On Colleges, Asylums, Reformatories, & Racetracks

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This is an account of how Southwestern—Southwestern Normal School; Southwestern State Teachers' College; Southwestern State College of Diversified Occupations; Southwestern Institute of Technology; Southwestern State College; Southwestern Oklahoma State University—came to be located in Weatherford. It's a two-part story. The first, a short story, has to do with name and purpose. The second, a not-so-short story, has to do with location.

“Southwestern” was established by an act of the Oklahoma Territorial Legislature in 1901 as the Southwestern Normal School. (A decision on the location wasn’t reached until October, 1902.) The school was authorized to offer two years of training for public-school teachers. Four years of preparatory work for students not qualified to enter college was also provided. The first classes met in 1903.

In 1920, the preparatory classes were eliminated and four years of college work were offered, after the state legislature changed the name (and purpose) of the institution to Southwestern State Teachers College. The first baccalaureate degrees were awarded in 1921.

In 1939, Southwestern became Southwestern State College of Diversified Occupations. In 1941, a School of Pharmacy, degree work in art and sciences, and trade schools were added, and the college became Southwestern Institute of Technology.

In 1949, Southwestern became Southwestern State College, a name it was to wear for 25 years. In 1974, the Oklahoma state legislature changed the name of the institution again to Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

The events which led to the location of Southwestern in Weatherford are considerably more interesting than the names the institution has worn. To a large extent, these events constitute an earlier version of a more recent Oklahoma drama, the location of parimutuel racetracks. How many racetracks shall we have? Shall we have some large ones and some small ones, or just one? Where shall they be located?

In the early days of Oklahoma, indeed even before Oklahoma came to be, every town and city wanted a railroad, and/or a college—or if not a college, then a prison would do. In 1890, people across Oklahoma Territory hoped to get a “territorial
plum." The rivalries for these plums were rarely displays of integrity.

In the competition for territorial plums in Southwestern Oklahoma, Weatherford placed first— and won Southwestern. Granite placed second—and won a reformatory. Mangum placed third—for which there was no prize.

The most interesting account of the competition for the Normal School of which I am aware is that found in HISTORY OF SOUTHWESTERN STATE COLLEGE, 1903-1953, by Melvin Frank Fiegel. Dr. Fiegel is a member of the faculty of the Southwestern Social Sciences Department. What follows is taken from Dr. Fiegel's account. It's a very brief summary. Readers interested in more detail should consult Dr. Fiegel's history.

The territorial legislature authorized the establishment of a Normal School in Southwestern Oklahoma in 1901 and appropriated the sum of $52,000 to erect and equip an appropriate building. Since there was sure to be a competition for the school, just as there has been more recently for racetracks, certain requirements were imposed. The town in which the school would be located would be required to provide a forty-acre tract for the school and a sum of $5,000 for fencing, planting of trees, and beautifying the campus of the proposed school.

Even before the passage of the legislation authorizing the Normal, lobbies were at work. Two Granite residents agreed to donate land in 1900. Early on, Greer County was thought to have an inside track for the location of the Normal. As time passed, the plot thickened. President William McKinley replaced Governor Barns with William H. Jenkins. In August, Governor Jenkins replaced the Barnes selection committee with a new selection committee, without notifying the former committee or asking for its resignation. Two selection committees now existed. The editor of the CUSTER COUNTY REPUBLICAN pointed out that Custer County was the only Republican county in the Southwest, and that Weatherford was entitled to the Normal School "under a Republican administration." The Weatherford lobby raised money for a possible court action, should such be needed.

Subsequently, the Jenkins committee visited Granite, and Granite appeared to be the favorite. Later, the Barnes committee visited Weatherford, and the editor of THE MANGUM STAR complained that Weatherford appeared to have the inside track with the selection committee, even though Weatherford wasn't located in Southwestern Oklahoma.

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