When David Nichols retired as Southwestern College’s academic dean in 2003, it would have been safe to assume that he would follow the traditional path of new retirees in small towns—coffee at midmorning, attendance at gradekids’ soccer games. Instead, Nichols has transformed his retirement into a scholarly quest that in a few months will result in the publication of A Matter of Justice: Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution. Simon & Schuster, one of the world’s most prestigious publishers, will release the book in early September. The book is being given the star treatment, including jacket blurbs by Walter Isaacson (whose biography of Einstein is atop the New York Times nondisclosure list), a book tour for Nichols, and a full lineup of speeches and author appearances. The book will be launched at the Eisenhower Library in Abilene on Sept. 6, celebrating the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Then Nichols will speak at the Clinton Library Sept. 15 in observance of the 50th anniversary of Eisenhower sending troops to Little Rock, Ark., to enforce school desegregation. So how did this whirlwind of fame come about for a man who graduated from Southeastern and spent most of his career on the Hill in Winfield? “I’m not a talented writer, but I’m a good researcher,” Nichols says, “and Simon & Schuster had an editor (Roger Labrie) who happened to be a real Eisenhower fan. He nibbled my proposal, and has turned out to be an extraordinary editor.”

Labrie urged Nichols to think of his audience, bringing the reader’s perspective to the enormous manuscript—“If the book is going to sell, it needs to be short,” Nichols was told. This was a major undertaking for a writer who had spent decades chronicling out accreditation reports and academic evaluations. But the quest to appeal to the general public, beyond scholarly audiences, has paid off in a book written in language accessible to any reader.

“That was brutal,” Nichols describes the editing process, “but it never did violence to the general integrity of the book.” The finished product will offer a depiction of Eisenhower that differs radically from the view previously taken by historians. Historical accounts for years have said that Eisenhower did nothing to promote civil rights, but this is a fallacy, Nichols’ research shows. Using sources that have been available but overlooked, as well as recently-released documentation and personal interviews with several of the men who were decision-makers during the key events of 1957, Nichols draws a portrait of Eisenhower as a first-class executive who delegated responsibility but held his team members strictly accountable.

“Historians tend to assume that presidential leadership is what pushes things along,” Nichols says. “Lincoln and Kennedy were eloquent speakers, and history rewards that,” Nichols says. “Eisenhower didn’t like the spotlight, though, so you have to go beyond the rhetoric to understand him.”

Now, with the rigor of the book’s completion taking its toll, Nichols is ready for a break. He won’t stop his scholarly pursuits, though.

“When people ask me why I chose Eisenhower, I say because Abilene was close and cheap,” he says with a laugh. “It’s crazy, but I knew all along I could do this kind of work. I tell people that if I had a 25-year missionary experience at Southwestern College that didn’t leave me for too, but I knew I could do it. Still, I didn’t imagine anything along these lines.

“It’s a gift. I did some diligence to make it happen, but it’s a gift.”

---

Homecoming ‘07 To Add Prof Stop

Mark your calendar for Oct. 19, 20, and 21—this year’s reunions will feature classes ending in “2” or “7.”

The weekend begins early on Thursday night with a Smith-Wilson Lecture with speakers Steven J. Kruller, and a theatre production of You Can’t Take it With You. On Friday noon, the Class of 1957 will have a kick-off Burger Station lunch, and the SC golf team will again host the Jinx Institutional Gold Tourney.

Because we’ve had many inquiries about former SC professors, we’ve added a new component to Homecoming this year, called The Prof Stop. We will invite former professors and coaches to come back for a reception on Friday afternoon during Homecoming registration so that alumni can visit with them.

In addition to the many activities scheduled for Saturday, there will also reunions for tennis and for the Black Student Union. Check out the full Homecoming schedule at www.sckans.edu/homecoming.

Don’t forget—motel space in Winfield is limited! Book early.