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MICHAEL PARKER

On the night of August 20, 1992, Sandra Parker packed up her three children and left her 35-year-old husband, Michael, in the Parker family's mobile home in Saluda, North Carolina. She soon filed for divorce asserting Michael was a drunk who physically abused her.

Several months later, the couple's nine-year-old son began acting out and was sent to a pediatric psychiatric facility. There, as part of a treatment group, he watched a video about sexual abuse and proceeded to give a tentative story of being sexually abused by his father, Michael. The hospital staff said the stories were questionable.

After Sandra Parker learned of the boy's statements, she and a boyfriend began speaking about sexual abuse to all three children. Ultimately, the boy and his two sisters, ages 7 and 11, were interviewed by social workers and a police detective. All gave lurid accounts of being subjected to ritual sexual abuse by Michael Parker, Parker's 63-year-old mother, and seven other acquaintances of the Parker family.

The allegations included stories of being penetrated with spoons, forks and a spark plug, of drinking blood, and of group assaults in the woods and other locations.

Michael Parker, his mother, and seven others were indicted by a Henderson County grand jury in February 1993. The charges followed the infamous prosecution of the owners of the "Little Rascals" day care center in Edenton, North Carolina, where children, after interviews by social service workers using highly suggestive interviewing techniques, made outlandish claims of ritual sexual abuse by the day care staff. The owner, [Robert Kelly](#), and a staff member, [Kathryn Dawn Wilson](#), were convicted and later both were exonerated.

The Little Rascals cases and the charges against Parker and his co-defendants were two of many sets of prosecutions in a wave of child sex abuse hysteria that swept through the country in the 1980s and early 1990s. Some (but not all) of these cases included allegations of satanic rituals and bizarre stories. Children in the Little Rascals case, for example, said they saw babies taken out on boats and fed to sharks. Many of these hysteria cases emerged from day care centers. Nationally, there have been dozens of exonerations in child sex abuse hysteria cases.

Parker went on trial in January 1994. The primary prosecution evidence against him was the testimony of his children, which was often contradictory and frequently wildly implausible. Two physicians testified that medical examinations indicated the children had been sexually abused.

Parker testified in his own defense and denied he had abused the children. He said they had been "brain-washed" by his ex-wife and the state investigators. Parker's defense attorney did not seek out any experts to testify for the defense.

State: North Carolina

County: Henderson

Most Serious Crime: Child Sex Abuse

Additional Convictions:

Reported Crime Date: 1992

Convicted: 1994

Exonerated: 2014

Sentence: Life

Race: Caucasian

Sex: Male

Age: 35

Contributing Factors: False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Perjury or False Accusation, Official Misconduct, Inadequate Legal Defense

Did DNA evidence contribute to the exoneration?: No

On January 18, 1994, the jury convicted Parker of eight counts of first-degree sexual assault and four counts of taking indecent liberties with a child. He was sentenced to eight consecutive terms of life in prison and four consecutive terms of 10 years in prison.

Shortly thereafter, Parker's mother, who was battling cancer, pled guilty to a single charge of taking indecent liberties with a child and was placed on probation.

In July 1995, the North Carolina Court of Appeals upheld Parker's conviction. That same month, a newly elected District Attorney dismissed the cases against the remaining seven defendants, citing insufficient evidence.

In 1999, Parker wrote to Dr. Rebecca Socolar, a professor of pediatric medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Socolar agreed to review the medical evidence in the case and concluded that the findings of the prosecution physicians were unsupported. In 2003, Parker twice submitted to polygraph examinations and both tests showed no deception when he denied sexually abusing the children.

Attorney Sean Devereaux began investigating the case for Parker and in 2011, Theresa Newman, Co-Director of The Wrongful Conviction Clinic at Duke University School of Law, and students enrolled in that Clinic, began working on Parker's case. In November 2013, a motion seeking to vacate Parker's conviction on two grounds: New medical evidence indicated the children never were sexually molested. Moreover, in 2010 Parker's youngest daughter signed a sworn affidavit recanting her testimony at the trial and saying that she lied to protect her mother and to make "sure that our father stayed in jail."

The motion said that even though the very first accusation, by Parker's son, was not taken seriously, "the successive false accusations that were spun from that tenuous beginning were then tragically reinforced and embellished in repeated interviews by the unskilled techniques and suggestive practices of... social workers and (a Henderson County Sheriff's Office) investigator, the very adults responsible for protecting children, even from their own mistakes..."

The motion claimed that "new scientific and expert evidence now shows that circumstances leading up to the accusations against Mr. Parker, the techniques used to interview the children, and the exclusive focus of medical examiners on interpretations that would support the accusations, indicate that the stories" told by the children were false. The motion said the prosecution pediatricians relied on "unsound theories, unreliable methods, and improper analysis" to conclude that the children had been sexually abused.

On August 25, Henderson County Circuit Court Judge Marvin Pope granted Parker's motion, vacated his convictions and dismissed the charges. The prosecution opposed the motion, but conceded that the new medical evidence and advances in forensic child interviewing techniques make it much easier to assess the truthfulness of such allegations than it was in the early 1990's.

Parker's mother, Mildred, died in 2005, still protesting her innocence.

– Maurice Possley

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