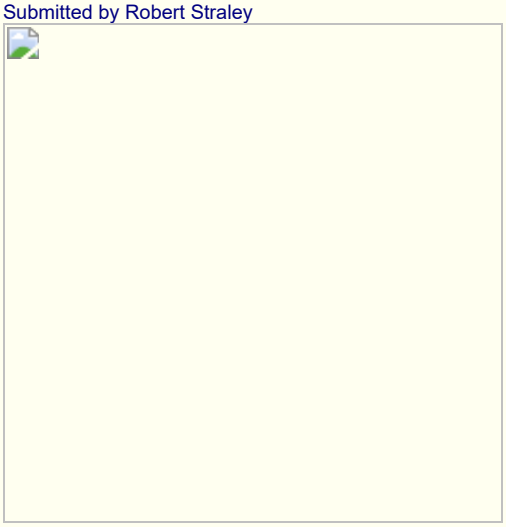
The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20161027160610/http://nospank.net/n-v01.htm

'White House Boy' tells his story

By Tony Holt

Hernando Today, December 18, 2011

Submitted by Robert Straley



Robert Straley, 65, is one of the "White House Boys," a group of men who said they were terrorized and abused repeatedly by guards at a reform school for troubled teens.

He had run away from home four times and each time his penalty was state confinement.

Jumping over a fence at his fourth youth facility convinced the state he needed more discipline. It would be his last escape. The people who controlled him the next time knew how to extinguish the allure of running away. They knew how to invoke pain and fear and would regularly do so — even to those who walked the straight line.

It was state-funded abuse. It went on for 100 years, said Robert Straley.

"They were so sadistic," he said. "They heard those screams and they seemed to be into that."

Amazingly to him and to the hundreds of other boys who were terrorized, Dozier wasn't so clandestine. Those who lived in the town of Marianna, where the Arthur G. Dozier School was located, knew what was going on within the "140 acres of hell," said Straley.

Either they didn't speak out because they or their family members worked there, or because they feared the consequences, he said.

"There was a great deal of money tied up there," said Straley. "If you lived in Marianna, you dared not talk about that place or what was going on with those boys.

Your barn would burn or your cattle would get poisoned … or a stray hunter's bullet would enter your head."

Straley's story has been corroborated by hundreds of others. Dozier was renamed to North Florida Youth Development Center before it was finally shut down within the past year.

In 2008, he and others who were once housed there filed a lawsuit. One of the guards who administered some of the worst abuse is still alive, Straley said. His name is Troy Tidwell. Investigations at the state and federal level are underway.

Straley, now 65 and living in Clearwater, said Tidwell's defense is being paid for by the State of Florida.

Straley gets interviewed often, sometimes in front of the camera. He's been quoted in several major news outlets in Florida and beyond. It's become a nationwide story.

Another former Dozier resident, Jerry Cooper, visited the Eckerd youth camp near Brooksville last week and spoke briefly about his experiences. He said he once sustained more than 130 lashes at one time — from the same man who whipped Straley.

He told the boys at Eckerd they were lucky to have not lived through a similar situation, but warned them about what could happen to them next if they continued to disregard authority and the law.

Cooper doesn't trust any detention facility in Florida. Monitoring those places, he said, has never been a priority for the state.

Straley said it is likely Hernando County has many men who used to live at Dozier and who experienced the same horrors as him and Cooper.

Straley was 16 years old when he was brought to Dozier in 1963. He barely weighed more than 100 pounds.

His first day at Dozier was a surprise to him. There were no fences. It appeared peaceful and wide open.

"The cottages were made of brick," he said. "There was foliage and big pine trees. It was a beautiful, beautiful place."

That night he received his first whipping by the one-armed Tidwell.

Some of the other new boys were talking about running away. Straley took one look at the blissful surroundings and decided he would stick it out. It couldn't possibly be such a bad place, he thought.

"I just wanted to be somewhere away from my parents," Straley said.

The guards there took him to the darkest place of his life.

Presumably because they thought Straley was a flight risk, or they suspected he was among those plotting an escape, the guards led him and four other boys to a white house on the property.

One-by-one, they were lined up against the wall. The first one went inside and the others listened to the sound of leather pounding against flesh — along with the accompanying grunts and screams.

Straley went last.

"That's the worst place to be," he said. "You want to be in there first. Otherwise you hear them screaming and crying. The boys would come out with their hands on their crotches and their eyes were glazed."

On the inside, the white house was a "blood-splattered shed," said Straley. The boys weren't allowed to scream, yell or look behind. All they could do was stay still — and cry.

He did all he could to avoid further corporal punishment. The age range in the school was 14 to 17, but the smallest and most defenseless-looking boys were subjected to the worst treatment, Straley said.

Someone weighing 105 pounds soaking wet had no chance.

Straley said he didn't smoke while he was there, but those who doled out the discipline claimed he did. He was escorted inside the small white house again in the middle of the night and lashed 25 times.

"They could beat you at any time," he said.

Straley's memories of his experiences were buried for 40 years. They resurfaced and his life changed, he said. It's been cathartic for him to speak out, but sometimes his eyes still get moist when he tells the story.

Now he is one of many "White House Boys," a group of activists who are speaking up about the abuses they

were forced to endure.

Many of them are hardened military veterans, police officers and successful businessmen. They picked up the pieces.

Others weren't so lucky.

Straley said there were more than 30 unmarked gravesites at the facility while he was there. The brutality in the early part of the 20th century was worse than what he went through.

He is still waiting for a thorough investigation. He is still waiting for Tidwell to receive what he thinks is owed to him.

"Why did the government do nothing about it? That's something we'll never know," Straley said.

When the announcement came that Dozier was closing, he thought state officials glossed over the real reasons for it.

"They can say budget cuts all day long," said Straley, "but we know the truth."

---

wholt@hernandotoday.com (352) 544-5283

See related: www.thewhitehouseboys.com

Return to:

- **The *EVERYTHING* index** — Includes links to recently added items and to items not linked elsewhere on this site.
- **BOOT CAMP FOR KIDS: Torturing Teens for Fun and Profit**.
- **Front Page**

