STATE HOME REUNION

Former residents drawn to Waco

Men, women trade stories about abuse, hard lessons at facility

By J.B. Smith
Tribune-Herald staff writer

Lavonne Senn got so wrapped up in “We Were Not Orphans,” the harrowing new book about the Waco State Home, she literally had a stroke.

Senn lived at the home for neglected children from 1950 to 1957. She said the book by Austin author Sherry Matthews brought back “floods of memories.”

“When I left the home, I put everything out of my mind until this book came out,” she said. “I couldn’t put it down. My blood pressure rose and I was in the hospital for three days.”

But the book also motivated her to drive from Fort Worth to Waco on Saturday for her first Waco State Home reunion, an annual event that drew about 120 people this year.

“I’m so thrilled she wrote the book,” Senn said. “It brought closure to me. Except one thing. I had a baby brother, and I still can’t find him anywhere.”

Released in February, the coffee-table book of oral histories turned a spotlight on an obscure chapter in Waco and Texas history. From the 1930s to the late 1970s, the state shipped thousands of indigent and neglected children to institutions such as the Waco home, where they had little contact with the outside world.

Matthews, whose brothers lived at the Waco home, discovered patterns of widespread physical, sexual and emotional abuse when she began interviewing alumni for her book.

Through her research, she concluded that a lack of state oversight enabled the abuse, especially in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s.

Matthews said the book has generated hostile responses from some alumni who accused her of being too negative. She was bracing for criticism when she showed up at the reunion to sign books and show a 15-minute video based on it.

But no criticism came, and by the end of the video, many of the alumni were wiping away tears. Alumni bought about 60 books, proceeds from which benefit the alumni association.

The alumni gathered at the Hewitt VFW for a short meeting and lunch and later toured the old state home, now the Waco Center for Youth on North 19th Street.

Senn was among several alumni who came to the reunion for the first time because of the book.

Brothers reunited

Earl Trueett Tyree, 70, drove up from Austin to attend with his younger brother, Johnny Sanderson, 66, a Clifton businessman.

The state sent the brothers to the home in 1948. Earl stayed until 1955, but his younger brother was adopted at age 6 by a family in 1951.

The boys never saw each other again — that is, until 1989, when Sanderson did some genealogy work and tracked his brother down in Austin.

“I couldn’t believe it,” said Tyree, a retired air conditioning repairman. “I said, ‘Where the hell have you been?’ I’d been looking for him. The last thing my mother said was, ‘Keep looking for him.’ ”

The men renewed their family bonds and have vacationed together.

“My wife and kids say we act just like each other,” Sanderson said.

Tyree said the state home taught him the value of hard work. He got up at 5 a.m. to milk cows on the home’s farm, which provided most of the food for the children.

But he also remembers severe beatings and brutal punishments at the hands of C.B. Whigham, a disciplinarian and coach for many years at the institution.

Tyree said he once showed up late for baseball practice and was forced to dig a hole all day without water. He said he passed out and ended up in the home’s infirmary, with a painful sunburn that lasted a week.

He also recalled that Superintendent Ben Peek, now deceased, once threw him across his office after the 13-year-old Tyree ran away and got caught. The boy landed on Peek’s glass figurines and shattered them, enraging Peek further, Tyree said.

Lessons learned

Others at the reunion also said the home instilled a valuable work ethic in them, but punishments from Whigham and several others crossed the line into child abuse.

“For a 250-pound man to beat the crap out of a 60-pound boy, there’s something drastically wrong with that guy,” said alumnus John L. Smith, speaking of Whigham.

Smith attended the home from 1942 to 1952 and was featured in the book.

David Tucker, 67, of Pasadena, was one of several brothers who attended the Waco State Home in the 1950s and ’60s.

He and his brothers, including Buddy Tucker of Waco, traded stories of pranks and hijinks at the state home.

But he also recalled getting beatings, including one that left him bloody from his back to his calves.

“Afther I got out, I never told a soul about it,” he said of his state home experience.

Tucker recalled fighting in Vietnam and being sent to a Japanese hospital for his battle wounds. During his long recuperation, he began to deal with the trauma of battle and the more distant trauma of childhood.

“You can’t erase memories like that,” he said. “It scars you for the rest of your life. It’s implanted in your brain. It’s taken me years to overcome the home and the way they treated me there. I don’t know if I’ll ever heal completely. There’s no cure for that.”

jbsmith@wacotrib.com
757-5752

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Waco resident Buddy Tucker (left) waits his turn to sign a copy of "Waco Was Not Orphans," for which he was interviewed.

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Economy bolstered by public workers

By Mike Copeland

A government employee like me of every six jobs in McLennan County. These people buy houses, attend stores and dine at restaurants. So worry spread last week when several officials said state and local government employees face the brunt of the state’s budget cuts.

A series of occasionally about the impact of government spending on our community.

The Texas Legislature, for example, went on its current budget process facing a deficit as high as $27 billion. If government spending cuts continue, businesses and workers are likely to see a reduction in their wages.

A government-related industry, for example, is $10 billion. These are people who buy the car parks looking at, as much as they can, the money that government employees can save.

The number of government employees across the state is 210,000. These are people, who keep the city parks looking at, as much as they can, the money that government employees can save.

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Ancient traditions mark holiday

High school students from Lindberg, Kan., perform a folk dance Saturday during the ninth annual Waco Midsummer Festival at the Tinniscus Creek Vineyard and Winery east of Waco. A group of 29 students from Texas were touring Texas this week, with stops in Austin and Fort Worth. The group was celebrating the ancient European holiday Midsummer, which traditionally is held on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year.

GAY MARRIAGE

Religious exceptions pave way for NY bill

By Dan Nabil

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