



We Were Not Orphans: Stories from the Waco State Home (Jack and Doris Smothers Series in Texas History, Life, and Culture (Hardcover))

Sherry Matthews

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"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. 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.

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.

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