

A Brief Outline of Frank Parsons' Chaotic Career

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I don't think anyone would object to us claiming him, but the beauty of Parsons being the father of vocational guidance is that his own career path was extremely chaotic. I became curious about this a while back and put this together using the sources I could find:

Parsons trained at Cornell University as a civil engineer. In 1873, as an eighteen-year-old, freshly minted college grad, he accepted a job on the engineering staff at a railroad company. The company went under. He lost his first job.

- ▶ Parsons looked hard for another engineering position, but because of an economic downturn, he settled for a job as a laborer in a steel mill. He worked sixty-hour weeks lifting and shearing iron and loading it on wagons. He hated it.
- ▶ Within the year, he left the steel mill for a public school teaching job near Boston.
- ▶ At the urging of a top attorney who admired Parsons' debating skills (which he put on display at local literary society meetings), he left teaching to study law. However, he worked himself so hard in preparation for the bar exam (which he passed) that he developed health problems that affected his vision and culminated in “some kind of general breakdown.”
- ▶ On medical advice, he “lived in the open” for three years in New Mexico.
- ▶ In 1885, at age thirty, he returned to Boston to practice law.
- ▶ After ten years as an attorney, moonlighting as a lecturer at Boston University, he decided to run for mayor of Boston. He finished with less than 1 percent of the vote.
- ▶ From there he moved to Manhattan, Kansas, to teach economics and social sciences at what is now Kansas State University. Three years later, he was fired.

After that firing in Kansas, Parsons landed back in Boston, where he persuaded a philanthropist to fund the Vocation Bureau. Parsons' tenure as director didn't last long, though. The summer after the bureau opened he became very ill, and before the end of that September, Parsons was dead, the victim of a kidney infection.

That was it — an abrupt and tragic end. The irony, of course, is that the career of Frank Parsons, the man widely known as the father of vocational guidance, can only be described as a convoluted pattern of trials and errors — and his experience as a career counselor amounted to a grand total of about six months!

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Mark L. Pope provided two additional references for interested readers:

Pope, M., & Sveinsdottir, M. (2005). Frank, we hardly knew ye: The very personal side of Frank Parsons. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 83*, 105-

Savickas, M. L. (2009). Pioneers of the vocational guidance movement: A centennial celebration [Special Issue]. *Career Development Quarterly, 57*, 194-288.

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