

A Breed So Rare: The Life of J. R. Parten, Liberal Texas Oil Man. By *Don E. Carleton*. Austin: Texas State History Association, 1998. 560 pp. Index, illustrations. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-876-11166-5.

Reviewed by Paul H. Carlson

Modern Texas and western historians are often amazed at the continuing influence of Walter Prescott Webb (d. 1963), former professor at the University of Texas. Here, as recently as 1998, is yet another example of Webb's long reach, for the title of Don E. Carleton's superb business biography of J. R. Parten was taken from a Webb comment. Webb, who knew him, claimed that Parten, because he was a very rich and politically a very liberal Texas oil man, was an uncommon individual, indeed a "breed so rare," said Webb, "that one should be preserved in brine" (p. 507).

J. R. Parten, born in 1896, grew up in Madison County in East Texas; served as a major of artillery in World War I; built an oil empire afterward; worked in Washington, D.C., during World War II as an energy and transportation expert; chaired the board of regents at the University of Texas; fought McCarthyism in the 1950s; and in later years backed liberal causes of many kinds. In Texas, he supported with advice, and large amounts of money, the liberal faction of the Democratic Party. Polished, articulate, and always well groomed, he associated with powerful and influential politicians, educators, and businessmen. If Carleton is correct, Parten was everywhere all at once.

Parten was a workaholic who neglected his family obligations and responsibilities. As a result, his first wife divorced him, and his second wife turned to alcohol to stave off the loneliness and boredom of marriage to a man who was seldom home.

In many ways, this lengthy book reflects Parten's long life. On Parten's public and professional career it is detailed, thorough, and carefully done. Conversely, there is little about his personal affairs, his family, or his only son, Randy, who remained loyal to his absent father.

Nonetheless, and perhaps understandably, Carleton presents a favorable image of Parten. He is critical on occasion but for the most part takes a positive view of his

activities. He suggests that in his business dealings Parten was loyal, incorruptible, and fair minded to a fault; in his public dealings he was honest, liberal, and persuasive.

Parten was an independent oil man, who, Carleton argues, directed drilling companies, sulfur operations, refineries, pipelines, and other oil-related businesses with considerable skill. Carleton also suggests that Parten successfully fought the major oil companies over “hot oil” issues in the gigantic East Texas oil field and over prorationing in the late 1920s and early 1930s. There is much to learn here about the American oil industry of the mid-twentieth century.

On the political front, Parten remained in the background. His influence was large, however, and his support came in numerous ways, but he shunned the limelight. He entertained senators, congressmen, governors, university presidents, and others of similar position at his home. He argued and talked privately with presidents of the United States, and some of them invited him for dinner at the White House. Still, when Parten died in 1992, few people took note of his passing.

In education, Parten accomplished much for his beloved University of Texas. He raised money for the football program as well as the College of Arts and Sciences; he played a key role in establishing the university’s McDonald Observatory in West Texas and the M. D. Anderson Cancer Hospital in Houston; and he fought consistently, if not always with success, for academic freedom for both faculty and administrations. As a member of the board of regents, he was an effective lobbyist for the university before the state legislature.

This is a good book, well written and often engaging. Oil and business historians might argue with Carleton over the central role he gives Parten on the proration fight in the 1930s or the credit he heaps on Parten for his role in the important “Big Inch” pipeline struggle during World War II, but if so, they had better marshal their evidence, for Carleton’s sources are impressive. Carleton had unlimited access to Parten’s personal papers and interviewed the man on numerous occasions. He used his sources well, at least those relating to Parten’s business activities.

As an academician in Texas, I preferred the chapters on the University of Texas. Parten’s lobbying activities, his part in hiring Homer Price Rainey as university president, and his defense of Rainey against subsequent attacks by the regents offer lessons about

honor and principle and about defending the individual rights and academic freedom of all employees of American universities.

Organized chronologically, the book is written in grand narrative fashion. There are bits of thoughtful analysis throughout, but some people might want a more critical judgment of Parten's sorry personal life.

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