

Way We Were
April 13, 2016
Before Ted Ligety, Park City's Most Famous Native Son
Robert Gurss, Museum volunteer

With this year's debate regarding a Supreme Court vacancy, Parkites might be surprised to learn that a Park City native was once described by the *New York Times* as "one of the greatest judicial talents never to sit on the United States Supreme Court."

Roger J. Traynor, born in Park City in 1900, served on the California Supreme Court for 30 years and wrote many highly influential opinions that led the way for subsequent landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions. In his day, Traynor was probably Park City's most famous native son.

Traynor was raised in a small house on Ontario Avenue overlooking the city (which is still standing and was recently refurbished and connected to a new structure). His parents, Felix and Elizabeth Traynor, were Irish immigrants who came to Park City at the height of the silver mining boom. Felix Traynor worked in the mines for a time before starting a local delivery business.

Young Roger Traynor helped his father at work, but he was also a voracious reader and excelled at school. Traynor was on the debate team at Park City High School and valedictorian of the Class of 1918. A *Park Record* story on the graduation ceremony described Traynor as a "very capable young man" and said that he had "won commendation for his pleasing appearance, his good delivery and clever utterances."

Traynor's teachers (one of whom would later serve on the Utah Supreme Court) recognized Traynor's talents and encouraged him to attend college. After brief service in the Army, Traynor enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley, which became his academic home for decades. He obtained bachelor, master and doctorate degrees in political science, as well as a law degree in 1927. Traynor taught law at Berkeley for many years, becoming a well-known expert in tax law and other fields. He was appointed to the California Supreme Court in 1940, and became Chief Justice in 1964.

Traynor's judicial thinking was well ahead of his time in many respects. In 1948, he wrote the opinion in a decision finding that California's law against interracial marriage violated the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court would not reach a similar conclusion until 1967 (in *Loving v. Virginia*). Traynor's ground-breaking opinions regarding the use of illegally obtained evidence in a criminal trial, product liability, and family law also established precedents for subsequent rulings by state and federal courts. Lawyers and law students across the nation would study his opinions and other legal writings for many years.

Local Park City residents also closely followed their native son's career, and the *Park Record* often reported on Traynor's numerous honors and awards. In 1963, Traynor returned to Park City for a luncheon held in his honor at the War Memorial Building on Main Street.

Traynor retired from the California Supreme Court in 1970, returned to teaching, and pushed for strict ethics codes for judges. He died in 1983 in San Francisco.



Image ID: 2000.17.425a

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Caption: Future Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, Roger J. Traynor (top row, center) and fellow members of the 1916-17 Park City High School Debate Team.