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We Were Not Orphans

Stories from the Waco State Home

By Sherry Matthews

Foreword by Robert Draper

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Jack and Doris Smothers Series in Texas History, Life, and Culture

“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

“We were not orphans. Our parents were living; they just couldn’t take care of us.” This poignant remark captures the heartbreaking 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. Sherry Matthews has tracked down former residents and uncovered criminal abuse that went unpunished and unpublicized.

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 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. The Waco State Home finally closed after a landmark federal court decision and a courageous superintendent stopped the abuse and helped shepherd the children out of institutionalized care.

SHERRY 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 with assistance from author Jesse Sublett.

ROBERT DRAPER has been a correspondent for *GQ* magazine since 1997 and is also a contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine* and *National Geographic*. He is the author of several books, including the Texas prison novel *Hadrian’s Walls* and the best-selling biography *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush*.