

Eighth in a Series

## Combatting the Image of “Godlessness” in 1909

by David W. Levy

**The conclusion was clear and troubling: the University of Oklahoma was “Godless,” and the president and faculty were either indifferent to the danger or themselves shameless participants in the immoralities of dancing, gambling and smoking.**

**T**he two documents from 1909 printed below—the first a letter that went to each member of the faculty from President A. Grant Evans and the second a resolution from the University’s Board of Regents—were aftermaths of one of the most dramatic and discreditable episodes in the history of the University of Oklahoma. Less than 10 months before, on June 23, 1908, the regents had fired President David Ross Boyd and, along with him, eight members of the faculty and three other employees of the University.

Boyd, of course, had guided the University since the day it opened in September 1892. Those fired with him were of varying importance to the institution, but at least two of them—Vernon L. Parrington and Lawrence W. Cole—were popular and effective teachers whose dismissals were serious losses to the University. Parrington, as is well known, went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in History for his monumental survey of the history of American literature, *Main Currents in American Thought*.

The reasons for the firings of June 1908 were extremely complicated, an intricately interwoven set of factors that combined to bring about the regents’ ill-advised action. The entire story is so tangled that it is impossible to tell all of the details here. Nevertheless, two sets of causes clearly joined in playing the most important part. They sprang from those two

tender areas of human life that have so often touched men and women deeply and have so often proved themselves capable of causing terrible harm and division as well as bringing incalculable benefits: politics and religion.

As far as politics is concerned the story is simple. As a territory, Oklahoma was governed, from Washington, by Republican administrations for all but four years of the entire territorial period. The Republican presidents of the United States appointed Republican governors of Oklahoma. They, in turn, appointed fellow Republicans to high offices—including the regents of the six territorial colleges, the men who hired and fired the college presidents.

Both Democrats and Republicans tended to think of university jobs as political plums that should be distributed to political friends and denied to political enemies. In 1908, therefore, the territorial governor of Oklahoma, all five of the territorial judges and all six of the college presidents were Republicans who had come down to Oklahoma from Kansas. David Ross Boyd was one of these.

Unlike the other Republicans, he had been able to survive the four years of Democrat Grover Cleveland’s administration, 1893-1897. Cleveland had appointed to the governorship a Norman banker who was a good friend of Boyd’s, who worshipped at the Presbyterian church where Boyd was an elder and who admired the way Boyd

was administering the University in his hometown.

While Boyd was the sole-surviving Republican in those four years of Democratic rule, the moment the Republicans returned to power in Washington with William McKinley’s inauguration in 1897, so did that flock of Republican territorial officeholders and regents and college presidents. Republicans maintained their sway in Oklahoma—because they maintained it in Washington—until the “twin territories” joined to form the state of Oklahoma in 1907.

In the first election after statehood, in November 1907, the Democratic majority of the new state swept the Republicans out of every office and placed in their stead a flock of Democrats who came from the former Indian Territory or who had migrated into Oklahoma from southern states such as Arkansas, Texas and Missouri. These southern Democrats had smarted under the long territorial rule of their Kansas Republican opponents. Now, by heaven, they were going to change a few things.

Before long their gaze fell upon the University of Oklahoma and its almost entirely northern and Republican faculty. In 1904, the faculty of the University had consisted of eight Kansans, eight from other northern States, three native Oklahomans and only two southern Democrats. The Democrats, historian James Buchanan of Tennessee and classicist Joseph

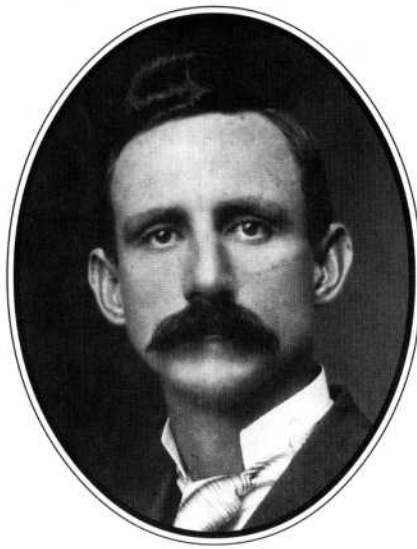


**President David Ross Boyd**

Paxton of Missouri, had both been hired during that four-year period when Cleveland was in the White House and the governor and the regents were also Democrats. Boyd tried to rectify this imbalance by hiring two southerners after 1904—one of them being the mathematician Samuel W. Reaves from South Carolina—but it was too little, too late.

It is impossible to understand the 1908 firings at Norman without understanding this relatively straightforward political side of the episode. It is also necessary, however, to appreciate the religious rivalries that were involved and that added an element of spirited and bitter emotionalism to the story. Almost every member of the faculty was a Presbyterian, like Boyd, or belonged to the Methodist Episcopal (the so-called Northern Methodist) or to the Christian (Disciples) Church. There was not a single Baptist teaching at the University until Boyd hired Samuel Reaves in 1905, nor a single Southern Methodist until he hired Ernest Taylor Bynum in 1904, although those denominations made up a very large part of the population of Oklahoma and of Norman itself. For some reason, the Baptists got along fairly well with Boyd, although before 1904 some noted that no member of the University's faculty worshipped at their church.

The Southern Methodists, however, were a different story. A particularly vocal critic of the University was Rev.



**Rev. Nathaniel Linebaugh**

Nathaniel Lee Linebaugh. He came to Norman from Pauls Valley in 1901, but left quickly because of a serious illness. His short stay in town was nonetheless sufficient for him to form a distinctly unfavorable impression of the University. Not only were there no members of the faculty in his church on Sundays, but President Boyd had never once asked him to conduct the daily chapel service on the campus. Linebaugh departed Norman a severe critic of the University and a powerful opponent.

Linebaugh's health returned a few years later, and he took up duties at the Southern Methodist Church in McAlester. He was also influential in the Oklahoma Southern Methodist Conference and active in support of Democrat Charles Haskell's campaign to become the first governor of Oklahoma, having been attracted to Haskell by the latter's advocacy of statewide prohibition of alcohol. Shortly after his election, Governor Haskell appointed to the Board of Regents this remorseless adversary of the University's president, faculty and student body.

In the meantime, Professor Bynum, the Southern Methodist from North Carolina and Arkansas whom Boyd had hired partly in an attempt to relieve the pressure, quickly became another spirited critic of the University. He immediately launched into so severe a denunciation of the University that Boyd felt that he had no

alternative but to ask for Bynum's resignation. The disgruntled professor left in 1906 for Epworth, the Methodist university in Oklahoma City that would become Oklahoma City University. But Bynum had been popular among Norman's Southern Methodists and his departure further embittered many of them against the climate on the campus.

Reverend Linebaugh and Professor Bynum objected particularly to the moral atmosphere they had observed in Norman. Such dangerous activities as dancing, card playing and smoking cigarettes were rampant on the campus and in the town. Most serious was the lack of proper supervision for women students. Linebaugh and Bynum could point to the fact that a voice student, a daughter of a well known figure in the territory, had given birth to an illegitimate child in her room near the campus and that another young woman left the campus abruptly probably because she too was pregnant. Bynum claimed that he knew of a third, similar case. The conclusion of Linebaugh, Bynum and many other Southern Methodists, both in Norman and outside, was clear and troubling: the University of Oklahoma was "Godless," and the president and faculty were either indifferent to the danger or themselves shameless participants in the immoralities of dancing, gambling and smoking.

So the powerful combination of political rivalry and religious fervor resulted in the wholesale firings of June 1908. At the same meeting where the new Democrat regents (one of them now being Rev. Linebaugh himself) fired Boyd, they appointed as his replacement, Arthur Grant Evans, a man of impeccable moral credentials, a Presbyterian minister, and, importantly, a friend and ally of the Democrat Governor Haskell. Like Linebaugh, Evans had been attracted to Haskell on the basis of their shared views on prohibition. Unfortunately, as these two documents show, neither the passage of 10 months nor the substantial transformation of the University's administration and faculty were sufficient to relax entirely the lingering uneasiness about moral behavior at the University of Oklahoma. *Continued*

**THE STATE UNIVERSITY  
OF OKLAHOMA  
NORMAN**

**PRESIDENT'S OFFICE**

April 9, 1909

Dear Prof Buchanan:-

The Regents of the University in their recent meeting, instructed me to forward to each member of the faculty a written copy of a resolution adopted by them, which I now enclose.

May I add the expression of my own conviction that we cannot arrive at a satisfactory status in matters of this kind by merely avoiding conformity to the least intellectual and elevating amusements common in Society, but that it is one of the most important as well as delicate duties coming to us as members of the faculty of the University to help, by example and advice, in the development of forms of amusement which shall be really recreative and at the same time elevating both morally and intellectually. I feel confident that all members of the faculty will accept the suggestion of the Board of Regents in the spirit in which I am sure it was given,—of making the interest of students at the University and the reputation of the institution itself a matter of first consideration with us all.

*Yours very cordially,*  
/s/ A. Grant Evans

Prof J S Buchanan  
Norman Oklahoma



**President A. Grant Evans**

*Whereas, the University of Oklahoma belongs to all the people of the State and should be conducted in such a way that the humblest citizen cannot justly criticize it or any member of the faculty, and*

*Whereas, a goodly number of our citizens very seriously object to members of the faculty engaging in the public and indiscriminate dance and card parties;*

*Therefore, be it resolved by the Board of Regents, in regular session in the city of Norman, April 2nd and 3rd, 1909, that we request the members of the faculty of this University to refrain from these amusements during their connection with the University.*

*Resolved further, that the President of the University be requested to furnish each member of the faculty with a copy of this resolution.*

[Source: James Shannon Buchanan Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Box 1, Folder 11. The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness and gratitude to Roy Gittinger, the premier historian of the University of Oklahoma, who brilliantly recounted and analyzed this episode, to which he was himself an eyewitness, in a detailed typescript written in the last years of his life. His account, "The University Reorganizations of 1908 and 1911," was given by his widow, at his request, to President George Lynn Cross. The Gittinger typescript can be found in the George Lynn Cross Papers at the Western History Collections, Box 14.]