



TEXAS | History, Sociology,
Child Welfare

We Were Not Orphans

Stories from the
Waco State Home

BY SHERRY MATTHEWS
Foreword by Robert Draper

In these amazing stories, Texans who spent their youth in an institution for “dependent and neglected” children reveal both the positive outcomes and the horrific abuses that resulted when a government-run “home” was allowed to operate for decades without any public oversight

“WE WERE NOT ORPHANS. OUR PARENTS WERE LIVING; THEY JUST couldn’t take care of us.” This poignant remark captures the heart-breaking reality faced by thousands of Texas children from the 1920s through the 1970s. The Waco State Home provided housing and education for “dependent and neglected” children, but residents paid a price in physical and sexual abuse, military discipline, and plantation-style labor. Even so, the institution was the only home they had, and it rescued many children from an even worse fate.

Now for the first time, oral histories and newly unearthed documents reveal what went on behind the gates of the Waco State Home. *We Were Not Orphans* gathers riveting recollections from nearly sixty alumni who share the horror of abuse as well as their triumphs of spirit and ingenuity. Some alumni recall only the positive—bountiful



Girls from the Waco State Home at camp

“Matthews’ book serves as a wake-up call for those who advocate for children and their families.”

—JANICE L. COOPER, PHD
Interim Director, National Center
for Children in Poverty

“This book is real, and it is more balanced, more profound, and more entertaining than any psychotic rant from Glenn Beck or any episode of Desperate Housewives or any ten-second eye bite on the internet. If you can put down this book, if you do not learn from it, if you are not moved by it, then you have forgotten your own childhood.”

—ROBERT FELLMETH
Price Professor of Public Interest
Law and Director, Children’s
Advocacy Institute, University of
San Diego School of Law



Boys working on one of the three Waco State Home farms



Paul Folkner, left, with classmates on a bus trip to camp at Marble Falls

“We Were Not Orphans is a harrowing, haunting, and, in its own way, uplifting human saga. . . . A deeply compelling read. Highly recommended!”

—DOUGLAS BRINKLEY
Professor of History, Rice University; history commentator, CBS News; and author of The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast

food, caring teachers, victorious sports teams, and friendships and values that have lasted a lifetime. Others recount bloody beatings and sexual molestation that have left physical and emotional scars. These personal narratives and Matthews’s relentless pursuit of the truth show how much can go wrong when a government-run institution operates without adequate public oversight.

“We owe Sherry Matthews a profound debt for transcending the personal pain that she leaves elegantly unspoken in order to give voice to those children who without her would have been, if not lost to history forever, certainly, tragically misfiled.”

—SARAH BIRD
author of eight novels, including The Gap Year

“A first-rate investigative report that has it all: the cold, hard truth of a heart-wrenching chapter in Texas history, unforgettable characters, terrible secrets, legal wrangling, and the ultimate triumph of justice over unforgivable wrongs.”

—DAN RATHER

From the book

“The Waco State Home was the de facto safety net for children who had committed no crime other than the offense of being born poor. Some of them were left on the street by parents who then sped off and were never seen again. Many were badly malnourished; for some, their most recent meal had been, literally, a handful of dirt. Others had been sexually abused, and still others had been utterly abandoned, dumped with their siblings like a litter of mutts. These were children as young as three years old, and already their fate was sealed—or would have been, were it not for the Waco State Home.”

—ROBERT DRAPER
from the foreword

SHERRY MATTHEWS
 AUSTIN, TEXAS

Matthews has spent most of her life working for change through her advocacy marketing firm and has won many awards on behalf of government agencies, nonprofits, and socially conscious companies. She first became aware of the Waco State Home at age three, when her three brothers were taken there to live. Years later, she attended a reunion at the Home and began collecting the alumni stories, assisted by author Jesse Sublett.

ROBERT DRAPER
 WASHINGTON, D.C.

Draper is a correspondent for GQ magazine and is also a contributing writer for the New York Times Magazine and National Geographic. He is the author of several books, including the best-selling biography Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush.

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