

Family history uncovers Waco State Home's brutal past



Jay Janner 2010 AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Advertising executive Sherry Matthews has had a desire to speak out for victims of injustice since she received an Underwood typewriter as a teen.

By Patrick Beach

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Sherry Matthews was, as F. Scott Fitzgerald put it, “borne back ceaselessly into the past” when her research into a piece of her family’s history uncovered a lot more than she was expecting. The result is out next week. “We Were Not Orphans: Stories From the Waco State Home,” is a realization of an ambition she says she first proclaimed in her teens, not long after her brother, Donald, gave her a manual Underwood typewriter.

“I was going to travel the world and cover the wars and famines and be the voice for the victims of injustice,” Matthews recalled.

Decades later, while running Sherry Matthews Advocacy Marketing in Austin and Washington, Matthews

started digging into the Waco institution that operated from the late 1920s through the ‘70s, and where her three brothers were taken in 1948 when she was just 3. “Dickensian” is the word former Austinite Robert Draper uses to describe the atmosphere there in his foreword for the book, but that’s not even close. In their oral histories, some alumni describe brutal beatings, sexual abuse and emotional torture.

Paul Folkner, who was at the home from 1956 to 1970, describes two houseparents who would beat boys with a baseball bat “whittled down to an inch wide, with holes in it. ... They would brag about how the holes in the bat made it catch the wind, and it would knock you up off the floor when it hit.” Folkner also describes another official who “beat me so hard my (buttocks) bled.”

MEET THE AUTHOR

Sherry Matthews will read from and sign copies of ‘We Were Not Orphans’ at 7 p.m. March 4 at Bookpeople, 603 N. Lamar Blvd. For more details on the book, visit wewerenotorphans.com

Conversely, others say the school did nothing less than save their lives. The first sentence of Dorothy Sue Robertson Diekmann’s interview is, “I miss the home.”

The book presents a decidedly mixed picture of the state home and its legacy, and its publication — and the documentation of abuse that the project uncovered — is reverberating in Waco, where relatives of some former staffers still live.

Matthews, who describes herself as an accidental advertising agency owner, goes out of her way to praise her staff,

Waco facility salvation for some children, nightmare for others

who worked on a freelance basis, in helping her finish the book (University of Texas Press, \$29.95). Characteristic of someone whose agency does advertising and marketing for good causes, she's pledged to donate any profits to the Waco State Home's alumni association.

Even with help, Matthews said working on the book while running a company was a juggle. "I would have a three-hour conversation at night around my other full-time job," she said.

Nonetheless, Matthews, 65, says this in an interview in her home:

"Eighty-five to 90 percent will say 'We're better off for having the Waco State Home,'" especially for those who lived there during the Depression and Dust Bowl years. "Most of them will say their circumstances were so horrible. ... Some of them were eating dirt."

The home was designed as a safety net for poor, neglected or abused children, many of whom were not orphans — hence the book's title — and thought that their parents were coming to retrieve them any day.

Even decades later, "You see the terrible sense of abandonment they feel," Matthews said. "You see it in their eyes."

Matthews' own circumstances were just as bad. She arrived in Texas with her family in a boxcar and settled outside Teague, 55 miles east of Waco, where, she says, her great-uncle put the family up in

a dirt-floor shed with no heat, no electricity and no plumbing — in the winter. When a caseworker saw the family's living conditions, the three boys — Donald, Bing and Jack — were sent to the state home. Matthews' mother, Vivian Smith, told the caseworker that Matthews was 2 1/2 because she'd heard that at 3, children could be taken away. One boy spent five years at the home, the other two, six years.

Each boy dealt with the experience differently, but it was Bing who persuaded Matthews and her younger sisters to attend a reunion in 2008. There, hearing the stories of other alumni, she got perspective on an unwelcome and undiscussed chapter in her own family's life.

That even more personal tale is the subject of a memoir she's been at work on for 15 years. For that reason, among others, her brothers' stories are not among the 57 told in oral history fashion. The project also hastened Matthews outing herself about the way she grew up, which only a handful of close friends had known before.

"I realized it's not something I need to be ashamed of," she said.

After hearing mostly positive stories from alums, she envisioned self-publishing a coffee table book for them. But after research and interviews — conducted by Matthews, author and musician Jesse Sublett and Matthews staffer Beau LeBoeuf, the latter two working on a freelance basis

— she started taking a less cheery view. And after public records and private archives substantiated many alumni's claims, the project became much more nuanced.

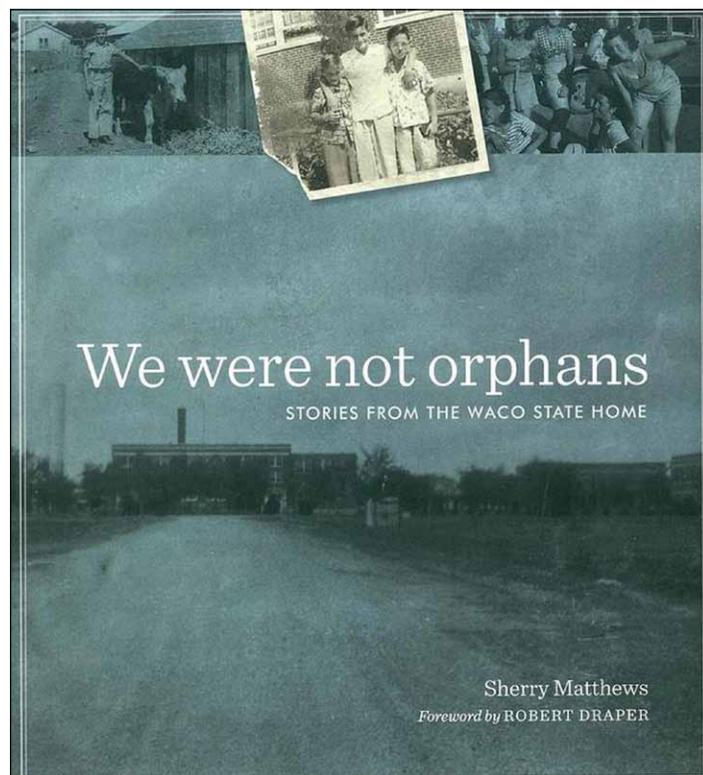
"I was personally upset by the abuse stories, for my first reaction was: 'Oh, my god, is this what happened to my brothers? Is this why they never talked about the home?'"

Central to 'We Were Not Orphans' is Waco State Home staffer C.B. "Buddy" Whigham, now deceased, who is mentioned about 50 times in the book as someone accused of terrorizing children over some 20 years, according to the oral histories and other documents. After Whigham, who held various titles over two or three tenures, dispensed countless whippings, a group of older boys finally got together and gave him one, likely in 1953 or '54. The boys quickly became legends. "There

wasn't an ounce of blood on any of us, except (another student), and that was Mr. Whigham's blood," recalled Tommy Turner, who was at the home from 1947-57.

"The alumni who cried did not cry about what happened to them," Matthews said. "They cried about witnessing a beating and not being able to help and the terrible guilt they felt that they couldn't do anything."

Matthews said she and her crew unearthed a paper trail exposing widespread abuse and cover-ups throughout five decades and that she has "dozens" of reports of abuse that are not in the book. After federal district Judge William Wayne Justice ruled in the early '70s that routine practices in Texas Youth Council (later renamed the Texas Youth Commission) facilities including the Waco State Home constituted cruel and unusual punishment,



UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS

Sherry Matthews took her title from the children at the state home, many of whom had parents but saw it as a rescue from poverty or neglect.

widespread reforms were instituted. But that was just a few years before the facility closed in 1979.

As Matthews puts it in the book: “The documents and interviews map out a damning trail of abuse and failures at the highest levels to protect the children.”

“A lot of stuff is not in the book,” she said. “A lot of names have been deleted. Even though dead people can’t sue for libel, I did not want to humiliate and embarrass, without absolute proof, living family who probably have no idea what their relatives did.”

Yet for all the tales of horror — children beaten bloody, a boy with a jaw broken, girls groped, impregnated and spirited away — many alums recall the home with great warmth, and some didn’t want their memories corrupted with those who had less rosy recollections. The book has people in Waco talking. One former alum has been very vocal in her opposition to the project, and there were vague rumblings about legal action to stop publication.

In the book, many alums talk about the great abundance of food, frequently because they were malnourished at home. They enjoyed outings to town. A fair number met their future spouses there. Many needed the structure and discipline — awaking at 5 a.m., making a bed so a coin could bounce off it — that the home provided. School was rigorous, athletics strongly encouraged. Guadalupe Vasquez King, who lived there from 1958-68, calls her time there the best experience of her life. Leroy Willeford calls it “the best three and a half years of my life. I had 280 brothers and sisters.”

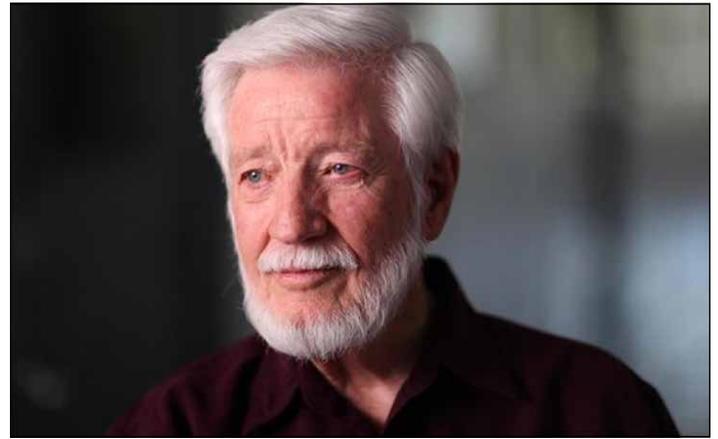
“I regard it as a lifesaver,” said Harvey Walker, who lives in rural Williamson County and lived at the home from 1944-51. “It changed my life forever. Pretty much everything about it was positive to me. A lot of the guys didn’t see things the same way.”

Walker said he thought the book was “a great idea. The title of the book indicates the attitude of the kids there — we weren’t orphans. I thought it was a good idea to get the stories written and let the public know what people who lived there thought about the place. I found out some things I didn’t know anything about.”

Asked if any habit he learned at the home stayed with him throughout his life, Walker laughed and said this: “I was 11 years old, and my job was to polish the brass in the boys’ bathroom. There were long brass or copper pipes. I had to keep those things shiny, and I took pride in that. Nowadays, every day I wipe my sink and faucet and everything down, make sure it’s shiny and doesn’t have any spots on it.”

That’s a happier memory, or at least a neutral one, and those like it have their place in the book. And it wasn’t as if Matthews went looking to expose the underside of the home, but once she found out, the dormant journalist in her couldn’t let it go — especially when she requested and received correspondence between her mother and the school’s then superintendent and uncovered a “horrible betrayal” on the part of her great-uncle. Again, she’s saving that story for her family memoir, but her reaction to the information is still raw.

“I got the records, and I was shocked and angry,” she



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Harvey Walker says he has happy memories about the home, which he calls a lifesaver.

said. “I could not stop reading it. I read those letters, and I was stalking around the house, screaming.”

Like Walker, many alums were grateful for the chance to tell their stories, grateful that somebody cared to revisit a corner of the state’s history that’s all but forgotten. Others, including one of Matthews’ own brothers, just didn’t want to talk about it. As for why brother Bing felt it important for Matthews to attend the reunion with him, Matthews has a simple answer: Those years in the home made a big impact in the kind of man he became. Bing says he doesn’t recall if he got whipped aside from switches on his legs in the baby cottage for talking too much. Brother Jack says he did, and one time put a pot lid in his pants before getting whipped to protect him from the blows. The teacher got one lick in and laughed so hard he told Jack he could go.

And there you have the institution in a nutshell: pain and humor in the same instant. Was the Waco State Home good or bad? Both, it would seem, sometimes at the same time. No place, no person is any one thing. And sometimes history can overtake you like a wave,

whether you want it to or not.

“I think I always sensed there were dark stories related to the home,” Matthews said. “And while I wanted the truth, I also took cues from my mother and brothers to ‘leave the past alone.’ The problem is that it never leaves us.”

Nor, sometimes, does an ambition first expressed as a youth. Matthews did, much later than she anticipated, become a muckraking journalist of a kind, telling a story that could hardly be more personal. She never forgot what she intended to be, which might be one reason why she still has that Underwood that Donald gave her sitting on a shelf in her study.

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TEXAS ■ COLLEGE COSTS

\$10,000 challenge puzzles educators

Proposed budget cuts make goal even tougher

By Ralph K.M. Haurwitz
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

When Gov. Rick Perry challenged the state's public institutions of higher learning this week to develop bachelor's degree programs costing no more than \$10,000, including textbooks, Mike McKinney was stumped.

"My answer is: I have no idea how," McKinney, chancellor of the Texas A&M University System, told the Senate Finance Committee. "I'm not going to say that it can't be done."

Tuition, fees and books for four years average \$31,696 at public universities in Texas, according to the Higher Education Coordinating Board. Sul Ross State University Rio Grande College is the cheapest, at \$17,332.

The governor's call for low-cost degrees comes as legislative budget writers and the governor himself have proposed deep cuts in higher education funding — cuts that would put pressure on governing boards to raise tuition, not lower it.

But officials of some university systems — whose governing boards are fully populated by Perry appointees — nevertheless struck an upbeat tone, or at least a neutral one. As McKinney, a former Perry chief of staff, put it: "If it can be figured out, we've got the faculty that can figure it out."

A spokesman for the University

See **COST**, A13



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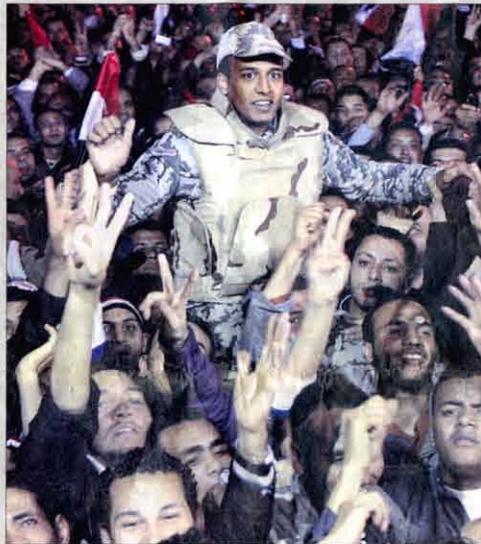
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FIRST CHANGE AT TOP SINCE 1981 COMES AFTER WEEKS OF PROTEST



Ahmed Ali 2011 AP/WIDEWORLD

Celebratory Egyptians carry an army soldier in Tahrir Square after longtime President Hosni Mubarak resigned Friday and handed power to a council of military leaders in Cairo.

By David D. Kirkpatrick
THE NEW YORK TIMES

CAIRO — An 18-day-old revolt led by the young people of Egypt ousted longtime President Hosni Mubarak on Friday, shattering three decades of political stasis here and upending the established order of the Arab world.

Shouts of "God is great" erupted from Tahrir Square at twilight as Mubarak's vice president and longtime intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, announced that Mubarak had passed all authority to a council of military leaders. Tens of thousands who had bowed for evening prayers leapt to their

feet, dancing in joy. "Lift your head high, you're an Egyptian," they cried. "We can breathe fresh air, we can feel our freedom," said Gamal Hesham, a former independent member of Parliament.

"After 30 years of absence from the world, Egypt is back."

Mubarak, an 82-year-old former air force commander who has ruled since 1981, left without comment for the Red Sea resort city of Sharm el-Sheikh, 250 miles from the turmoil in Cairo. Mubarak's fall removed a bulwark of U.S. foreign policy in the region and left the United States, its Arab allies and Israel pondering whether the Egyptian military, which has vowed to hold free elections, will give way to a new era of democratic dynamism or to a frenzied lurch into the instability or religious rule that Mubarak had fought for so long. The upheaval comes less

See **RESIGN**, A7

AUSTIN ■ SCHOOL DISTRICT

1,000 jobs might be cut

Board to vote Monday on plan designed to save \$53.6 million

By Laura Heinauer
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Austin schools Superintendent Meria Carstarphen will recommend on Monday cutting more than 1,000 positions next school year — about 8 percent of the district's total work force, administrators said Friday.

The cuts are more extensive than a plan board members approved last month, but the exact number that will be in the final proposal is still unclear. District officials were making changes to the proposal throughout the day. As of late Friday, the plan proposed that 770 campus-based positions and 242 central office positions would be eliminated from the 12,000-employee work force for an estimated salary savings of \$53.6 million.

Virtually every campus would be affected. Decisions on who will lose their jobs will be determined first on performance, second on seniority and third on professional background, including education and certification, said Michael Houser, the district's top human resources official.

"As we make these difficult decisions, we realize there are names, faces and careers behind these positions, and that makes this process gut-wrenching," Houser said. "I'm also the same person who recruited these people, and it is not an easy thing for us to move forward. I can assure you."

The announcement was made in advance of a board meeting Monday at which administrators are expected to hear a presentation on where and how staffing cuts will be made

See **JOBS**, A8

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See stories and community resources related to the Austin school district budget crunch.

AUSTIN ■ PUBLIC SAFETY

Man trailed by officer hits bus, dies, police say

By Tony Plohefski
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

A man in a vehicle reported stolen who had just finished a parking lot drug deal died Friday when he collided with a Capital Metro bus as a police officer trailed behind him, authorities said.

Twelve people on the bus, including two children, were treated for injuries that were not life-threatening, officials said. The bus driver, Robbin Hanks, had to be extracted from her seat and was in fair condition Friday night.

Police on Friday did not identify the 44-year-old driver of the SUV, who died at the scene of the crash in the 8000 block of Georgian Drive in North Austin. He was the only occupant of the vehicle.

Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo said officials will review the incident to ensure that the officer, whose identity was not immediately available, was obeying departmental policies when the crash happened.

"We have not seen anything to cause us concern."

See **CRASH**, A4

AUSTIN ■ BOOK RELEASE

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By Patrick Beach
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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See **HOME**, A12



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INSIDE ■ BUSINESS B6-9 ■ DEATHS B4-5 ■ EDITORIALS A14-15 ■ LIFE & ARTS E1 ■ SPORTS C1 ■ WORLD & NATION A2 ■ CLASSIFIEDS D3-D4
COMING SUNDAY ■ AFTER A YEAR OF RUNNING OPERATIONS IN IRAQ, A FORT HOOD UNIT RETURNS HOME ■ PAGE ONE

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