to have this wonderful community around her. If the adage, "It takes a village to raise a child," was ever true, it certainly was in Jean's case. "I remember playing outside and going from house to house eating homemade cookies," she recalls. "My neighborhood was wonderful. All of the mothers looked after all of the children."

Jean attended Frances Grout School through fourth grade and then went onto the McKinley School. Jean eventually graduated from Waterloo East High School. Education was very important to her family, and Jean was blessed to be able to attend college. Her parents encouraged her to think beyond Iowa when choosing a college so she could have the opportunity to gain a different perspective on life.

Jean was always entranced with the Deep South, so it was for that reason that she enrolled at a junior college, Ward Bellmont (an all girls school) in Nashville, Tennessee. She was very interested in art and art history and also was drawn to interior design while she studied.

The experience of attending college in the south was very interesting to Jean. She was there during World War II and remembers how formal and unique the experience was. All of the girls who attended Ward Bellmont were waited on and given the white glove treatment. The culture that surrounded the school

was very different than at home in Waterloo. She also saw first hand how life was lived in the south before desegregation began and could definitely see how wrong it was.

While in Tennessee, Jean got engaged to Clair Parker, her childhood friend from Waterloo.

Clair, an only child, was born in 1919 to Clair and Aura Parker. His family attended First Presbyterian Church along with Jean's family, which is where their long lasting family friendship began. Clair, also a graduate of Waterloo East High School, had wanted to attend the University of Iowa, but eventually settled on Iowa State University in Ames. It was while he was at Iowa State that Jean and Clair's relationship grew. Clair invited Jean to visit and attend a dance with him and, as a bit of a surprise, her parents agreed she could make the trip even though she was still in high school. Clair arranged for Jean to stay with friends at a sorority house and they went to the dance. After that night, they kept in close contact with one another, writing letters too numerous to count.

While in college, Clair decided to join to Air Corp instead of remaining a part of the Iowa State ROTC. While in the service, he was stationed in England, North Africa, and then France at the European Theatre for two years.

While Clair was overseas, Jean decided to continue her education after graduating from Ward Bellmont and attended the University of Arizona and became a member of Pi Beta Phi. Her studies there continued in art and interior design until she learned of Clair's return from the war in 1944 for a short leave.

Jean decided she wanted to meet Clair in Chicago as he flew in from his rotation tour in Europe on Christmas Day. When he arrived in Chicago, Jean and Clair both knew it was time to get married. Jean wasn't sure about the timing with the holidays, but her mother knew she could make the wedding happen in one week. Jean's father gathered evergreen trees as the decorations, because flowers were too hard to come by at that time of year, while Jean's mother began making preparations.

On January 2, 1945, Jean Donnell and Clair Parker were married at the First Presbyterian Church in Waterloo, with Christmas trees lining the choir loft behind the altar. The wedding was beautiful and perfect.

Because Clair's stay was expected to be short, the couple had their honeymoon in a house in the Highland Neighborhood. Soon, Clair was off to Utah to pull together another unit and prepare to head overseas. The European war had been won, but there were still the Pacific battles to take care of. While Clair was preparing the troops, Jean stayed with her parents and also returned to the University of Arizona.

Right before Clair was to leave, the bomb was dropped and the war ended. He did not have to return to the battle field and instead returned to his wife in Waterloo. Clair then went to work at Jean's family business, Rath Packing Company, and Jean began her life of community involvement. Since her younger brother and sister moved out of the area, Jean and her older brother, John, were asked to serve on numerous boards and committees for community events and non-profits. Jean felt this was her calling.

In 1950, after five years of marriage, Jean and Clair were blessed with the birth of their daughter, Patty. They lived a wonderful life in their home on Rainbow Drive. When their son Bobby was born four years later in 1954, they began building a home on Prospect Boulevard in Waterloo, which Jean designed. It was this home that they lived in for 25 years until their children were grown and they purchased a condominium complex.

While Clair worked at Rath Packing Company, Jean found herself working in the community. For many years, she served on numerous boards and soon came to put a focus on areas and organizations that were of the most interest to her. She found that her role on these committees and organizations often was to be the fundraiser, which she gladly did. "All of the organizations I was involved in were doing wonderful

things to address problems that, in many ways, could be solved with money they didn't have. Each of these organizations just needed someone to ask the community and I decided, "I'll do it!" Many of the organizations Jean was involved in realized that to get donations, all that needed to be done was for someone to ask for it, and Jean understood that was the role she was most needed to play; one role she was happy to fill.

Clair also understood his responsibility to the community and was active in several area organizations. He filled many leadership roles in the First Presbyterian Church, which was so important to his family. He was extremely involved with Goodwill Industries of Northeast Iowa, of which he served as one of the founders, was on the board of directors and was past president. Clair also served as past president of the Waterloo Boys Club and on the board of directors of the Waterloo Kiwanis. He was an active member of the Westminster Foundation of the Synod of Iowa, the Wapsipinicon Area Council Boy Scouts of America, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Waterloo AMVETS Post 19 and Waterloo Elks Lodge 290.

Because Jean recognized she was blessed with a wonderful family and the dollars that came with her family, she dedicated most of her adult life to learning about and actively practicing philanthropy... and practicing it well. She quickly learned some ways to donate money are better than others!

One of the organizations near and dear to Jean's heart was the Waterloo Civic Foundation (later known as the Community Foundation of Waterloo/Cedar Falls and Northeast Iowa). Jean was approached to help with the organization and was glad to do so since she was so interested in philanthropy and raising much needed funds for this community. She recalled meetings in her living room with Charles Swisher, Bill Hinson, Marion Lichty and other community-minded individuals who had this vision for the future. During its beginning years, the Waterloo Civic Foundation struggled. One trust had been left and they were earning very little income. They were constantly facing the challenge of how to make the Waterloo Civic Foundation best assist the community's needs. Several individuals met with leaders in Cedar Rapids to learn about their "community foundation," and Bill Brown and Herb Williams really got things underway in the Cedar Valley.

By the time the Community Foundation was off and running in 1993, Jean had already been involved for such a long time and knew it was time for "new blood" to join the board. She felt good about what had been developed and was confident in the organization's future. Jean was so excited for the path that the Community Foundation would be taking and thrilled when the first staff person, Mary Ann Burk, was hired.

After her involvement with the Community Foundation, Jean honed in on her passions, the YWCA and the Grout Museum. She remembered so well her father's involvement in the community and even her mother and grandmother's years of service on the YWCA Board of Directors. The sense of community responsibility and stewardship that was so well modeled by her family stuck with her all her life.

*Historical vignette prepared by the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa.