A Southwest Conference football historian would characterize the year 1957 as the end of an era.

It was the Last Year of the Bear, who left A&M for Alabama, where there are bigger football players and more telephone lines. It was the year that Texas hired Darrell Royal and went to the Sugar Bowl almost by default to be embarrassed by Mississippi. It was the year before deliverance for Arkansas, and the Hogs haven’t lost a November game since.

TCU was rebuilding following the graduation of all-American Jim Swink. A quarterback named Don Meredith threw his first intercollegiate pass. And Rice Institute won a football championship.

The Owls weren’t the same after Bryant took leave. Texas hasn’t been embarrassed since that New Year’s Day, except that every once in a while they lose (or are tied . . . but that’s getting ahead of our story).

Arkansas has taken its place alongside the Big Boys of the Southwest. TCU has been rugged every year since ’57, and Don Meredith has come and gone but his passing records still stand.

As for Rice, it hasn’t seen a football championship since that year, although in two of the following years the Owls were outright favorites, and in a third had a golden opportunity.

The Failure of the Owls is one of the lesser-told stories of Southwest Conference warfare, because it is overshadowed by the successes of Arkansas and Texas.

What seems to be the Owls’ fate again in 1958. As promising as the Owls are, they rate only a dark-horse role after Texas, Arkansas and TCU.

The league next year will be almost a carbon-copy of 1957. Texas will be much the same—strong defensively but unspectacular, except in result. The Hogs will be speedy as always, throw a little more, and quite spectacular everywhere. TCU, except for the loss of Sonny Gibbs, is virtually intact. And the Owls, once again, will be an enigma.

Any discussion of Rice football must begin at quarterback. There Walter McReynolds holds the fort, he of the talented passing arm and heavy lab schedule. It is said that the junior quarterback simply doesn’t have the desire to play football that some of the less-academically gifted have. After all, beating Texas won’t get one into med school, but then getting into med school won’t beat Texas, either.

On the assumption that Mac can be all his potential says he could be, the discussion can continue. Without a good performance by McReynolds, the Owls will be mediocre at best.

McReynolds won’t have to worry about receivers. Red Bale always produces fine ends, and even if the material weren’t there—which it is—it would be by September. But Bale has returnees Jerry Kelly, John Sylvester, and George Parry to work with.

All tackles were expected to return, but Lynwood Moore has chosen to graduate, and Louis Mazzurana will not be allowed to compete. Nevertheless, with Richard Bowe, John Mims, and Larry Stewart, Boidde Joe Davis can rest well assured that the tackles will be well-fortified.

If fact, there are enough good linemen that the Owls shouldn’t have any worries. Charles and Will Jay Hubbard, Archie Peterson, Ronnie Ulbrich—a spring training sensation—Johnny Nichols, Doug Mills, and Wayne Bertsch give the Owls a wealth of experienced depth in the trenches.

With Malcolm Walker holding down center, the Owls shouldn’t have any problems there. Linebacking is much more solid than it was a year ago—Walker and fullbacks Piper and Wayt plus the new monster man innovation will give the Owls a good defense.

The Backfield is also a terror. The two fullbacks are inside and outside threats. Fleming will be great when the line starts blocking for him, and Gene Walker is labeled "can’t miss" and "another Dicky Moegle" at halfback. Tough Billy Bale will return at wingback.

But, as always, there are problems. Three of them are Texas, Arkansas, and TCU, but even so, the Owls must learn not to beat themselves before they can beat anyone else.

Rice has never given any indication that it can play pass defense. One reason is that the Owls play a somewhat outmoded style of coverage—they leave the flats unprotected and concede the short ones.

In football, when you concede anything, you’re dead.

Owl Punt Coverage—another perpetual problem—must be improved. Tommy Ford got off the killing return in the Texas game last year that cost the Owls a victory.

Running defense should be sound, the passing attack much better than this year, and the running attack greatly improved. It all comes down in the long run to desire. The Owls always start fast, then hit that slump. For a while last year—two games to be exact—it looked like the Owls might have a new spirit.

But split milk, just like last season, went down the drain, and there’s no need to cry over it. The same pattern held true in ’58, ’59 (although the good start was only the first half of the first game and the slump lasted the rest of the year), ’61, and ’62.

Two things stand out: the Owls perform well in the big ones, and in the others, the Owls lose games in ways heretofore unknown to man.

The Owls will be Owls long. When an Owl ended blocked an Owl tackle to spring a Clemson halfback for a long gain. We’ve seen a misplayed punt cost the Owls 80 yards and the conference championship. We’ve watched as an Owl quarterback handed off to a Baylor end.

Rice doesn’t get whipped; they whip themselves. Last year—a dropped TD pass in the end zone against Penn State. The hopeless SMU fiasco. The pass interception just before the half against Oregon.

The Owls, if they can play up to their potential against TCU, Arkansas, and Baylor, like they play up to it when they meet Texas and LSU, are strong enough to win.