



# postscript. The One Who Got Away

If Sooner football fans touring the University of Washington campus last fall had even a cursory knowledge of OU history, they were in for a surprise. Chiseled above the entrance to one of UW's older buildings were the words: Vernon L. Parrington Hall. Yes, the same Parrington whose name graces the University of Oklahoma's south oval, the fellow brought to OU in 1897 to organize the study of English—and in his spare time, to jump-start the football team and a laundry list of other cherished institutions and traditions.

Oklahoma lost the popular young professor to Washington in the political upheaval of 1907 statehood, when the new governor and a Southern Methodist clique, as one Parrington authority recounted, wanted to rid the University of “immoral influences.” A faculty member who smoked, danced and was educated at an eastern school (Harvard), “Parrington was, on all counts, guilty.” Twenty years later, he won the Pulitzer Prize.

But let's not get ahead of the story.

In his history of the University of Oklahoma, David L. Levy relates that President David Ross Boyd was so eager to bring Parrington's classroom brilliance to OU that he overlooked the fact that his highest earned degree was (and always would be) a B.A. Parrington at first taught German, French and composition while developing 11 courses in English literature.

Handsome, fit and athletic, always well-dressed, Parrington was everywhere on campus. Within weeks of his arrival, the *University Empire*, OU's first student periodical, appeared under his editorship. He produced the *University Catalogue*; coached and played first base for the baseball team; became the fledgling football team's first faculty coach, amassing a 9-win, 2-loss, 1-tie record; and chaired the faculty Athletic Committee.



Vernon L. Parrington Hall, University of Washington

Inspired by a study trip to London and Paris, where he surveyed gardens and architecture, he designed and built a new house patterned after an Elizabethan cottage. Then he submitted a plan for campus development that included the oval rather than the Harvardenesque square, an element that was eventually adopted.

Parrington's energetic and devoted service to the University and his immense popularity were not enough to save his job. The historian Richard Hofstadter described his firing, along with President Boyd and 12 others, as “one of the most scandalous episodes in American academic history.”

A year later at age 37, he arrived in Seattle, drawn perhaps by the magnificent surroundings where he and his Oklahoma sweetheart, Julia Williams, had been married in 1901 and still had close connections. He also found a campus more compatible with his prairie populist convictions. Descriptions of him at UW show a still-gracious and genial man but quieter and more aloof. No longer driven by the need to build a new university as at Oklahoma, he became almost entirely fo-



Vernon L. Parrington

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cused on his scholarship and teaching.

The result, in addition to his continued vast popularity in the classroom, was *Main Currents in American Thought*, published in 1927, the first two volumes of which won the Pulitzer Prize. This epic life's work included some 100 portraits of the giants of American intellectual history from colonial times and analyses of the historical background and ideas of their eras.

The reaction in Seattle and elsewhere was overwhelming. UW renamed the old building that housed the English department in his honor. The Parringtons retreated to his beloved Cotswold hills in England where he worked on the third volume of *Main Currents* until his sudden death in 1929. A lifelong smoker—one of the charges brought against him at OU—he was 58.

Several of Parrington's colleagues at the University survived the “political cyclone” to become institutional legends—and have buildings named for them: Gittinger, Buchanan, DeBarr, Gould, Felgar, Holmberg. But a campus beauty spot like Parrington Oval isn't too shabby a commemoration for the man who insisted to President Boyd: “I feel that we talk too much about a big university and too little about a beautiful university.”

—CJB