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A Dozier boy's nightmares

By Robert W. Straley
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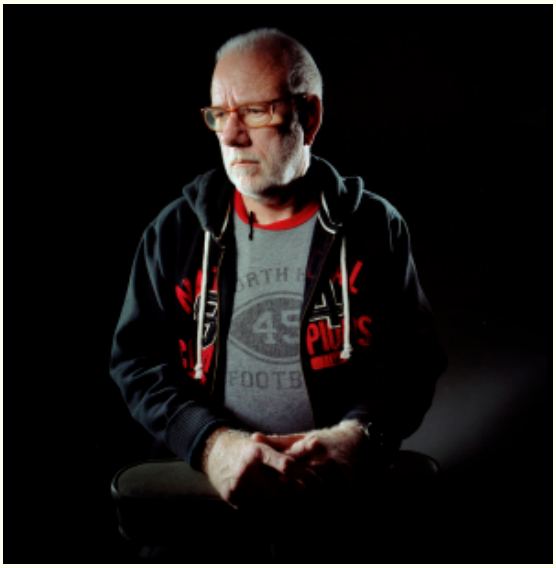
Editor's note: *Last month, the state Department of Juvenile Justice announced it would be closing Florida's oldest state-run reform school, commonly known as the Dozier School for Boys, on June 30. Robert Straley, of Clearwater, was sent to the school in 1963 for running away from home. He attributes a lifetime of nightmares and broken relationships to the brutal beatings and abuse he received while there, which he wrote about in The Boys of the Dark: A Story of Betrayal and Redemption in the Deep South.*

Never in a million years could I have imagined that while standing against the cold cement block of the White House punishment room hallway at 13 years of age, in a state of shock from hearing the screams and the sound of the whip on flesh, that I would return 45 years later to stand in the exact same spot.

I was told there were trauma counselors on standby, but there was no terror in my heart. What had taken place those many years ago had already had its way with me in the form of terrible nightmares, a man's presence sitting down on the edge of my bed for the next 45 years, to awaken in great fright, the inability to become close with anyone.

I was suspicious, paranoid, courting dangerous pursuits to cheat death in many ways to prove to myself I was no longer afraid and, worst of all, rage that would never die. Not even old age could weaken its grip. It became an old familiar demon that wrapped me up in dark wings. As the years passed they became oh so familiar that I ceased to struggle, at home in that burning, resigned embrace. I had no idea that I would later harm others, especially the ones I loved.

If you look too long at those



[EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN - Times]

Robert Straley writes that “if you look too long at those White House walls, stained and pitted, you may start to see things I saw, a hint of a face, an eye, a cadaverous mouth caught in an unending scream … ”

White House walls, stained and pitted, you may start to see things I saw, a hint of a face, an eye, a cadaverous mouth caught in an unending scream, the figure of a man with a whip, arm upraised, shifting ghostly images and screams, locked in those walls and in my 13-year-old mind, now trapped in an old man's body.

The institution opened in 1900 and brutality became the norm. Boys were flogged for the next 68 years, even after Gov. Cary A. Hardee banned it in 1922. That was what was on my mind that day, those 68 years. It brought to mind a very vivid image that I saw at 10 years old, which shocked me, from a book entitled *The Story of Man*. It was huge and ancient then, with exquisite artwork. It spared no horror. On one page was the picture of men, chained and suffering, in a line that stretched beyond the horizon, all headed into the great mouth of Baal, an ancient god with a lion's mouth, and inside was fire that burned day and night and the sacrifices never ended. I thought to myself that day about the thousands of boys who were pushed through the doors to that room of torture and how many screams and pleas for mercy those walls had heard. It seems that man's story has not changed.

When it became my turn to speak I chose to speak about those 68 years and I saw that on most of the faces that looked up was surprise and disbelief and I realized, save for the older staff, most of these

people never knew what that building they passed daily stood for.

Now Dozier is closing and 185 jobs are lost. One reporter called me and kept asking what would I say to all of those people who were losing their jobs? Did I consider them guilty of some crime? Did I think it was fair? Did I even care?

I told him no, that the beatings and abuse were by the hands of the few and many staff quit over them. The truth is that in those days you did not talk about the beatings or the boys to strangers or your cattle might be poisoned, your barn burnt or you might catch a careless hunter's bullet. A veil of secrecy surrounded the town for all those years. When Michael O'McCarthy and I made our last visit to Marianna, we made a plea on camera to the citizens of Marianna to speak up — they no longer had to be afraid. They still are afraid and not one person in that town ever gathered up the courage to blow the whistle on the abuse that everyone knew about. If someone had, the outcome would have been very different.

Sadly, the people who are losing their jobs are, for the most part, innocent victims themselves. Decades before them men they never knew sowed their seeds and they now are reaping what their forefathers did sow. No one person save for Roger Kiser's letters to the state, largely ignored, set out to expose what happened. It was by chance and the hand of fate that four men met and a series of events led to this tragic tale.

Three hundred men still wait for justice, and unnamed boys in unmarked graves under Florida pines whisper, "Please Remember Me." Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a famous writer, cried over Martin Tabert, whipped to death in a backwoods labor camp that led to the ban on flogging. As she wrote in her famous ballad:

> *The other convicts, they stood around him,*
>
> *When the length of the black strap cracked and found him,*
>
> *Martin Tabert of North Dakota,*
>
> *And he's walking Florida now.*

I suspect he has a 14-year-old boy named Martin

Anderson walking with him, and many others, yet to be named, and they are all walking Florida now.

Twenty White House Boys have died since 2008, including Michael O'McCarthy, a journalist and activist and incredibly, a boy at Marianna who had received one of the dreaded 100-lash beatings. He passed the story to Carol Marbin Miller, a journalist at the *Miami Herald*. The story broke two months later. In the end, this strange journey would cost us all more than we could ever have imagined.

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