Reflections

A tribute to Robert Satterfield Sparkman, MD, 1912–1997

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Dr. Sparkman was born in Brownwood, Texas, the son of Viola and Ellis Sparkman. He graduated from Baylor University College of Medicine in Dallas in 1935 and completed a general surgery residency at Cincinnati General Hospital in 1940. After his residency, he entered the US Army in 1940 and left the service in 1946 as a colonel honored with an Oak Leaf Cluster, Bronze Star, Invasion Arrowhead, and 3 Battle Stars. In 1942, he married Ms. Willie Ford Bassett, a debutante, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Bassett of Kosse, Texas. After the completion of his military duty, he entered the private practice of surgery in Dallas. Dr. Sparkman was named chief of Surgery in 1969 and was chief for 12 years until December 31, 1981. During his tenure, funding of a chair for the chief of Surgery was started in 1976, and Dr. Ronald C. Jones was named the first Robert S. Sparkman Chair in Surgery in 1987.

Dr. Sparkman was president of the Texas Surgical Society in 1965. That year, he published the book The First 50 Years of the Texas Surgical Society 1915–1965. He was vice president of the American Surgical Association in 1977 and served as president of the Southern Surgical Association in 1978 at its 90th meeting. He was appointed to prepare a historical exhibit of the first 100 years of the American Surgical Association, which was displayed at its 100th anniversary meeting in Atlanta in April 1980. For that meeting, he prepared and edited a 3-volume set of the minutes of the American Surgical Association, and the council presented Dr. Sparkman with a commemorative plaque acknowledging his efforts in compiling archival material for the American Surgical Association. Such action by the council was rare.

For the 100th meeting of the Southern Surgical Association, Dr. Sparkman was asked to compile a collection of historical documents and memorabilia to display during the 1987 meeting at the Homestead. He edited a book The Southern Surgical Association, The First 100 Years 1887–1987. The council recognized the tremendous effort of Dr. Sparkman in
planning, organizing, and conducting the special activities of the centennial meeting by making him an honorary member of the Southern Surgical Association. This collection of documents is now housed at the University of Alabama.

In 1976, Dr. Sparkman was honored as a distinguished alumnus of Baylor University. He received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Baylor University in Waco in 1974. He was the recipient of the 1993 A. C. Greene Award and served on the board of directors of Fondren Library at Southern Methodist University. He was instrumental in building the Dallas Public Library’s collection of imprints by Carl Hertzog of El Paso and served on its elected advisory board as an honorary lifetime member of the Friends of the Dallas Public Library. Dr. Sparkman created the Robert S. Sparkman Endowment for Special Acquisitions through the Friends of the Dallas Public Library.

Dr. Sparkman was a governor of the American College of Surgeons, and the North Texas Chapter of the American College of Surgeons established the Robert S. Sparkman Lectureship. He was an honorary member of the National Association of Program Directors in Surgery. He was responsible for establishing numerous endowments, including lectureships and departmental chairs. Dr. Sparkman is recognized for his contributions to medical history, surgical organizations, surgical education, and philanthropy, and as a teacher, scholar, and surgeon.

Because of Dr. Sparkman’s interest in medical history, documentation of important presentations at meetings, photographs of speakers and events, commitment to surgical education, and philanthropic support which has included the founding of the Society of Baylor Surgeons, it is appropriate that he be recognized by naming a library and conference room in the Department of Surgery as the Robert S. Sparkman Library and Conference Center. Funds have been made available through the Baylor Health Care System Foundation to build this facility, and a portion of Dr. Sparkman’s memorabilia is displayed in the library and conference center.

Dr. Sparkman—teacher, exemplar, chief

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Medical history teaches us where we came from, where we stand in medicine at the present time, and in what direction we are marching. It is the compass that guides us into the future. If our work is not to be haphazard but to follow a well-laid plan, we need the guidance of history, and it is not by accident that all great medical leaders were fully aware of the value of historical studies.

—HENRY E. SIGERIST (1891–1957)

These words, found in the July 1998 issue of the Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings (1), describe Dr. Sparkman perfectly. He was a gentleman of uncompromising integrity, superb scholarship, and not given to self-aggrandizement. He
compiled histories of such renowned organizations as the Texas Surgical Society, Southern Surgical Association, and the American Surgical Association.

Although he was short in stature, he cast a long shadow, particularly for “his boys”—his residents. To have had the opportunity to train under such a superb person was truly a gift. As a chief, he was fair though firm. When I was requested to come to his office, if he started, “Now, John,” I knew that I had transgressed, and this was not to be a social visit.

He had a marvelous sense of humor and used it often. When he told us to do something, he followed up with “this is only a suggestion, but remember who is making it.” Another time when several of us were with him, he introduced us to a friend as his residents. The person was somewhat taken aback, seeing our gray hair and the evidence of our age. When questioned, Dr. Sparkman replied, “once a resident, always a resident.”

In his address at the Michael E. DeBakey International Surgical Society, C. Rollins Hanlon (2) made 4 points: teachers must be able to instruct their pupils—pass on information and inculcate a desire for continued self-education; teachers are exemplars or heroes who are commemorated through imitation by their students—they are worthy to be emulated; certain teachers are commemorated because they developed “schools” or philosophies in the field of surgery; and, teachers have personal characteristics that help form attitudes and virtues in their pupils. Dr. Sparkman was a world-renowned surgeon who created an atmosphere conducive to learning and who could impart knowledge to my fellow residents and me. Some say that this was when the title of “Miracle Worker” was appended to his name. We learned as residents but have learned even more after training. He took an active interest in each of us, and this did not stop after we completed our formal training. He was a true hero, worthy of imitation.

Dr. Sparkman was our surgical father. Just as our own fathers helped us grow and develop, Dr. Sparkman molded us from medical school graduates into caring, capable surgeons. Patience and compassion were hallmarks that he ingrained in us. He also imbued an appreciation for art, music, and study—particularly history, surgical history, our heritage. He loved each of us and gave unselfishly of himself that we might be better persons and physicians. That love was reciprocated by all. He made a difference. He touched the lives of many people, particularly his patients and his residents, and through us, our patients. We are better for it.

Dr. Seymour Schwartz, in his editorial “The honorable scholar,” (3) commemorated Dr. Sparkman as a man who immersed himself in his work that was characterized by thoroughness, accuracy, and precision. In describing Dr. Sparkman, Dr. Schwartz quoted from King Henry VIII, act IV, scene 2, line 51: “He was a scholar, and a ripe and good one.”

Dr. Sparkman was a devoted husband to his lovely wife, Willie Ford Bassett Sparkman. “The true index of a man’s character is the health of his wife” (4). By this measure, too, he showed greatness. They traveled widely, carrying the ubiquitous camera and tape recorder. They were inseparable and dedicated to each other. Mrs. Sparkman was a pillar of strength throughout their lives together. We all thank her for her generosity and willingness to share her treasure with others. She is an exemplar in her own right, to be emulated by those who would be called a lady.
Throughout history, writers have given the reason for farsightedness—from Lucan in AD 65: “Pygmies placed on the shoulders of giants see more than the giants themselves,” to Bernard de Chartres in the tenth century: “We are like dwarfs seated on the shoulders of giants. If we see more and farther than they, it is not due to our own clear eyes or tall bodies, but because we are raised on high and upborn by their gigantic bigness.” We are all better for having been seated upon the shoulders of this great man.

References

1 Nota bene. *Baylor University Medical Center Proceedings* 1998;11:133.

