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# Fly away home

Winston Parker looks back on 94 years of Okotoks living

**F**ew people have lived as long, rich and vibrant a life as Winston Parker.

Born July 31, 1918 to English immigrants Herbert Garfield Parker, and Amelia Emily Churchill, Winston was the middle-child of the three Parker kids. Sister Jessie was two years older and Winston's brother Geoffrey was three years younger. Geoffrey passed away due to illness about 30 years ago while Jessie, like Winston, is still going strong.

In the early days, the family lived on a farm Winston's father rented in the Red Deer Lake district. Later, the family lived on a ranch near the Cross Conservation area. Parker now resides in a condo just off Southridge Drive in Okotoks.

Like many of their time, Winston and his siblings went to Red Deer Lake School. Every day, he says, chores had to be done before and after school, leaving little time for foolishness. "Although," he chuckles, "I do remember playing jokes and getting up to some mischief."

Growing up in the foothills around Okotoks, horses were part of daily life. Winston remembers riding ponies both to school and in the show ring. Raising, breaking, showing and selling thoroughbred horses were the family's mainstay. "We were brought up to ride and then, when we got a bit older, we'd school colts. We just came up with it."

When Winston was 14, he was asked to take part in a round-up with local rancher Clem Gardner, who was taking stock to the Calgary Stampede. At 18, he was allowed to halter-break wild horses before Stampede.

Winston went to "Tech," which is now the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, to study agricultural mechanics and tractors in the late 1930s. He also got a job with Home Oil, cutting lines through the bush and digging ditches.

A month after he turned 21, in 1939, Winston joined the RCAF with his friend, Bill Wallace. He was trained in bombing and gunnery, received his wings and was sent overseas in June 1941 as part of a six-man Wellington bomber team. While on leave from the RCAF, he visited his British uncle, who just happened to be the British Prime Minister's chauffeur. Arrangements were made and Winston was introduced to his namesake, a chap by the name of Winston Churchill. >>

Photo by Debra Zelisko

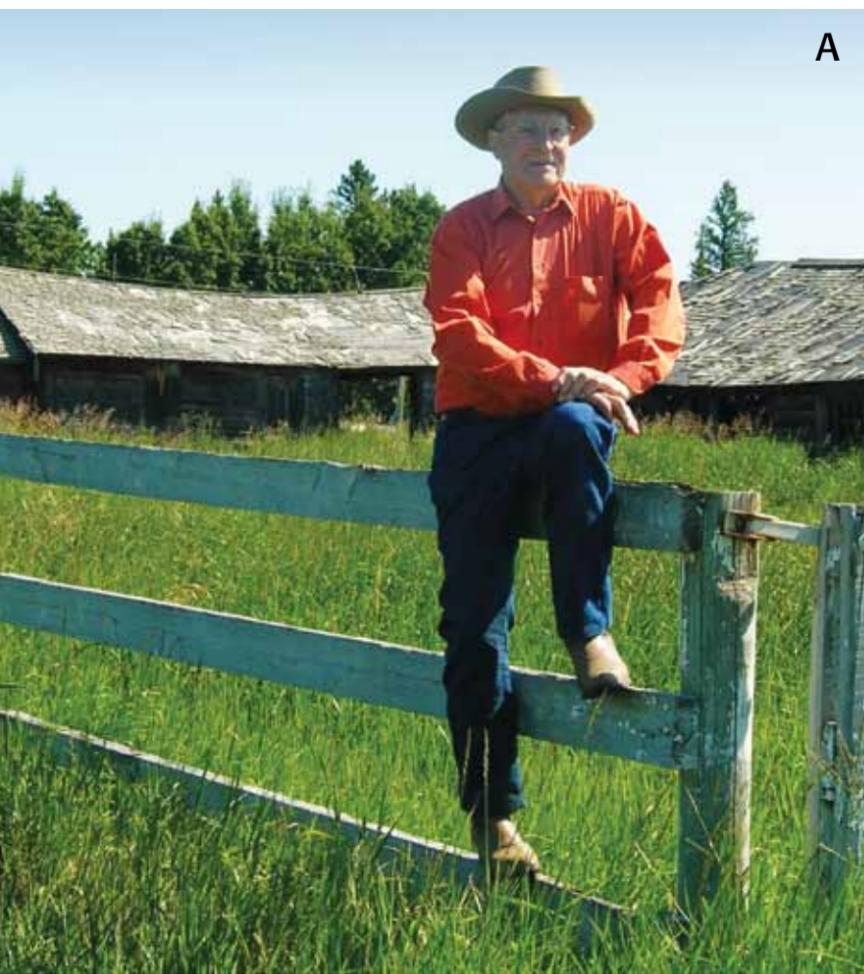
# “The war was only six years of my life. My life was not and did not end with the war.”

On his crew's 13th mission, clearly not a lucky number, Winston's plane was shot down and he parachuted into occupied France. He was captured by German forces and sent to a prison camp — the infamous Stalag VIII-B on the Polish-Czech border, where he spent three years.

On January 22, 1945, the prisoners were moved out of the camp as the Russian army advanced. Winston and fellow prisoners of war were marched 600 miles (or approximately 1,000 km). Their trek, however, was short-lived and they were liberated by American troops on April 11, 1945. A few months later, in July, Winston boarded a ship for home.

“The war was only six years of my life,” he says. “My life was not and did not end with the war.”

Once home, Winston wooed and wed Joyce, whom he'd met long before the war. He returned to Home Oil, and was promoted to lease foreman. He also bought a ranch, the Deane-Freeman place, which was called “Monea” in 1946. It was named after an Irish village where the original owners were from.



“I knew the place, that was part of the reason I bought it,” Winston explains. “I had two or three places lined up, there weren't a lot of them on the market at the time. And I was real happy to get it.”

On his ranch, Winston grew oats and registered seed, produced hay and had a herd of cattle. Even then, Winston was never too busy to help out a friend, drop in to tea with neighbours or help build the community.

In 1980, Winston married his third wife, Phyllis, who resides in an Alzheimer's care facility in Calgary. Winston, who never had children, goes into the city to visit her several times a week.

Long-time friend Elaine Taylor Thomas has known Winston since she was a child. “We didn't have a lot of company,” Thomas explains. “We had our near neighbours and relatives that came to visit, but to have somebody new come to visit, that was quite intriguing.”

“In the early years, we didn't have a telephone and he would just show up, come for tea,” Thomas says. “He was always there to help, he was always there for entertainment purposes. Winston injected laughter into so many lives. Jokes, but also jokes on himself. He'll tell a joke on himself as quickly as he'll tell one he heard in the barbershop.”

“Winston made me laugh so hard,” she says.

“She's more like family than friend,” says he.

Over the years, the relationship continued to grow. Winston taught Thomas how to drive. He helped her with photography assignments when she was attending SAIT's journalism program.

“He's always been one of those people who has a word for a six-year-old or a ninety-year-old,” Thomas says. “He makes a six-year-old feel as important as the 90-year-old. I think he sees value in all people, he finds all people interesting.”

Thomas, who'd spent a career in communications, knew the importance of stories and felt that stories needed to be written down before they were lost. “When I started to talk with Winston about this, he agreed and we talked about some of the old-timers and wished we'd had the opportunity to record, and to be able to share that,” Thomas says. “So, I kept asking him about it. And, one day he said 'I guess we can talk about it.'”

After three years and countless weekly recorded sessions, the stories were compiled into a book, *Saddles and Service: Winston Parker's story*. The book talks about life as Winston saw it, in terms of the community, Thomas says.

Rich in detail, *Saddles and Service* encompasses Winston's life, but “it's not about Winston Parker, it's about the people (he) saw and met and co-existed with, because without that connection to community, there is no story,” she says.

The Texas-based author and former foothills resident says Winston taught her a great deal, and instilled in her a belief in the importance of giving back.

“I think one of my favourite memories is that, no matter when I was growing up, no matter where I was, who I was with, if I saw Winston Parker, I was assured of a massive hug. He always has good word and a hug for a friend. It is as natural to him to acknowledge a youngster, every person has value. I think that was one of the things he taught me.”

The book has made Winston into a bit of a local celebrity, but he's still humble to a fault, gentle and patient, always there for his friends. He brings out the best in them. “I'm just an ornery guy, just like anyone else,

with all the warts anyone else has,” Winston says.

From the early 1960s, to today, Winston's life has been anything

but placid. In the 1960s, he was on the agricultural committee for Calgary's Heritage Park. He sat two years on the MD's agricultural service board and he sat two terms as chief returning officer for the riding.

Winston celebrates his 94th year in the foothills, in July. He's still very active, meets regularly with friends, drives to Calgary for visits. He plays bridge, reads and golfs in his spare time. “I paid my green fees for this year, so I'd better well play,” he jokes.

He's seen a lot more change in the foothills than most. “When I was a kid, you could ride your horse right into Calgary, with no paved roads or anything.”

My, how times have changed. **OL**

A Photo by Debra Zelisko.

B Winston with sister Jessie.

C Clem Gardner, Winston, brother Geoff, Joan Gardner, Audrey Gardner, Kelva Littlewood and Bobby Blaine.

D Winston and Art feeding the cattle.

E Winston Parker, age 21.

As Seen in Okotoks Living Magazine

**Okotoks living**

Winston's immediate family: Marion and her husband Hugh Kennedy from Turner Valley; nephew Terry and his wife, Joan Allwarden of Millarville, and another niece, Nancy Allwarden of Quadra Island, B.C., were the winning bidders in the auction of Winston's first book, which raised \$850 for Foothills Country Hospice in Okotoks.

All proceeds from the book go to a new SAIT scholarship award, for an Aircraft Maintenance Engineers Technology student. The first *Saddles and Service* scholarship will be presented in fall 2012.

For more information about *Saddles and Service* — Winston Parker's Story, check out [www.saddlesandservice.com](http://www.saddlesandservice.com)

