Classical Mythology in Western Oklahoma

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Around the turn of the century, the Oklahoman Al Jennings was very good at his profession. At one time he actually ran for the state Governor’s chair, but failed. Later in life he moved to California where he wrote movie scripts and articles for *The Saturday Evening Post.* Hollywood made a movie of his life, entitled *Al Jennings of Oklahoma* (starring Dan Duryea).

This was a “local boy makes good” story, right? Perhaps, but in between his birth and his writing career, Al Jennings was the most notorious outlaw in early Oklahoma history. As he relieved a train and its passengers of their valuables, this bible-quoting and classics-reciting train robber drove railroad officials to drink.

Eventually caught, he was imprisoned for several years. In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt invited the freed outlaw to the White House. The stories related by Jennings fascinated Teddy, who couldn’t believe that a “hick” from Oklahoma could be so well versed in the classics.

The enemy was storming the gates. In the sixth century B.C. Rome was in dire peril as the pesky Estruscans reached the bridge over the Tiber River, unprepared Rome’s last defense. Panic ensued! Suddenly, a hero appeared from the east. The Roman General Horatio took his stand on the bridge, delaying the foe until his city properly prepared its defenses. Rome was saved by “Horatio at the Bridge!”

Twenty-five hundred years later the enemy again stormed the gates. In 1931 A.D. Oklahoma was in grave danger as those perverse Texans reached the bridges spanning the Red River. Dismay rampaged! Suddenly a hero appeared from the north.

Alfalfa Bill Murray took his stand. Governor Murray objected to Texas toll bridges competing with Oklahoma’s free spans crossing the Red River, especially since Texas would not connect its highways with our bridges.

Alfalfa Bill personally led the Oklahoma Militia to the north end of the Texas toll bridges. Claiming the Red River was Oklahoma’s, by order of the Supreme Court, he barricaded the alien crossings. The rascally
Texans backed down.

As the newspapers of the day reported, Oklahoma was saved by our "Horatio at the Bridge!"

Oklahomans are often ridiculed in many states as "Dumb Okies," especially in the North Atlantic and West Coast regions. There are those historians who claim Indian Territory (eastern Oklahoma) was inhabited by savage natives too primitive to adapt to the White Man's culture. Even within our state certain writers say Oklahoma Territory (the western half of our commonwealth) was settled by two groups—uneducated farmers and inept townspeople, both of which were too incompetent to make a living in the established states.

The stereotyped image of the "noble savage" in the Indian Territory is too ludicrous to give it credence. The accomplishments of the Five Civilized Tribes and the smaller tribes there belie this absurd motion.

The hypothesis that Oklahoma Territory was homesteaded by "losers and outlaws" is just as preposterous. The purpose of this article is to point out how sophis-
ticated the educational level of early Oklahoma settlers really was, even among those who were self-educated. The concept stressed here will be their obvious knowledge and appreciation of the classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome, particularly in the realm of classical mythology.

One sphere where this can be seen is in the names the homesteaders chose for their communities. Dozens of town names in western Oklahoma reflected ancient origins, either directly or indirectly. The following paragraphs will present a sampling of Greek and Roman place names in western Oklahoma which were derived from classical culture. Though many of the communities are now extinct (others still exist), all were once realities in our area. [As a rule-of-thumb, I define "western Oklahoma" as identical to old Oklahoma Territory, plus the part of Indian Territory west of present day Interstate Highway 35.]

Beginning in the west, in the Panhandle at least three town names were classical derivatives. Texas County had the towns of OPTIMA (Latin for “best possible result”) and CARTHAGE (Hannibal’s city and bitter enemy of Rome). Cimarron County once held the community of FLORENCE (the old Roman city north of Rome), which is now Kenton.

Within the old Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation numerous classically-named towns existed. Dewey County contained VICI (Latin for “I conquered”—mirthfully named after Caesar’s boast, “Veni, vidi, vici,” or, “I came, I saw, I conquered”). Nearby were the villages of SPARTA (from the early Greek city) and RHEA (mother of the Greek gods Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hades, Hestia, and Demeter).

Roger Mills County experienced the hamlet of ROME (the Empire’s capital), while Blaine County had ETNA (after the deadly volcano in Sicily). Ellis County once produced the community of SOLON (the great Athenian lawgiver).

The Cherokee Outlet (usually and mistakenly referred to as the Cherokee Strip) embraced its share of classical names. In Woodward County was OSIRIS (Egyptian god of the underworld, and much feared by the Greeks), while Woods County contained Virgil (the outstanding Roman epic poet), which is now called Capron.

Noble County reflected its agricultural economy with the town of CERES (Roman goddess of grain), and Kay County gave origin to another CARTHAGE (Hannibal was a popular military hero to early Oklahomans).

The shining star of Major County is ORION (the mighty hunter of Greek Mythology who angered the Olympic gods, so he was killed and placed in the sky as a constellation). Alfalfa County is graced with the city of HELENA (indirectly named after Helen of Troy, the Spartan queen whose abduction triggered the Trojan War). Harper County once harbored two communities, CUPID (Roman god of love and son of Venus) and ALTO (Latin for “high”).

The region of Old Greer County has given us two towns. In present Greer County was ATHENS (the greatest of ancient Greek cities), while Jackson County still has ALTUS (Latin for “high,” referring to the high ground to which the older town of Frazier was moved after a flood, and then renamed Altus).

After Oklahoma Territory was formed in 1890 several counties contained towns reflecting classical values. We find in Pottawatomie County the twin hamlets of ROMULUS and REMUS (the twin orphans who were raised by a she-wolf and who later founded the city of Rome before Romulus killed Remus in battle, thus naming the city after himself). [NOTE: In the
neighboring Indian Territory county of Seminole, there once was the community of WOLF, only a few miles from Romulus and Remus—and please note that today's nickname for the high school teams of Shawnee, Pottowatomie County's seat, is the "WOLVES."—A coincidence—na-a-h-h-h!

Lincoln County provides us with a HORACE (the Roman poet who contributed to classical mythology) and CLEMATIS (Greek word for the vine "Klemna"). Payne County spawned the village of VINCO (Latin for "I conquer"), but now absorbed by Perkins, while Canadian county offered up CEREAL (after "Ceres," the Roman goddess of grain), which later changed its name to Banner.

This brings us to the "Championship County of Classical Communities"—Kingfisher County. Here have been founded no fewer than five such settlements, including CATO (Roman orator and writer), PARIS (Prince of Troy who kidnapped the Greek beauty Helen, thus causing the Trojan War) and EXCELSIOR (from the Latin term "Excelsus," meaning "high" or "upward"). We cannot omit the beginning-and-the-end of Oklahoma towns, ALPHA (first letter of the Greek alphabet) and OMEGA (last letter of the Greek Alphabet).

In Indian Territory, but still within our definition of "western Oklahoma," were places with classical names. Carter County once saw EOLIAN (after Aeolus, Greek god of the wind), later changed to Joiner. Grady conceived Naples (named after the Greek colony founded in Italy, "Neapolis," which is today called "Naples"). And finally, Jefferson County once held the village of VETO (Latin for "I forbid"—a word still often heard in Oklahoma City and Washington D.C.).

The foregoing communities are only a representation of the many other classical place names in Oklahoma and Indian territories. In addition to these, we can discover the educational level of early Oklahomans in such town designations as SHAKESPEARE, BYRON, SHELLEY, VERNE, and VERDI (there also has been a ZENDA, after Anthony Hope's novel, "The Prisoner of Zenda").

In any state today, if you ask the average person, whether he or she is a farmer, merchant, laborer, or professional, "To what do these classical place names refer?", the most received response would be, "Huh?" The early Oklahoma homesteaders knew, and they named their communities accordingly. Of the thirty-nine counties in or adjacent to western Oklahoma, 65%, or two-thirds, have contained towns with names of classical origin.

So, to those cynics who attempt to put-down the educational level and the knowledge of Oklahoma's pioneers, I shout, "VETO!"