

Wanette and the Cross Timbers*

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Wanette, population 400, is about an hour's drive southeast of Oklahoma City. Few visitors search it out, and because Wanette's not on the way to anywhere, nobody even passes through on the way to someplace else. Still, Wanette's an interesting town. The light of Oklahoma City gradually declines, town by town—Moore, Norman, Purcell, Lexington--until, at Wanette, there's suddenly not even the ghost of an urban shadow.

Wanette's at the end of a stub that branches off a state highway that intersects Interstate 35. The highway itself runs through such empty country that it's hard to decide whether to bother with Wanette even if you have time to kill. Except for the razor-wired maximum-security state prison, the last built-up place before the turnoff is 15 miles back at Lexington, a town of 2,000 people and one commercial street. It's lined with brick-faced stone buildings, their cornices trimmed in silver-painted stamped metal, mostly patterned with fleurs-de-lis. It may seem primitive, but Lexington is separated from civilization—in the form of Interstate 35--by hardly anything except a long bridge across the Canadian River. The people of Lexington, in short, are on the grid. They know that they're half an hour from a Wal-Mart supercenter in Norman. Even if they have no intention of doing it, they know they can be in Dallas by lunch.

Wanette's different. The stub takes you a mile south to a stop sign at the crossing of a very broad and well-paved main street. There aren't any pedestrians, and there's no traffic, either, though eight or nine cars are parked here and there. On your right at the stop sign is an old bank. There's no inscription—not even the word “bank”--and there's only one polished granite pillar. There never were two: the building was designed with its entrance at the corner, so you only needed one column at the corner proper. A helpful Oklahoman explains: “they didn't have enough money for two.”

On your left, there's another brick building. It, too, was a bank: a two-door safe sits in the back. Across the street on the right is an empty lot with remnants of a foundation. On the left, there is yet another ex-bank. According to its informal sign, it's now the senior citizens' center for southern Pottawatomie County. You can advance 20 feet and stop in the middle of the intersection to inspect a town where nobody seems to have invested a dime since World War I.

The whole place is built on the western slope of a gentle hill, so there's a slight grade uphill to the left, where a gappy line of buildings stretches for a block or so before the street turns residential. Most of the buildings--Petrie's drugs, Old

Friends Cafe--have been vacant a long time, but Ritter's grocery is still in business, with a wooden barrel full of soft drinks and chipped ice. Farther inside, there's a pair of metal racks with ads for a brand of white bread that hasn't been made in years. Against the wall there's a shelf with bags of Shawnee corn meal, milled 30 miles away in Shawnee, the seat of what the locals pleasantly call "Pott County." Outside of Ritter's, you have an abundance of wood benches on which to sit. Almost every building has one, even though the air this June day is as humid as the air in an indoor swimming pool. At least the benches are shaded by awnings, mostly of corrugated sheet metal sticking out horizontally like a shelf over the sidewalk.

Across the street, there's a set of portable bleachers; someone explains that they're leftovers from last month's Flag Day celebration.

The only other active commercial establishment in town is Ladner's Hardware. It's half a block straight ahead from the stop sign. You pass a vacant lot and an abandoned building that once housed a barber shop, an insurance office, and the town's domino parlor. Then you get to Ladner's, which is in a large building, twice as wide as its neighbors. Ladner's dusty plate glass windows reveal a fine display of washboards, big and small. There's a manual corn sheller for \$59. Step inside, and you see that the two-story building really has only one floor, rimmed with a narrow second-story balcony on all four sides. On one wall, there's a large selection of tack; Ladner's offers a saddle-repair service to go with it. On another, there are huge rolls of linoleum; on a third, built-in cabinets and shelves for things like nails, rope, and leg-hold traps. On the floor in front of the traps there's a kind of Lazy Susan axe-dispenser; it's only a half-round, and it doesn't actually rotate, but it holds about 40 axes in a double-decked semi-circle. The stock's down a bit, with only a dozen or so axes in the slots. There's no air-conditioning, not even a fan. The proprietor, a vigorous man in his late 30s, ignores the sweat pouring off him. He has some photos to prove that the store has hardly changed since the doors opened in 1903; he adds that the immense and all-brass cash register is as good as new, so long as he gives it a squirt of WD-40 every now and then. You don't have to tell him not to touch the place: he bought the store in 1981 and would have gone elsewhere if he had had something else in mind. Ask, and he'll give you an imprinted yardstick: they always come in handy.

That's about it. There's a school a few blocks away, at the top of the hill. Wanette also has three churches: Pentecostal, Baptist, and Catholic. Otherwise, there's only the residential periphery. Almost all the houses sit on large lots without fences or sidewalks, and they have little in the way of landscaping, except Bermuda grass stretching almost across each block, as though the houses sat on a public lawn. The houses themselves look like contenders in a competition to find the most unpretentious American house. Most are 50 years old and have less than a thousand square feet of floor space. Most also have only one story and are clapboarded and white, with an open

porch and a little bit of turned-wood trim. Some are no more than two cabins with a common wall and two doors facing the street: one for the parlor, one for the bedroom. Many are empty, but few bother with For Sale signs. If you like garage sales and are tired of appliances that wear out in five or ten years, Wanette's the perfect place to buy your next refrigerator.

Old books talk about the Santa Fe coming through in 1903, the same year Ladner's opened. That's the year, in fact, when the entire town picked up and moved itself a couple of miles to be closer to the track. That explains the name Wanette, which is awfully informal for a town along the Santa Fe, where most places were named for company or government officials. The explanation is that Wanette already had its name, courtesy of a popular song about a certain Juanita.

The depot should be at the bottom of the Main Street hill, but things don't look promising, for the street dead ends in the unpaved parking lot of the town's rodeo grounds. Sure enough, however, when you walk around the parking lot you come across crosstie culverts. They are about the only sign left of the Santa Fe, which pulled up its track here sometime before 1965. There were cotton gins alongside it, and grain and lumber mills, but there's not a sign of any of them. The depot itself was hauled away and made into a house. The only substantial railway remnant anywhere nearby is the old, multi-trussed bridge across the Canadian River. The rails have been removed; planking added to the crossties, and a one-lane bridge created for local traffic. The headroom is fabulous.

The strange thing about Wanette, when you think about it, isn't that it's only one step from a ghost town: it's that there doesn't seem any reason why the town should have been built in the first place. The surrounding countryside, after all, is empty enough to have been chosen as the site for a prison. Climb up the water tower at the top of the town's hill and you look over rolling woodland, interrupted only occasionally by a clearing. There's nothing that looks like a cotton field. In fact there aren't ten farmers growing cotton between here and Oklahoma City.

From the air, even at low altitude, the countryside looks flat, but drive across it on something besides an interstate freeway and you're always going downhill a hundred feet or so to a pokey, overgrown creek, and then rising to a broad divide a mile ahead. That's not a lot of relief by some standards, but it's enough for long views down section-line roads. Sometimes there are beautiful pastures of weeping love-grass, mown and parkified by pecans; more often, there is rough pasture, with scrub oaks and junipers. Most of all, there is oak and hickory forest. Blackjack and post oak forests aren't grand, but there are lots of individual trees you can't get your arms around and some that are too big for two people to embrace.

These are the Cross Timbers, which start a few miles east of Oklahoma City. The boundary between western prairie and eastern woodland, in fact, is remarkably sharp and has been so since long before Washington Irving came this way in 1832. He had been coming south past what is now Oklahoma City. Ahead of him lay more of the great prairie he had been exploring, but on his left he saw the forest that he referred to, without the final "s," as the "Cross Timber." He saw "hill beyond hill, forest beyond forest" and noted that the trees began with no polite zone of transition, no feathering of trees into grass: they formed a wall. They still do, because the edge of the Cross Timbers follows a geologic boundary between sandstone on the east and shale on the west. East of the contact, there are sandy and permeable soils; west of it, there are moisture-retaining loams and clays. The former supports the Cross Timbers; the latter, the prairie. Many species of trees are quite capable of doing well in the prairie, but fires kept them mostly out of it. The oaks and hickory adapted to the sandy soils of the Cross Timbers, on the other hand, were fire-resistant. None of this, of course, goes very far to explain Wanette: if anything, these details about the Cross Timbers make the town an even bigger puzzle.

At the time of Washington Irving's visit, this part of the Cross Timbers and the adjoining prairie had just been made part of the new Seminole Indian reservation. The tribe had been forcibly evicted from its home in the Floridian swamps and was making little use of these new and very different lands. Thirty years later, the Seminoles lost this new home, too, because, like almost all the Indians relocated to Oklahoma, they made the mistake of siding with the Confederacy. The Seminoles were pushed farther east, and the land around Wanette was reassigned to the Pottawatomies, a tribe from Michigan. The westernmost miles of the Cross Timbers and the prairie beyond them as far as the Canadian River were designated as "unassigned" land.

Still in the 1860s, federal surveyors ran township and range lines across Oklahoma, including the Indian reservations. The Indian Meridian was blazed north through the Cross Timbers from a basepoint about 30 miles south of the Canadian River. What is now Lexington fell about five miles west of the line; what is now Wanette, about 13 miles east of it. Section corners were staked out everywhere, including lands Indians were using, as well as lands they weren't. Even though the lands were still closed to white settlement, it didn't take long before the Santa Fe built a line from Wichita to Fort Worth. The route lay mostly through unassigned lands, and stations on it grew into Oklahoma City, Norman, and Lexington.

With a completed survey and railroad, the pressure to open the unassigned land was irresistible, and with the first Oklahoma land run, in 1889, nearly 2,000,000 acres were taken up one afternoon by about 10,000 settlers, each claiming a 160-acre quarter-section. Many settlers had gone over the country in advance of the opening; a local historian suggests that half were "sooners,"

hiding on the land at the appointed hour. Some were fortunate enough to get quarter-sections of prairie. Some got bottomlands in the Cross Timbers, either along the Canadian or a tributary called the Little River. Others had to settle for upland Cross Timbers.

Government surveyors had rated the forest soil there as inferior to that of the prairies, but the settlers weren't choosy. Besides, the Cross Timbers at that time had a foot-thick mantle of organic matter on top of the weathered sandstone. There was no doubt that the land could be cleared and put in crops.

The settlers quickly formed counties: the one south of Oklahoma City was named for President Cleveland. Its east boundary, just inside the Cross Timbers, was the Indian Meridian, beyond which lay the Pottawatomie Reservation. To the frustration of the white settlers, much of the reservation was not being used. This situation was quickly corrected, however. Each Pottawatomie family received a 160-acre allotment; the reservation was then abolished and the rest of what is now Pottawatomie County was opened in 1891 in a run like that of '89. The county lines were readjusted, so that Cleveland County's east boundary reached a township further into the Cross Timbers.

Every quarter-section in Cleveland and Pottawatomie counties now had an owner. Section-line roads were opened, earth-floored shacks put up, and rural schools and post offices built; it wasn't long before cemeteries appeared. Oddly enough, the tombstones rarely mention places of birth. Looking at the tombstones, you'd never know that most of the settlers had come from the upland South, places like Arkansas and Kentucky. Instead, the tombstones stick to names, dates, and occasional pieties. It's as though the settlers didn't want to remember where they had come from.

These were the years when Edward Ripley was president of the Santa Fe, and there were few railroad men as energetic as he when it came to pursuing traffic. What he saw, no doubt, was that the Cross Timbers were quickly becoming a place that needed a railroad. The average settler had cleared close to 100 acres of woodland and, though there was a lot of corn and sorghum grown for cattle, nearly half of the cropped land was planted to cotton, typically in fields plowed the easiest way possible, uphill and down.

It didn't take long for the Santa Fe to run a new north-south line through Oklahoma: it started in the northern part of the state and ran right through the Cross Timbers to Wauwata, before crossing the Canadian and rejoining the main line.

It is said that the first years were good ones, with high yields. No doubt that's true in comparison to later ones, but by 1920 more than half the farms in Cleveland and Pottawatomie counties were worked by tenants. How this remarkable transformation occurred isn't clear, but mortgages were very

common, and so were foreclosures. A mortgage company would get its money back at a sheriff's sale, and a neighbor would buy the land in question, leaving it to a tenant to work. In some cases, entire sections were gradually bought by families that started out by leasing a quarter.

The thin layer of topsoil quickly washed away. The Pottawatomie County soil conservationist in the 1930s said that the big job of the coming decade would be to "tune up" the soils, but there wasn't much soil left to tune. Today, there are very few places left in the Cross Timbers where you can even find a sample of the original soil. Instead, there is a reddish cast to the ground, which is often deeply scored with gullies the color of a brick. The Little River, like the other streams of the Cross Timbers, is bright red when the sun shines, as though some giant upstream was cleaning an enormous paintbrush. At many of the bridges crossing these streams, you can stop and look down cliff-walled channels ineffectually plugged with old cars and the occasional sofa.

The tenants cleared out, while most of the owners shifted heavily to part-time cattle production. Today, there are some 2,000 cattle producers, earning on average about \$6,000 a year from cattle sales. The cultivated acreage of the counties is meanwhile down to about a quarter of what it was in 1920. Nearly all of it is in wheat and hay, grown in the bottomlands of the Canadian and Little rivers.

Wanette's population peaked at 800 in 1920; by 1960 it was down to half that. The same thing happened to Lexington, but Interstate 35 brought that town back to its old peak. Wanette got no reprieve.

An old woman in town explains that most of the people who lived in and around Wanette moved to the city. She's right: sometimes you can see them and their children in Oklahoma City, where they look like the people photographed by Dorothea Lange. More often, you have to rely on indirect evidence, like backyards planted with okra, collards, and "peas," by which people here mean black-eyed peas. Supermarket carts are filled with white bread, chips, and soda. A church near Lexington has a sign announcing that it is "Open under New Management/To Serve the Lord."

"That's progress," the woman in Wanette says amiably enough, and you'd be a fool to argue with her. It may be that the Cross Timbers should never have been cleared; it may be that Wanette should never have existed, any more than the line of the Santa Fe running through it. But one had better say things like this carefully: Oklahomans have had more than their share of criticism and are as thin-skinned as Southerners in general.

Besides, you can have a pretty good time looking around without being judgmental. The section-line roads don't often fail you, and when they do it's easy to make the necessary jogs to get back on track. The long views are the

stuff of fantasy: they beckon to places unknown. The stream crossings are especially likely places to stop and hunt for wildflowers. The Bureau of Reclamation was good enough to dam the Little River in the 1960s, even though the Corps of Engineers had judged the project uneconomical. Recreational use is high, and it's not unlikely that you'll pass someone towing a bassboat to the lake. You learn to wave back properly, with your right hand on the steering wheel and your fingers dropping like the spokes of a turning wheel until an index finger points at your mock adversary. It takes a bit of practice, but with a hat and a bottle of Dr. Pepper you'll do all right.

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