

## Book Review

WE WERE NOT ORPHANS: STORIES FROM THE WACO STATE HOME. By Sherry Matthews. (Jack and Doris Smothers Series in Texas History, Life, and Culture). Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. 234 pp. Hardbound, \$29.95.

Sherry Matthews began collecting histories of former Waco State Home residents after attending a reunion with her older brother, one of three who had been sent to the Home when Sherry was three years old. As happens with good oral history, much more emerged than Ms. Matthews anticipated. Her narrators tell stories that are passionate, heart-breaking, even inspiring; never indifferent or detached.

The Home, which opened in 1923 and closed in 1979, sat on a 100-acre working farm that was operated primarily by the children. Narrators differ sharply in their memories of the Home. Even siblings often experienced the Home very differently and have widely diverging accounts. Some were protective of the image of the Home and antagonistic to the idea that it might be presented in an unfavorable light. Others told horror stories of their lives during the years they were there. Ms. Matthews respects these diverging memories and attitudes by allowing the narrators to tell their own stories; yet one can't help but be impressed by the courage it took to allow so many very hard truths and opposing views to emerge, while resisting the temptation to reconcile, interpret, or summarize.

The book begins with a prologue that presents a sketch of the Home's history and Ms. Matthew's own experience at Home reunions; it ends with an epilogue that presents evidence from public records that bears out much in the narrators' stories. But the stories themselves comprise most of the book, offered to the reader in their entirety and without interpretation. In fact, it is the great strength of this collection that narrators are permitted to speak in their own voices and for themselves. Matthews presents narrators' stories unedited, so in a sense this volume acts as one archive for the histories. The last few chapters of the book offer excerpts from state documents, period newspaper clippings, and letters that document the histories narrators provide.

The oral histories describe fun, opportunities, good food, education, and (almost to a person) the closeness that evolved among the children and the bonds so many formed. They also tell of brutal and sadistic beatings, sexual abuse, and ongoing psychological humiliation and intimidation. Amazingly, in

spite of the heart-wrenching and appalling abuse recounted by person after person, most expressed their gratitude for what the Home had done for them in providing good meals that arrived on a dependable schedule and for keeping them off the streets, out of jail, and away from drugs and crime. That these adults could have been grateful suggests how terrifying the alternatives most have seemed.

The narrators' stories are presented chronologically, with the earliest related by individuals born in the 1920s, and the latest from persons born in the 1950s and early 1960s. An integral part of their stories, even as insulated and isolated as these children's lives were, was the influence of the larger culture, and their histories reflect that culture in the attitudes and perceptions of the times. Their histories place the children's experiences in a larger context, in which one can see cultural changes reflected over several decades in time.

The stories told in Matthews's work remind us of the life-long influence adults have on children for good or ill. In spite of diverging views of life in the Home, narrators remember many of the same individuals appearing over decades of time, cast in the same light: the understanding and effective English teacher, who provided scores of children with many of the skills necessary for their later successes, and the brutal coach, who found opportunities for students to excel and succeed in sports, while at the same time inflicting horrendous physical injury and abuse upon them. Most of the staff fell between those extremes but were poorly educated and unprepared to manage children appropriately. In spite of the lack of warmth and the extraordinary abuse that numbers of children suffered in the Home, many grew up to build successful marriages and careers and to become loving parents. This is a book worth reading not only by oral historians but also by those interested in public policy as it affects children and families, child development, resilience, state institutions, child abuse, and education—in fact, everyone. In the foreword, Robert Draper states that *We Were Not Orphans* is a story of the resilience of children. It is certainly that. But more, it is an account of the resilience and indomitable nature of the human spirit.

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