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Warden: Prison Life and Death from the Inside Out (review)

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George Phenix remembers the volatile political climate of Dallas. On assignment one week before Kennedy's shooting while covering Alabama Gov. George Wallace's speech before approximately two thousand right-wingers at Dallas's Baker Hotel, Phenix was physically assaulted and twice thrown to the ground by the ultraconservative Gen. Edwin Walker. The conservative crowd robustly applauded Walker's efforts; no one yet knew that one month earlier Lee Harvey Oswald had attempted to assassinate Walker in his Dallas home.

Bill Mercer writes about the chaotic conditions at police headquarters after the capture of Lee Harvey Oswald, focusing on the impromptu midnight press conference with Oswald. Mercer acknowledges that among those in attendance at the press conference was Jack Ruby, who apparently had no trouble entering police headquarters, given the confused state of affairs. Mercer also covered the arrival at police headquarters of Oswald's wife, Marina, and his mother, Marguerite, who steadfastly proclaimed her son's innocence.

Wes Wise focuses on the political instability of Dallas, recounting the October 1963 visit of former Senator and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson, who was accosted by several conservative, anti-U.N. protestors. This event forced the Secret Service, FBI, and Dallas police to work hard to protect President Kennedy. Wise also reports that the day after the assassination he found Jack Ruby near the now famous "grassy knoll"; Ruby was despondent over the president's death and murmured his concerns about Jackie and the Kennedy children having to come to Dallas for Oswald's trial.

These four men do not attempt to "spin" a new interpretation, nor do they attempt to support or refute the various conspiracy charges surrounding the events of November 1963. In those terrible days they shared a common bond to report the news as they lived and witnessed it. Forty years later and still committed to the same principle, they offer the reader their observations. *When the News Went Live: Dallas 1963* is a fascinating text and one that every person of the generation that remembers the Kennedy assassination will enjoy reading.

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JOHN D. HUDDLESTON

Warden: Prison Life and Death from the Inside Out. By Jim Willett and Ron Rozelle. (Albany, Texas: Bright Sky Press, 2005. Pp. 232. Foreword, photographs, epilogue, acknowledgments. ISBN 1931721505. \$24.95, cloth.)

Huntsville's infamous prison has been chronicled by reporters, prisoners, and chaplains, but rarely by prison officials. In 1957, Texas Prison Director Lee Simmons published *Assignment Huntsville: Memoirs of a Texas Prison Official* (Austin: UT Press), which has been considered the classic account of the prison from an official's perspective. In *Warden: Prison Life and Death from the Inside Out*, Jim Willett becomes the first Huntsville warden to recount his life during the more than 150-year history of Huntsville Prison.

Willett experienced Huntsville as a student at Sam Houston State University and as a career corrections employee, and both experiences have informed this somewhat breezy account of his life behind prison walls. Willett's story

demonstrates the serendipity of life as he recounts, “looking forward to getting his degree and getting a job” behind a desk in a career unrelated to corrections. But, after leaving his part-time job as a gas jockey, Willett found more lucrative employment with the prison system, a coveted job in the 1970s. This is a striking contrast to the present-day shortage of correctional officers that leaves security wanting in a number of the state’s prison units.

The author describes a career behind bars as a kind of reverse Stockholm syndrome, explaining, “In an odd way, I felt at home. In some ways, I’d grown as institutionalized as an old convict” (p. 119). Willett describes the changing prison culture, where the young violent prisoners do not respect the older codes of conduct that were apparently followed by the convicts of yesteryear. It was here that the reviewer hoped that Willett might shed some light on the gang culture that pervades most prisons since the Ruiz decision did away with the building tender system in the 1980s.

Willett chronicles his rise through the ranks of TDC, from a lowly corrections officer (CO) handing out medications and chow, to sergeant, lieutenant, assistant warden, and finally senior warden at the Walls unit in Huntsville. During his career he saw the reintroduction of capital punishment in Texas in 1982, when he witnessed the first lethal injection in the United States (of Charles Brooks). Willett admits that he was unprepared for dealing with executions since there hadn’t been an execution in Texas in twenty years. However, once it did return he found himself confronted with moral questions that he thought he would never have to face, admitting “it wasn’t something that we did at the Walls” and “never counted on killing people” (p. 141). During his career he would accompany eighty-nine prisoners into the death chamber.

Warden recounts the story of a small-town boy who after decades in corrections finds himself in charge of one of the nation’s most infamous prisons. Willett is adept at shifting gears between stories of brutality and malice and moments of surprising humanity. The book is interspersed with his journal jottings and thoughts about several specific executions, in particular the recent executions of Gary Graham and Kenneth McDuff. Willett is never judgmental and often tells his story through the words of the convicts.

This book is recommended to general readers, students of corrections, and those interested in Texas history, not just for its descriptions of the state’s prisons and inmates, but most of all for Willett’s descriptions of small-town life. His description of growing up in Texas and his affection for the state’s culture is often touching. His eight years as warden between 1993 and 2002 happened to coincide with the ratcheting up of the Texas death row machinery, and while he is too loyal a public servant to admit it, this must have contributed to his retirement.

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Long Dark Road: Bill King and Murder in Jasper, Texas. By Ricardo C. Ainslie. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. 254. Preface, acknowledgments, photographs. ISBN 0292705743. \$24.95, cloth.)