

**Gladys Parker**  
**Presented by Jean Dyer Swanson**

Gladys Parker was probably in her 30s when I knew her as a young girl and then for the rest of her life. Gladys did not impress me as being someone who was beautiful or good looking.

After all, she was merely a teacher.

She was just what I thought a teacher should look like—not like some movie star.

In the 1930s a woman's wardrobe usually consisted of: one black dress, a good summer dress and a winter dress coat. Flaps on shoes were the rage then; most women wore plain, one-inch-high heeled shoes. Miss Parker had a pair of white ones, I remember. Stockings, either cotton or silk—nylon came in the 1940s--were usually rolled and worn either below the knees or over them. Lots of times Gladys' slip straps slid down her shoulders—and you could tell they'd slipped because the hem of her slip was often longer on one side.

She had a heavy head of dark hair that she wore curled and brought up in the front, with a bun of some sort tucked under in the back. That bun was usually held in place with a large bobby pin—which she usually brought out at different times and used to scratch her scalp. She never had what I called a “trim” figure; hers was pudgy.

Does that description sound like a schoolteacher? She wore no make-up; there was no need since she had a one of those lovely “English” complexions. One of the most distinctive things I can remember about all my teachers is the variety of perfumes they wore—each one had a lovely scent. Violet, carnation, camellia—even talcum powder—was nice smelling: when you got a whiff of one of these scents you could tell who was around.

One year we had to move—that was before my folks bought the house in which my husband, Herb, and I live. We rented one of the houses known as the “Three Sisters” for a year. It was the one across the street from The Columns. I think I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

As I have talked to people who were my age, funny stories about Gladys have come out: the one thing we could do to earn spending money was to clean houses and help people where needed. We all had our turns working for Gladys Parker.

My sister, Virnadeen, tells about the time that she was cleaning Gladys' bedroom. On the dresser was a long fingernail file. Vir picked it up and started to file her nails. Gladys walked in the room just then and found Vir using the file. A lecture followed. “*You do not touch or use someone's personal belongings!*”

Jeanette Bell told about the time she worked for Gladys. “*One day the phone rang at the house.*” Very few people in those days had phones. Jeanette picked it up the receiver and heard a voice ask, “*is Gladys there?*” Jeanette said, “*No,*” and hung up. Gladys found out that someone had called and taught Jeanette how to answer the phone.

Of course, Gladys operated the Jasmine Tearoom in this house. At that time teachers never did not make big money, nor did they have medical coverage nor retirement funds. Perhaps this was Gladys' way of solving those problems. Jeanette said Gladys read people's tealeaves.

“Some times there was only one guest for Tea. Gladys served cookies, tea and read the guest's fortune. How she came about telling fortunes or hosting the teas I do not know. Nor ever learned.

Work ethics were strong. Teachers were expected to always be healthy, to behave properly, and women teachers were not allowed to marry if they wanted to continue teaching. So most women teachers had to find a way to make extra money. Gladys was a gifted person: she taught business, typing and shorthand. She started her teaching career at Stadium High School and then went to Lincoln High School in Tacoma. She always had a car. For a woman that was something.

***Steilacoom's Theater Group***

What did Gladys ever do for the town? I've brought some photos of the Minstrel Show she directed. Appearing in the cast are many of the great people of Steilacoom, showcasing their talents. None of us knew in those days just how good they were. Bernie Schools taught classes in ballet, tap –whatever. That is how she earned her college money. Freida Whitacre Jack could really whistle—her whistling tunes

always were a favorite with the audience. My mother did funny readings. I can still remember her practicing by standing in front of a mirror.

In those days there were never any colored people in Steilacoom, not until after WW II. Since the program was a Minstrel Show—some of the cast members blackened their faces with burnt cork—Gladys was one who did.

Dr. Tollefson was the leader of the band; his costume was funny and a shocker at that time. He often took nips from a bottle in between numbers, and as a result became funnier and funnier.

What was the purpose of this minstrel show? To earn money to purchase much-needed library books. Gladys also served as one of the town's librarians.

The whole town was involved in the project. The Friday before the show the older students walked downtown and met with the cast members to have a photo taken to advertise the play.

Later Miss Parker directed our Christmas Pageant at church. I was Mary—couldn't sing worth a dime, and forgot the words to "Away in a Manger". She later told my mother that she didn't care about the music. She only wanted a young girl for the part. But I bravely got through the play. See, I still remember.

### *Steilacoom has Charm*

Gladys invented this slogan for her real estate business. As I remember there had not been any real estate people before her. People in town, such as Mr. Davies, owned a number of houses and rented them out himself.

When we first came to Steilacoom my folks rented "The Mattie" from Mr. Davies. Then we moved into the Second Sister. Finally we moved to the house where I still live.

At first my folks rented it for eight years. Then Miss Murray, who owned it, decided she wanted to move to Steilacoom and live there. So we moved to the First Sister, across from Miss Parker's home. After a year of living in the house alone, Miss Murray decided she could no longer stay there so she went to my mother and asked her to buy it. My father did not want to own a house. Gladys told my mother, "Just wait. I'll handle Jim." And she did. The house cost \$1,200—no down payment necessary--\$20 a month payment. What a sweet deal! Gladys helped many people to buy and rent homes. To close my time I am passing around a short trip around Steilacoom that Gladys wrote for prospective homebuyers.