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## South by Midwest: Or, Where is Oklahoma?

Posted By [Russell Cobb](#) On April 10, 2011 @ 9:22 am In [Print Edition](#) | [14 Comments](#)

I'm not much of a Facebook person. Most of the time, I passively scroll through status updates while avoiding doing something else. Recently, however, I set off a Facebook conversation that lasted for days, with far-flung acquaintances and distant relatives chiming in on what I thought was a perfectly reasonable assertion.

Before I come to that assertion, let me ask you, dear reader, who I trust has at least a passing interest in the nation's 46th state: Where is Oklahoma? Were someone on the street to ask you this question, you might turn to a political map of the United States and point to the meat cleaver above Texas. There it is, you would say, in the mid-south-central portion of the continental United States. But where is it culturally? Is it part of The South? The U.S. Census Bureau says so. Generations of venerable southern historians, such as C. Vann Woodward, have said so.

And this was the assertion I casually made on Facebook. Actually, what I said was that, as a Southerner, the word "heritage" (as in "Southern heritage") struck me as slightly sinister, but I wasn't quite sure why.

I was quickly shot down by the sister of a very good friend, who happens to live in Birmingham. "Oklahoma is not the South, Russ," she said. "It's the Midwest." Another friend in Georgia sprung to my defense. "I've lived in the Deep South and Chicago. Oklahoma is definitely more Southern than Midwestern. Still, it's not quite the South either."

A Canadian friend was confused. "Where does the South end?" he wanted to know. "Is the South synonymous with the Bible Belt?" In a famous article, one historian asserted that the best way to define the contemporary South was to examine the audience for religious television. The bigger the market share for televangelists, the more southern the place. By this calculation, Tulsa was either the buckle on the Bible Belt, or, at the very least, one of its belt holes.

A good friend who considers a trip to Dallas to be a visit to a foreign country tried to argue that Oklahoma was its own region, that it shouldn't be lumped together with any other state, especially not Texas. But this seemed strange, too, because there are some affinities between Texas and Oklahoma. Still, Okies have none of the bluster of Texans, and it's hard to imagine a tourism campaign with the slogan: "Oklahoma, it's like a whole other country." We don't do arrogance. When I was growing up, the slogan on license plates was "Oklahoma is OK." Not great, not terrible, just OK.

The conversation went on for days. I could sense I was losing the argument. All the Oklahomans who posted seemed to think their native state was in the Midwest. This disturbed me, but why? There was something hopelessly dull and uninteresting about being from the Midwest. Someone else, a friend in New York, agreed. "It's in the Midwest, but I would rather it be in the South," she said. Why was the South an improvement on the Midwest? Being from the South had its own set of problems. And what about the Southwest? Maybe we were Southwesterners.

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Trace the old Route 66 via Interstate 44, and you will eventually come to a town where, depending on which gas station you visit, you will hear a nasally Midwestern accent or a Southern accent. The town is just across the Missouri-Oklahoma line, in Carthage, Missouri. On the southern end of town, near the highway, locals will say "highway forty-four," but will often turn the number four into two separate syllables: fo-or. Linguists will tell you that this is the hallmark "Southern drawl": drawing one vowel out to make it sound like two.

On the other end of town, on the road to Kansas City, I-44 becomes pronounced as “farty-far.” I can make this assertion with some authority, having traveled north and south across Missouri many times on my way to college in Iowa, which, unlike Oklahoma, suffers from no regional identity complex. Rolling hills of grain silos, perfectly red barns and miles of corn fields signify, in no uncertain terms, the Midwest.

Iowa, along with Nebraska and South Dakota, has produced a disproportionate share of broadcasters, in part because the accent in these states is considered the most neutral. This is the heartland of a type of English known as General American (SAE, or Standard American English, in another term of art for this accent), a place the linguist William Labov found to be the area most devoid of regional variations and irregular speech patterns. According to Labov’s Atlas of North American English, General American encompasses an oval-shaped blob from eastern Nebraska and South Dakota to central Illinois, taking in much of Iowa and northern Missouri. Walter Cronkite, Ronald Reagan and Tom Brokaw all spent their formative years in General America. General America is where corporations go to test new products to see if they will succeed in the rest of the country. If all the children in Lake Wobegon are above average, all the children in General America are average.

When I first drove across General America in the early 1990s, I was shocked to learn how different it was from Oklahoma, which I always assumed was the most generic, milquetoast place in the world. The towns of General America, however, were tidier and straighter than anything I had seen in Oklahoma. The churches were whiter. The town squares looked like settings for Normal Rockwell paintings. So many small towns in Oklahoma looked like they’d just been hit by F-5 tornadoes or served as a setting for a movie about rural meth labs.

I also assumed that anyone not from a city spoke with an Oklahoma accent, which traces its genealogy back to Appalachia—a variation on the Southern accent. When I met my first roommate, Jake, from Hawarden, Iowa (population 2,478) at the University of Iowa, I was surprised he spoke General American. He looked like a hick in his tight Wranglers, mullet, and Metallica t-shirt, and yet he spoke without a trace of an accent. I expected his accent to be something like that of Boomhauer’s from King of the Hill: a twangy, monotone slur. (The creator of the show, Mike Judge, has stated that the inspiration for Boomhauer’s accent came from an unintelligible phone conversation he once had with a man from Oklahoma City.) My roommate also had three more Advanced Placement credits than I did, completing the ruin of my sense of intellectual and cultural superiority.

Even more shocking than all this was learning that I had an accent. I shared a phone with Jake and two guys from Chicago next door. The Chicagoans drank Old Style beer at 8 a.m. and skipped class to watch hockey. One day, I discovered that I was missing a pair of socks and asked them about it.

“You’re missing what?” one of them said.

“Socks,” I said. “I can’t find my socks.”

The one I had been talking to went to find his roommate. He brought him into the common area, where we shared a refrigerator and a telephone.

“I can’t understand this guy,” one Chicagoan said to the other. “What are you missing?”

“My socks!” I said. “You put them on your feet.”

“Sacks,” said the other one. “He’s saying ‘sacks.’” They laughed and then mocked me. “Saw-ahks,” they said. “I can’t find my saw-ahks. Shi-it!” To their ears, I sounded like an Alabama redneck.

So I set about detecting regionalisms in my speech and purging them one by one with the help of a fellow English major from Chicago. Greasy was not pronounced with a “z” sound but with an “s” sound. Words ending in “-ow” were pronounced with an “oh” sound, not with an “-uh” sound. “Pen” and “pin” were pronounced differently. “Milk” was one syllable, not “mi-yulk.”

Going back to Tulsa, I noticed that somewhere south of Kansas City, Standard American gave way to Southern twang, leading me to eventually pinpoint Carthage as the transition zone. A 2004 study of national speech patterns boiled American dialects down to six major groupings. Northeastern Oklahoma and southern Missouri are the northwestern limits of the southern accent, while the "midland," that area from northern Missouri to Iowa, Nebraska and Illinois, was found to be the region with the fewest deviations from Standard American.

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Even if we Okies have a sort of Southern accent, though, that doesn't make us Southerners. The Census Bureau may designate Oklahoma as the South, but what explains the visceral reaction of Georgians and Alabamans when an Okie claims to be from Dixie? A friend of a friend from Tulsa replicated my Facebook experiment and was shot down by from someone from Arkansas. "It's the Southwest," he wrote. "The South starts with Arkansas." The next person to post was confused. "Upper central mid south west?" she wrote. "Please let me know what the answer is."

A friend of a friend who works for Southern Living magazine was sort of annoyed that Oklahoma was included in her lifestyle magazine. "It was a marketing decision," she said. "Everyone knows Oklahoma isn't in the real South." But where is the real South?

There was a time in the not-too-distant past when Oklahoma politicians made a deliberate effort to make the state part of the "Solid South," a peculiar institution that guaranteed the one-party rule of the Democratic Party. The heyday of the "Solid South" lasted from the end of Reconstruction until the end of World War II. The strategy was all about, of course, disenfranchising black voters and wielding monolithic political control over state politics. Danney Goble, the recently deceased Oklahoma historian, explains it this way in the Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture:

The fact that much of the future state was settled by immigrating southerners had great influence on Oklahoma's later politics. Its unwieldy constitution, its distrust of concentrated corporate and political power, its steady run-ins with federal authority, even its susceptibility to political corruption—all of these were qualities that the Sooner State shared with states of the Old Confederacy...Early Oklahoma Democrats campaigned and governed just like their fellow Democrats across the South: they openly and bluntly proclaimed their racism to win power, and they used power to affirm and institutionalize their racism. It was they who mandated separate schools under the constitution; they who segregated public transportation in Oklahoma's first statute; they who countenanced "white only" public accommodations, neighborhoods, even entire towns; they who systematically disenfranchised blacks with racist election laws.

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The geographer Wilbur Zelinsky—one of the inventors of modern cultural geography—attempted to understand regional identity in the "vernacular." Zelinsky wanted to understand how everyday folks defined themselves in terms of regional identity. This was in the pre-Internet age of the 1970s and 1980s, and Zelinsky focused on the Yellow Pages. The telephone book, unlike, say, the Census Bureau, would give you a good idea of the regional place names that people used to identify themselves and their businesses.

Sorting through thousands of place names in hundreds of cities, he compiled a series of maps that showed how people identified their regions. Some of the regions were predictable: Boston businesses used a lot of terms like New England and Northeastern in their names or descriptions. "Southern" was a dominant term in phone books in Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, etc. But, looking at Zelinsky's maps today, it is Oklahoma that shows the biggest regional confusion. Strangely, Zelinsky never commented on this fact. He noted that some places, like western Pennsylvania, were kind of stuck between Northeastern and Midwestern, but it was Oklahoma that had the greatest amount of regional identities. Five of the twelve vernacular identities that Zelinsky came up with converged on Oklahoma. For phone books in the very southeastern part of the state, Oklahoma was

southern. In the panhandle, it was the "West." Along the Kansas border, it was the Midwest. From Oklahoma City to the west, it was the "southwest."

Part of the problem with Zelinsky's research, though, is that it is static. It doesn't take into account the way regional identities change. Minnesota was once considered the Northwest; it is now firmly ensconced in the Midwest. Maryland was once considered the South, but few people would today characterize it as anything other than the Mid-Atlantic.

The Midwest, in general, seems to be gaining ground, expanding its reach beyond its western and southern boundaries. In 2006, NPR, while reporting on an outbreak of tornadoes in Tennessee, referred to the state as the Midwest. If the Midwest is the region of Standard American, this seems to make sense, at least on the surface. The common wisdom is that the proliferation of mainstream popular culture through TV, the Internet, and social media is destroying regional identities, making us all one undifferentiated mass of Starbucks coffee shops and crappy reality television. Sociolinguists, however, have found that the opposite is true—at least in terms of regional vocabularies and dialects. New dialects are being born: California used to speak Standard American but now has its own accent and regional variations are becoming more—not less—pronounced.

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There is always the case for the Southwest. But Oklahoma doesn't quite fit there either because the proper Southwest is a legacy of what was once Mexico, and, before that, the Spanish Empire. West Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, some of Colorado: all these places have Hispanic place names and visible relics of Spain and Mexico. Apart from El Reno—and one has to doubt that there were ever any reindeer (Reno is Spanish for reindeer) in central Oklahoma—there are no Spanish place names in Oklahoma. Coronado, apparently, wandered through the Wichita Mountains and lost a few pounds of gold along the way, but there are no missions, no pueblos. Our only decent Mexican food comes from recent migration patterns; in short, we have nothing that Americans recognize as archetypes of Southwestern culture.

Finally, in moments of brutal honesty, Okies will admit that their state is a variation of Texas. This is a painful admission, to be sure. "The whole state is like a suburb of Dallas," a fellow Tulsan told a Canadian friend. "It's Texas-light," someone wrote during my interminable Facebook conversation. Politically, culturally and religiously speaking, there's a good case to be made for this assertion. Texans and Oklahomans share the same affinity for hard-right, red-meat conservative politics, and they have large populations of Southern Baptists. Western Swing is a purely Texas-Oklahoma creation of Bob Wills, who belongs to both states. The accent is pretty much the same, although a bit stronger in Texas. There's the big role oil companies play in the states' economies. And, of course, there's football. Both states are football crazed, but therein lies a complication: there is no greater sports hatred than that between the Sooners and the Longhorns.

I've tried to deconstruct the annual hatefest that is the OU-Texas game for my wife, a native Californian, who, before meeting me, had never watched a college football game. Part of what makes the game exciting, I told her, is that it's played on a neutral site. So it's not in Texas or Oklahoma, she wondered? Well, it's in Dallas, I said. The idea that Dallas was somehow neutral seemed ludicrous, and, indeed, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like Oklahomans had been bamboozled.

So, where is Oklahoma? It is in America's Heart, someone said. Well, not quite, I rebutted. If you compare the map of the continental U.S. to the human body, you would have to conclude that Oklahoma is America's pancreas. It's in the mid-south-central of the body, and, although it doesn't have the poetic resonance of the heart, it serves an important function. It breaks down proteins, carbs and fats. The pancreas is often overlooked until something terrible happens there, like a cancer—or the bombing of a federal building. But there it is, right there in the middle of everything, trying to make sense of all the substances coming through the system. Not all the substances that come through are healthy, but the pancreas soldiers on, keeping the body running.

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