

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 Truett 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

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.”

David Tucker,
former Waco State Home resident

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.

“After 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.”
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Staff photo — J.B. Smith

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

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Economy bolstered by public workers

By Mike Copeland
Tribune-Herald staff writer

A government employee fills one of every six jobs in McLennan County.

These people buy homes, attend movies and dine at restaurants. So worry spreads fast when elected officials talk about budget cuts affecting federal, state and local workers.

HARD TIMES HARD CHOICES

A series of occasional articles about the impact of government spending cuts on our community.

The Texas Legislature, for example, went into its current budget process facing a deficit as high as \$27 billion.

Aggravating the situation is that the loss of a government worker's job typically results in the loss of 1.5 additional jobs when calculating the total economic impact, Waco-based economist Ray Perryman said.

"Government jobs typically pay a little more, on average, than private-sector jobs," Baylor University economist Tom Kelly said. "And money for federal and state jobs comes from outside the area."

The number of government employees countywide is 18,300. These are people who keep the city parks looking nice, teach classes at Texas State Technical College or treat patients at the Veterans Affairs hospital.

During the fourth quarter of last year, pay for government employees totaled \$180 million in McLennan County.

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Ancient traditions mark holiday



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

Staff photo — Rod Aydelotte

GAY MARRIAGE

Religious exceptions pave way for NY bill

By Danny Hakim
The New York Times

ALBANY, N.Y. — It was just a few paragraphs, but they proved to be the most microscopically examined and debated — and the most pivotal in the battle about same-sex marriage.

Language that Republican senators inserted into the bill legalizing same-sex marriage provided more expansive protections for religious organizations and helped pull the legislation across the finish line Friday night.

The Republicans who insisted on the provision did not only want religious organizations and affiliated groups to be protected from lawsuits if they refused to provide their buildings or services for same-sex



NYT photo — Michelle V. Agins

Jennifer Morera (left) and Rio Feliz celebrate the news that New York officials legalized gay marriage in their state.

marriage ceremonies, they also wanted them to be spared any penalties by state government.

That means a church that declined to accommodate same-sex weddings could not be penalized later with the loss of state aid for the social service programs it administers.

Such language is not unusual. In New Hampshire, which also approved a same-sex marriage

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BORDER SECURITY

Do the results match the cost of operation?

By Martha Mendoza
Associated Press

HIDALGO — Perched 20 feet above a South Texas cabbage field in a telephone booth-sized capsule, a National Guardsman passes a moonlit Sunday night with a gun strapped to his hip, peering through heat-detector lenses into an adjacent orange grove.

Deployment of 1,200 National Guard soldiers for one year costs \$110 million.

This same night, farther west on the border, a haunting whistle blasts through the pre-dawn quiet as a mile-long train groans to a heavy stop halfway across a Rio Grande River bridge.

In a ritual performed nightly, a Customs and Border Protection agent unlocks a gate, a railroad policeman slides the heavy doors open and they both wave flashlight beams under, over and in between the loads of cars, electronics and produce, before

they pass through an X-ray machine searching for hidden people or drugs.

One rail cargo X-ray screening machine costs \$1.75 million.

As Congress debates border funding and as governors demand more assistance, the Associated Press has investigated what taxpayers spend securing the U.S.-Mexico border.

The price tag, until now, has

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Officials said a North Dakota river won't crest as high as previously thought, but the flooding still has taken its toll.

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High: 99
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