

# OXFORD AMERICAN



# AN INTERSECTION AT THE END OF AMERICA

A portrait of Dilley, Texas, home of the largest  
immigration detention center in the United States

BY EMILY GOGOLAK

Photographs by Gabriella Demczuk

Dear Dying Town,

The food is cheap; the squirrels are black; the box factories have all moved offshore; the light reproaches us; and our coffee is watered down, but we have an offer from the Feds to make nerve gas; the tribe is lobbying hard for another casino; the bids are out to attract a nuclear dump; and there's talk of a supermax—

In the descending order of your feelings

Please identify your concerns.

P.S.: Remember Susanville, where Restore the Night Sky has become the town cry.

— C.D. WRIGHT, FROM *ONE BIG SELF*



The east side of the railroad tracks on Dilley's main drag. The town's park, once used to load watermelons onto passing freight trains, is now used as a parking lot for elected officials in the county annex building across the street. Left: A sign welcomes visitors to Dilley.

**T**he town of Dilley is in the South Texas Brush Country, a vast, unforgiving land that a Spanish explorer in 1736 called the pais despoblado and many Texans today, whether or not they've ever been there, call the middle of nowhere. Eighty-five miles north of the Rio Grande and seventy miles south of San Antonio, the town is just past the edge of the borderlands, occupying a spiny, flat middle at the intersection of Interstate 35 and Highway 85 in far southern Frio County. Eighteen-wheelers rush by en route from Laredo to anywhere. Trucks hauling frack sand leave behind potholes on country roads. Aside from the interstate, there's little to orient an outsider but the Family Dollar on one end of Main Street, the Dollar General on the other, two water towers, several motels, an old feed mill, and, at night, at the town limits, the lights.

From the pump at the Valero station, you can make out two sets of lights behind the Americas Best Value Inn Extended Stay. The duller, amber ones are at the Dolph Briscoe Unit, a medium-security state prison named after the forty-first governor of Texas. They are outshone by fluorescent ones on the next lot over, not at a prison but something similar: the South Texas Family Residential Center. With twenty-four hundred beds, it's the largest immigration detention center in the United States and exclusively holds women and their children. Beyond the lights is deep, dark brush. Nothing except the headlights of trucks, the occasional lamp inside a ranch house, gas flares, and the spotlights on the wells, though there are fewer of those now. The whistle of the freight train, why this town is here to begin with, marks time. Dilley's motto is exclamatory: "A slice of the good life!" And a sign still welcomes you with this message when you drive in from the

east on Highway 85. But two panels have fallen off, so now it reads: *elcom LL ice of the*. The sign was once decorated with a quarter-slice of watermelon, an ode to Dilley's erstwhile pride as the self-proclaimed Watermelon Capital of Texas, but the slice has fallen off. A watermelon sculpture is in the center of town and some police cars have watermelon bumper stickers. But these days most of the watermelons grown in Dilley are in the fields at the Briscoe Unit. Past the welcome sign on Highway 85, it's all open land from there, right and left, with the occasional trailer. Signs along the road advertise lodging: QUALITY HOUSING! and, later, ALL THE AMENITIES! and, later, YOUR HOME AWAY FROM HOME.

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**T**he South Texas Family Residential Center opened in December 2014, a supposed deterrent to migrants seeking to

come north. That year, there had been a marked increase in the numbers of families and unaccompanied children, primarily from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, seeking asylum at the Texas-Mexico border. The media recycled Homeland Security speak: it was the "surge," an "influx." Critics in Washington blamed it on President Obama's executive memorandum establishing Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and said the migrants were asking for permisos, or permits to remain in the United States. Obama had made a Faustian pact: send a strong message by deporting the families who had come recently and deterring the ones who might come—but protect the ones who have roots here. The huge new facility was broadcast throughout the hemisphere as a gleaming warning: Do Not Enter. I went to the detention center about six months after it opened to report from asylum hearings and interview mothers. I'd never

been to a place so steeped in undiluted pain. In court, the memories of violence and the persistence of fear were rendered through language like blows. "Over there in Honduras, women can get—can be beaten and nothing's ever done about it," one detainee told an immigration judge through an interpreter on televideo. "People get killed, and they don't do anything. They kill women, cut their feet off, and they don't do anything. And I'm afraid." Meanwhile, the Obama administration's warning didn't work: two years later, the numbers of families caught crossing the U.S.-Mexico border surpassed the 2014 figures. And daily life in Dilley largely went on as though the detention center weren't there. Today, more than five years after opening, the center is a symbol of President Trump's immigration agenda, and Dilley is a window into the landscape of detention, a case study for how a private prison contract lands in a town and what happens after. It's also

representative of many small towns across America whose economies and ways of life have changed radically in the last thirty-plus years. The motels' clientele in Dilley hints at the town's competing interests. The Dilley Motor Inn is popular with dove hunters, who come with their German shorthaired pointers and cook steaks on the communal grills out front. The newest and nicest is the Best Western, which opened in 2016 and is, according to desk clerks, especially popular with attorneys representing people housed in the detention center, who come in week-long shifts, and with oil field workers. At check-in, guests can pick up little blue shoe nets so as not to dirty the floors with their work boots. In 2015, half a year after the center opened but before it had gained significant national attention, when few attorneys were here but about fifteen hundred asylum-seeking mothers and children were, I spent a few



Gilbert and Raul, two regulars at A&A Ballroom. In the most recent boom, oil field companies rented out the bar for trainings. Right: Eagle Ford Village.

hours in a second-floor room at the Days Inn with two moms who had been released with their two daughters. Their pro bono attorney was putting them up for a night before they traveled to meet their families. They were so excited to have access to their old beauty routines that they used a clothes iron to straighten their hair.

Lured by clean rooms and cheap rates, I prefer to stay at Eagle Ford Village, a mobile home community named after the local shale play. At the Eagle Ford, blue, burgundy, green, and yellow trailers sit in neat rows. You can rent by the day, week, month, or year, and the longer you rent, the cheaper the per diem—as cheap as \$20. I'd assumed that the other people staying there were all working in oil, but then, at the end of one day, I saw single women hurry into their trailers

carrying see-through plastic tote bags and backpacks. A telltale sign: they worked for Nashville-based CoreCivic, formerly known as the CCA, or the Corrections Corporation of America, which runs the detention center. At the Eagle Ford, they get special rates and can opt in for meals.

By dusk, I found little to do in Dilley to unwind but take a drive or watch television or, if the temperature was right, drag out a plastic Adirondack chair to the empty field in front of the Eagle Ford and watch the tankers and eighteen-wheelers go by. By dawn, you start hearing the motors of pickup trucks and, in the dark, seeing the reflective strips on yellow vests: men going to work in the oil fields. At first light, prisoners dressed in white start picking crops at the state prison under the watch of newjacks in ranger hats

on horseback. Truck drivers return to their shifts after mandatory rest. Prison guards go home from the graveyard shift. Detention center guards buy coffee and kolaches from the TexBest truck stop before they clock in. Oil field workers lift gallons of water into the backs of their Ford F-150s. You can tell who is who by the uniform, official or not: the rig welder's jumpsuit, the trucker hat, the attorney's slacks, the hunter's camouflage shirt, the white Stetson, my notepad.

I moved to Texas in 2017 and returned often to Dilley. When I would chat with residents—after a city council meeting, at the nail salon, before a cook-off—they'd ask if I was in Dilley to write about how depressing or messed up the place is. Or they'd scoff: I was just another journalist coming to write about the detention center. Or they couldn't

figure out why someone would want to study a town they found so dreadfully boring. In reality, I was struck by how the town is at the crossroads of three industries: oil, confinement, and smuggling. I wondered what it might take to revive a small town like Dilley—and at what cost. I kept sticking around.

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Rudy Martinez grew up working in Dilley's melon fields, though now he works part time as a bartender at the A&A Ballroom, a hangar-like building on the town's main drag, facing the train tracks. Trucks used to park out front during the harvest, filled with watermelons ready to be loaded onto the train. When I noticed the building in 2017, there weren't any cars parked outside and I'd assumed that the ballroom had shut down, like a lot of things around here (the emergency room, the rodeo arena, the pharmacy). Google lists it as Permanently Closed. Then, on a weekday afternoon last year, I saw a door open and a man walk inside, and I discovered the bar, which was still decorated with silver and burgundy streamers for the Dilley High School Class of 1979 reunion. It didn't open until five, and the jukebox—which plays mostly Norteño and Tejano and sometimes country—wasn't on. Big fans spun over pool tables. When I met Rudy, he introduced himself by saying, "I used to be justice of the peace, and now I'm a bartender!" Seventy-two, he has worked at the A&A Ballroom for eleven years. He was elected in the early 1980s to the Dilley City Council, and in 1990 as justice of the peace, a position he held for five years. His parents were born in Dilley, and their parents were born in Mexico. Like most Mexican Americans of their generation in the area, the family worked in agriculture. Other than his military service in Vietnam straight out of high school, Rudy has always lived in Dilley. He likes to remark, proudly and not morbidly, that he'll die here.

It's hard to say just when the slice of the good life started disintegrating in Dilley, and for whom it had ever been the good life. The land bears a history of cruelty: at least two-

hundred and thirty-two ethnic Mexicans were lynched by vigilante groups in Texas between 1848 (the year the Rio Grande became the southern border) and 1928. The toll is far eclipsed when including extralegal violence at the hands of local police and the Texas Rangers, who also hunted down runaway slaves and fought indigenous groups, for the país des poblado had never really been a no-man's-land. "What this violence nearly always shared was location: death often occurred in the isolation of the rural Texas landscape," wrote the historian Monica Muñoz Martinez. "The thick mesquite brush and the dark of night frequently cloaked these acts from public view." Racism found scaffolding in the Juan Crow system, modeled after Jim Crow, whereby ethnic Hispanics had to live on the east side of the tracks and education was segregated until high school, when most of



those teens had already long been working the fields. The division remains most visible in the cemetery, which has an Anglo side and a Hispanic side. The former has organized rows of cypresses, the biggest trees in the whole town. The Hispanic side, at the back of the lot, has mesquites and a few stout palm trees, shrines to the Virgen de Guadalupe, and over the graves, hundreds of fake flowers. A half-block length of mowed grass separates the two sides. It's not like the postmortem division is enforced; people just want to be buried among their own.

I asked Rudy to give me an overview of the town's evolution. We sat together at the end of the bar over ice water—it was still early in the day for beer—and he gave me the highlights. As recently as the 1980s, most of the

Hispanic families in Dilley were dependent on agriculture—watermelons, cantaloupes, peanuts, spinach—though unemployment was in the double digits. In 1984, Walmart opened in Pearsall, one town north, and most mom-and-pop shops in the area couldn't hang on. Then two big things happened, one right after the other—and they changed Dilley's trajectory.

First was the advent of horizontal drilling in the late 1980s, which was effective in the area's Austin chalk, a soft, porous, fine-grained limestone. Oil had been discovered here in the mid-thirties and boomed in the late seventies—and then busted: wildcaters called this stretch of South Texas the Heartbreak Field. But the new technology brought new promise. "Mineral rights" became a buzzword as surveyors, geologists, tool pushers, engineers, truckers, service workers, and roughnecks all came to town. Hotels, restaurants, beverage barns, fast-food restaurants, and gas stations revived and multiplied. Tips were so good, one bartender made enough to buy himself a new Pontiac. A *Washington Post* reporter couldn't find a motel vacancy within a forty-mile radius. Oil prospectors couldn't seem to find a dry hole. Families who for at least a generation had faced unemployment were able to find work. DO SOMETHING EXCITING! GET HORIZONTAL! was the message on a popular bumper sticker. Journalists from around the nation flocked to this tiny town that had all but died. But it didn't last. The boom dwindled by 1992.

Rudy wondered aloud what he'd have done with all that money if only he'd had the right land—land with oil. "There were some folks that had property, a few, very few," he said. "But they had a lot of property that was inherited. You know, they had the mineral rights—that's what counts. They're making that money. You see those checks. Oh my god!" He laughed a long laugh, then rattled his hands on the bar as he spoke of the changing landscape. "There were cows grazing in the grass, and, after, not even cows, just the land and drilling for oil."

The second thing was the prison. When Richard Nixon launched his war on drugs in 1972, annual Texas prison admissions were 7,725. By 1987, when tough-on-crime Bill Clements became governor (for the second

time), the number had increased to 35,007. That year, he broke ground on facilities to offer 12,500 new prison beds. In the next legislative session two years later, he approved funding for another 10,800 beds. Ann Richards came to office in 1991 and outdid Clements. “Well, Ann, what does that say about Texas that we’ve got the largest prison system in the world?” she asks herself in a 1994 campaign ad. “It says that if you commit a crime in Texas we’ve got a place to lock you up, that’s what it says.” By the end of her first and only term, she’d added nearly 100,000 beds to the Texas prison system. The Dolph Briscoe Unit opened in February 1992. It was a big deal for Dilley, having a state prison built there. The whole town was encouraged to come to the opening, where Dolph Briscoe, who’d served as governor of Texas in the 1970s, was the keynote speaker. “Never have so many people pulled together so cooperatively to accomplish so much,” said an article in the *Dilley Herald*.

Marc Robertson, the former editor of the *Frio-Nueces Current* (a pun on the names of the two rivers that pass through the area), which absorbed the *Herald*, explained it to me this way: “All of the people were promised that this, instead of the oil boom, this is your employment opportunity, this is the thing that will really boost the Dilley economy. . . . The people of Dilley thought, Yes, deliverance has come, they would be saved from another generation of watermelon picking and watching everyone go rushing past on the interstate and ignoring them.” Soon enough, trucks would rush by even faster: NAFTA was signed in 1994, and I-35 was its gateway, stretching from the Mexican border in Laredo to the shores of Lake Superior, just south of Canada. I-35 was America. Goods needed to move fast. The speed limit was raised from 55 to 75 mph.

But the prison boom didn’t deliver either. For prospective Briscoe Unit employees, drug tests and criminal background checks were hard to pass. Rudy joked that one time at the bar, a customer asked if he gave credit, and he said sure, but first you’ll have to fill out my application—then he pulled out the prison job application. “I gave him a book about that thick,” he said, holding his hands phonebook-width apart. Out-of-towners got many of the prison jobs promised to the people of Dilley. Rudy laments that this is when Dilley lost its small-town feel. “There are people here I don’t know, and it didn’t used to be that way.” Now, he doesn’t often think about the prison.

“Like the place is not there, that’s the way we treat it. We never talk about it. They do their business, like another town by itself.”

Marc, a good-humored Brit who could tell stories for hours (the Valentine’s Day murder on Hickey Street, the “real teddy bear of a chap” cop who got busted dealing dope), is a transplant—he married a Texan who has been band director at the high school for three decades. They live in Cotulla, a town fifteen miles south of Dilley. He put it more bluntly. “It’s horrible, but the joke became: the people of Dilley aren’t working there, they’re *in* there. I know it’s a terrible thing to say, but the likelihood of people from Dilley being incarcerated in the detention center was higher than Dilley natives being employed in the detention center.” By detention center, he meant the Dolph Briscoe Unit. When the immigration detention center came in 2014, the language got confusing. But for most people here: same difference.

As of 2010, of the town’s 3,894 residents, 1,253 were incarcerated. The U.S. Census includes non-citizen detainees, referring to them, along with inmates, as the “institutionalized population” of a place. In 2020, the town’s incarcerated population will increase by as many as 2,400; the confined will soon far outnumber the free.

These days, two of Rudy Martinez’s children work in Dilley’s family detention center—one in supplies and the other assisting nurses and doctors. But he thinks it’s not a job to plan a future on. Some townspeople fear that the detention center will shut down. It was not meant to be permanent; a Homeland Security report from 2014 referenced the “temporary and indefinite nature of the facility.” At last measure, nearly a third of Dilley residents were living below the poverty line.

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**T**he first time I went to Dilley, in June 2015, six months after the family detention center opened, I flew into San Antonio and drove south. On I-35, the live oaks grow sparser until they disappear altogether, and the land becomes flatter and harsher. It’s a land that Robert Caro, in his biography of Lyndon B. Johnson (who was once a teacher at what was then known as “the Mexican school” in Cotulla), called “one of the great wildernesses of the United States, the emptiness at the end of America.” Caro was describing the landscape in 1928, though it still feels that way today.

The detention center was difficult to find, so a law professor in New York who had volunteered there gave me directions over the phone: drive past the state prison, and you know you’re at the right place when you see the palm trees. Then turn left. The state prison was clearly marked with signs for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Dolph Briscoe Unit, and, even before that, heralded a few miles down I-35 with a white sign with red font: PRISON AREA: DO NOT PICK UP HITCH HIKERS. The Briscoe fields were a lush green moat around a five-story white structure with blue trim and tiny windows. Past the prison, I saw a brown stucco sign for Sendero Ranch, a former mobile home camp that once housed itinerant oil field workers. And then there they were:

ten tall palm trees. And a sign: INDUSTRIAL LOTS FOR SALE. I turned left. The speed limit dropped from 85 to 30 mph. The paved road became gravel. A white sign was staked into the ground: SOUTH TEXAS FAMILY RESIDENTIAL CENTER, U.S. IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY. Beside it was another, taller sign: CCA in sporty burgundy font, all-caps. The facility was made up of gray and beige trailers surrounded by beige fencing and gravel. White buses and vans were parked in a corner. Rows of parking spots were marked with little signs: RESERVED CCA TRANSPORT VEHICLES ONLY, RESERVED ICE, RESERVED CHIEF OF UNIT MANAGEMENT, RESERVED FOR SHIFT SAFETY EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH. There were no trees. The writer

Ian Frazier once said that “places look the way people who see them feel.” Even on the hottest day in summer, the family detention center looks cold.

It is, in fact, cold inside the detention center. A woman named Luz greeted me at the metal detector and shook my hand, “Welcome to the South Texas Family Residential Center!” she said. “It’s a really neat place; you’ll see when you go inside.” An ICE officer accompanied me down a ramp to a trailer fashioned to mimic the inside of a courthouse, with green carpeting, ivory walls, and wooden benches, as though the veneer of justice counted for something. The hearings were presided over via televideo by judges in Miami; for each proceeding, the judge would sit on the same side of the

screen as the government prosecutor who, through interpreters, challenged the chronologies of murders and rapes and escapes. CCA employees in burgundy polo shirts carrying walkie-talkies adjusted the volume on the court television. During a break midway through a particularly upsetting hearing for a Salvadoran mother who testified that she was on the run from a deeply violent husband, a pro bono immigration attorney, a tough and highly lauded one, banged the table and, with tears in her eyes, said, “I fucking hate this work.”

After one of the hearings, I ran into a sobbing woman who seemed about to collapse on the carpet of the trailer’s vestibule. Two other women held her up and she cried into one of their necks. She had just lost her case,



The road from Dilley to Crystal City.



Daniella Juarez at the local park on a night off from work in a nearby oil field.

one of the others told me in Spanish. Employees stood by, averting their eyes, studying their fingernails. I stepped closer. She told me her name: Lolian Celina Gutiérrez. She and the two other women were led out of the trailer by a guard and trailed by three young girls, their daughters, into the camp.

About five months before, after a two-month journey through Mexico, Celina had paid smugglers eight hundred dollars to let her and her daughter cross the Rio Grande near Reynosa. She was fleeing members of the transnational Barrio 18 gang, who, she said, had threatened to harm her daughter if Celina didn't join the gang and become their boss's girlfriend. Celina, twenty-one, and her daughter, five, turned themselves in to Border Patrol and were taken to a processing center known as the perrera (dog pound) and then to the hielera (ice box), and from there they rode in a white bus west through the brush country to the South Texas Family Residential Center. They would remain there for eight months. In her diary from the

time, she wrote: "I felt tired, sad and with my dreams destroyed."

Life inside detention was bleak at best. At that time, women and children were detained for months on end, particularly those with a previous deportation. The days and weeks blended into each other, punctuated by visits to the court trailer. (Dolly Gee, a federal judge in California, ruled in July 2015 that prolonged family detention violated a 1997 legal settlement known as the Flores agreement, which dictates the treatment of minors in federal immigration custody; families thereafter were typically held for two to three weeks. Now, the Trump administration is attempting to dismantle the Flores agreement. In the original lawsuit, a sixteen-year-old from El Salvador claimed that she had been subjected to strip and vaginal searches at a CCA-run detention center in Laredo in 1985.) In Honduras, Celina had worked in a melon-packaging plant. But she didn't know Dilley had been famous for its melons—she could have been anywhere. Her

medical records, which I obtained with her permission, indicated that in detention she had been prescribed Mirtazapine, Klonopin, and Prozac. A psychologist who evaluated Celina a few weeks after I met her wrote, "Unless her stress level decreases, she is at risk for a psychotic break." The day Celina learned the outcome of her case, the psychologist noted, "She felt that she was 'dying inside.'"

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**D**aniella Juarez, twenty-five, grew up in Dilley after the state prison had been built, once farming was on the decline and NAFTA was in full swing. Her life there is a mirror of the town's efforts and shortcomings at revival. After graduating from Dilley High School, she briefly worked at an RV park and in an auto-glass shop, but she wanted a higher-paying job and started in the oil fields. She posted on Facebook that she was looking for work and almost immediately got a job as a bilingual dispatcher for an

oil transport company in Carrizo Springs, two towns west. She'd often work sixteen-hour days—once, she told me, she worked thirty-six hours straight. On her twenty-first birthday, she was working a double shift and her boss gave her \$5,000. That was in mid-2014, when shale was booming.

The job took an emotional toll. In 2015, a tanker driver whom she'd dispatched hit a passenger van carrying five men from Laredo. The truck was carrying oil, the van caught fire, and the passengers died; the driver, who survived, had third-degree burns. For a long time, there were rumors among her coworkers that the crash was Daniella's fault, and she still gets upset when she tells the story. But drivers, she said, would tell her, "Hey, why would they ever blame you? You're just a dispatcher. You're doing your job. You weren't there. It's not like you were riding with them." She thinks she was an easy scapegoat because she was young and female. By late 2017, she was frustrated with new management at her job. Plus, one of her drivers accidentally delivered one hundred and ninety barrels of oil to the wrong location, and the blame fell on her. So she quit. Over the years, she'd considered joining the Army. And the idea of joining Border Patrol or ICE had also grown on her. She was attracted to the physicality of such jobs, and she saw law enforcement as a force for good. The Department of Homeland Security is a lauded local employer, and it would be a steady job. Working at the detention center, she thought, could open the door to working in immigration enforcement, and she knew people who worked there. The pay was, she thought, decent enough—\$14.50 to start—though she didn't get overtime. Two days after quitting the oil field job, she started her training at the family detention center.

I became connected with Daniella through her aunt, whom I'd gotten to know through a mutual friend. Daniella doesn't like people eavesdropping—in Dilley people joke that the name of the town is "dile," Spanish for "tell (someone)"—so we first met at night last winter at her house, which she bought herself, on the east side of town. Her house was sparkling clean, and the living room was decorated with framed aphorisms: "Don't forget where you came from but never lose sight of where you are going." "This life is your message to the world. Let it be extraordinary." "Today I choose happiness." She curses with abandon and furrows her brows intensely when she talks about someone or something she finds unsavory. As she told me her story, we sat on

barstools at the kitchen table; framed Minnie and Mickey Mouse prints hung on the wall. Daniella wore sweatpants and a pink hoodie, and *RuPaul's Drag Race* was playing on a giant flat screen set to mute.

When she started at the detention center, training was on the old part of the property, Sendero Ranch, where the oil workers' trailers had been. Dilley's detention center is the only facility of its kind run by CoreCivic. Training was a "sit down and watch whatever they're showing on the wall type of thing—or whoever was the instructor for the day, just listen to them," Daniella said. "And they'll tell you, 'Don't listen to this book. We're not a correctional facility. You're working with women and children.'" (A CoreCivic spokesperson said that, in Dilley, training includes a PowerPoint presentation specific to family detention.)

Daniella clashed with friends who lived elsewhere over her decision to take the job. "You know your mom was illegal at one point," one told her. "Yeah, I know my mom was illegal at one point," Daniella responded, though she said of her mother, "She doesn't see [the job] as disrespectful. She sees it as success for her daughter and that's it."

Daniella's mother is Mexican and moved to Texas in the early 1990s with Daniella's two older half-siblings; her mother's first husband had been part of Los Tejas, a now-defunct gang that controlled smuggling in Nuevo Laredo until the group was absorbed by the Gulf Cartel. He was shot to death—there were thirteen bullets, Daniella said—and her mother feared for her family's safety. So she came to Texas to start over. She never left,

and she married Daniella's father, a truck driver also from Mexico. Daniella and her twin brother were born near Dallas, and they moved to Dilley, where their grandparents were living, when they were nine. The family lived in a house on the land that became Sendero Ranch—and eventually the detention center. Back then, there was a line of big, shade-giving oak trees from their house

to Highway 85. She and her brother used to shoot cans their dad would set up in the yard. As an over-the-road truck driver, he liked being able to park his eighteen-wheeler right outside. The house, people said, was haunted: a baby was buried on the property in 1914 or 1915, and Daniella said she heard it crying. When rent got too high, the family moved around town.

The work at the detention center was more trying than Daniella had anticipated, although the job itself wasn't physically hard and her shifts were just eight hours. And, except for the heavily chlorinated taste of the tap water, she didn't think that the conditions were bad for the detainees. Like a lot of people in Dilley, Daniella says that the facility is nice, almost too nice. The sentiment was: Everyone is poor out here, and look—at least these kids get toys, classes, a playground. What bothered Daniella the most was how some of the other local employees spoke to the detainees. "Some girls would treat them like shit; they'd just talk a lot of shit," she said. She started to feel like she had more in common with the women in the detention center than she did with her coworkers. There were more locals working there than when the center had first opened, but a lot of people were still out-of-towners. Daniella didn't think that was necessarily a bad thing. Too many people from

the same small town made a workplace environment toxic, she thought. People got catty, spiteful, mean.

She recounted one painful altercation with a colleague. She'd said, "Dude, if you were in that position, you're a detainee, if someone fucking treated you like shit, would you enjoy it? No. Like, exactly, don't be treating them like that. What if, God forbid, it's your mother

one day or your children going one day, going to another country, because if you crossed a border going to Mexico, you're considered a wetback over there."

Her whole face cringed at the word she'd just used: wetback. It was as though she had taken a bite of something rotten. She looked away.

"That term, I don't use it," she said. "I hate it, but since I was like so mad and upset

***Life inside detention was bleak at best. At that time, women and children were detained for months on end, particularly those with a previous deportation.***



Foundation slabs for buildings of what used to be the Crystal City Internment Camp.

at that time, that's the only way she understood me."

Her eyes got glassy when she told the story. "You don't know what these women are like, so just treat them with respect."

Trump was in office, and many families who had been separated at the border were held there upon reunification. Daniella said those families were kept apart from the rest.

In November 2018, Daniella was let go from her CoreCivic job. She has theories about her termination. One is her mother's immigration history. Another is the fact that she confronted people about how they spoke to detainees. Another has to do with small-town

gossip: she had some dirt on a supervisor's boyfriend, and maybe that's why she got let go, she thought.

She says she's gotten over it, though her anger undercut that sentiment. "If you were to ask me now, 'Do you still want to be a border patrol agent?' I'd say, 'Fuck no.' 'Do you still want to work for ICE?' I'd say, 'Fuck no.'" Nonetheless, she uses the words Make America Great Again with conviction—she voted for Trump in 2016—and says her mom would have voted for Trump, too, if she could have.

Daniella was exhausted, so we wound down our conversation around 8:30 P.M. She often worked nights, but the next day she was getting up at 4:30 A.M. for the

day shift. Three months after leaving the detention center, she'd found another oil job, also working with truck drivers, but in waste management instead of dispatching. Fracking is a material-intensive technology, and you have to dispose of the cement, gel, liquid, concrete, sand, and water. Daniella was stationed at the scale house and would get atop the tankers and test the materials inside and work with the drivers and lease operators to take waste to the right place. The job was near a ghost town called Los Angeles, and the dirt road to get to the oil field cut through ranch land and was often unsafe. That morning alone, on the day I first met her, two employees had gotten into

accidents. One drove his brand-new truck into a ditch. Visibility was terrible—it was unusually cold outside, and an unsettling fog hung over I-35 all the way to Austin. The other got hit by an eighteen-wheeler.

In Dilley, I once hit a tire that had come off an eighteen-wheeler, an "alligator tire" filled with scrap metal. An affable tow truck driver named Gus from a couple towns away picked me up. His love for the open road was infectious. "Whoooey, this is God's country!" he shouted. We spoke about our lives and work, and midway through the ride he told me that he'd served two sentences for drug smuggling. He grew up near Dilley but was living for a time in Minnesota, at the very

end of the interstate. Smuggling is a family business, a way of life, for more people than you'd think in this part of South Texas, he explained. When he got out of prison the second time, he came back home, and people he knew gave him a break. He not infrequently tows vehicles on I-35 impounded by the Border Patrol because they were used for smuggling. "Imagine if the Feds knew," he said, and laughed out loud.

Daniella knows people in the smuggling world but hasn't been attracted to that line of work. She wants to stay in Dilley for the time being and keep working in oil. And she seems to enjoy her work, speaking proudly of her love of "crude." In January, she took a new position with the same company at the same oil field, in the invoice-processing trailer. She'd recently lost her house after falling behind on mortgage payments, so the good news was welcome. The job is administrative and pays three dollars more per hour, and she doesn't have to wear a jumpsuit and be on alert for rattlesnakes and brown recluse spiders, but she misses her old colleagues, all but one of them men. She is thrilled whenever she comes across safety personnel or a driver or anyone out in the field who is a woman. She told me a story about a driver who pulled her tanker up to the scale house, with perfectly done fake nails. Some of Daniella's peers were giving her a hard time, and the woman went about her business. Before she drove off, the trucker said, "See, didn't even break a nail."

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**T**exas is home to more immigration detention centers than anywhere else in the country, though you wouldn't know it by driving around—the detention archipelago is hidden in plain sight, behind motels and diners and oil field equipment lots. It's a system seen most clearly in the interstitial, if you know where to look. On Interstate 35, dingy white passenger vans and white buses with netting over the windows travel just under the speed limit, shuttling migrants from the border to detention centers, or the detention centers to the border or the airport, or, if they're lucky and are released, the Greyhound station in San Antonio. The one hundred and fifty miles from Laredo to San Antonio are known as Detention Alley. Six detention centers are located on this stretch of I-35, all but one run by a private prison company.

CCA, which operates three of those detention centers, including the one in Dilley, was founded in 1983, the year after Reagan declared his war on drugs, when privatization was panacea. The government needed more beds to hold new offenders, and fast. Rather than fronting the money for design and construction, it could rent from CCA, which sold itself as the company that could build and manage jails and prisons cheaper and better than the government could. One of the co-founders told *Inc.* magazine in 1988 that "you just sell it like you were selling cars or real estate or hamburgers." And the company is, in fact, a "real estate investment trust"—except CCA doesn't own or operate offices or apartment complexes or hospitals or strip malls or hotels. It turns profits on warehouses for the confined.

CCA's first job for the government was running a temporary immigration detention center out of the Olympic Motel in Houston. By the end of 1983, CCA had signed its first permanent contract and the first private prison contract in history: an immigration detention center in Houston that it still operates today. CCA went public in 1986, followed by its biggest competitor, the GEO Group, in 1994. The expanding prison and detention system found a home in rural America, and by the end of the decade, prisoners outnumbered farmers in this country. In the 1990s, two hundred and forty-five new prisons were built in rural counties; one out of every five was in rural Texas. Legislation passed in 1996 brought sweeping changes to immigration enforcement, among them the expansion of mandatory detention. The immigration system was remade and fortified after 9/11; detention boomed. In South Texas today, the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Mexican farmworkers now seek work at immigration detention centers.

Large-scale for-profit family detention emerged as a practice in 2006, when President Bush started detaining immigrant families at the T. Don Hutto detention center, a former medium-security prison in a rural town outside of Austin. Named after a CCA co-founder who had formerly served as warden of Texas's biggest prison farm, the facility was the subject of intense litigation. Mothers and children were dressed in prison uniforms and held behind walls topped with razor wire. In 2009, President Obama stopped sending families to Hutto, as it is called, and halted plans for three additional family detention centers—a move the administration called a

shift toward a “truly civil detention system.” (A pre-existing eighty-four-bed family detention center operated by ICE remained open in rural Pennsylvania.) Between the 2013 and 2014 fiscal years, the number of families arrested at the U.S.–Mexico border rose by more than three hundred and sixty percent, and President Obama resuscitated family detention. A temporary camp was set up at a Border Patrol training center in rural New Mexico, and an adult male detention center in Karnes City, Texas (run by the GEO Group), was converted into a detention center for five hundred and thirty-two women and children. When Homeland Security put out a request for proposals for a much larger family detention center, CCA was well positioned to land the deal.

By the time CCA gave a presentation at Dilley City Hall in late August 2014, the family detention deal seemed all but finalized between CCA and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, though Dilley still needed to allow the center to access local infrastructure. On the city council’s meeting agenda, alongside the possible hiring of a patrolman and a crossing guard, was a “proposed development of a 51.5-acre tract as a Family Residential Center adjacent the Sendero Ranch Development.” (Built in 2013, Sendero Ranch, the camp for oil field workers, was next to a big undeveloped lot.) It wasn’t unusual for real estate developers to come before the Dilley City Council—during the frack boom, prospectors and pipeline engineers passed through often enough. This was different, though you wouldn’t know it from the agenda. Absent was the name “Corrections Corporation of America” or the words “immigration” and “detention.”

A CCA executive presented plans for a twenty-four-hundred-bed detention center for “only grandmothers, mothers and young children” who were from countries “other than Mexico.” There would be a security gate and a fence. CCA employees would be brought in to open the center and get it up and running, and then CCA would hire locally. As CCA described it, the townspeople would hardly even know the center was there, except for, ultimately, the jobs. Some meeting attendees expressed concern about adding more than two thousand residents to the town’s infrastructure, which was already in poor shape. Others asked how long the facility would remain open and what would become of it all after it closed. For a few residents, the detention center struck a nerve,

like Dilley was participating in some kind of historical reenactment: forty-five minutes west of the proposed site, high school tennis courts sit next to the foundation slabs of demolished buildings, the site of the Crystal City Internment Camp—a camp for “enemy alien” families (those with Japanese ancestry as well as German and Italian nationals) during World War II. Lucibeth Mayberry, a vice president of real estate at CCA, stressed that “there is a need for speedy delivery,” citing the recent increase in Central American women and children crossing the southern border. “ICE needs the beds quickly,” she said. The chance to improve infrastructure was pitched as one of the upsides of hosting the facility.

The *Frio-Nueces Current* ran a front-page article about the meeting with the headline: “‘Opportunities for Employment’ Feds may OK internment camp at Dilley.” (The next week, the *Current* ran an article with the headline “CCA: We don’t call it an internment camp.”) But no record exists of the precise content of that August 2014 meeting, except for what Marc Robertson reported in the paper. Last fall, I went to City Hall to look through binders of council minutes. The record of the most consequential meeting in the town’s contemporary history is glaringly absent, skipped over. The city’s official explanation: the minutes had been lost.

Except for Now Hiring ads (“Apply Now and Make a Difference”), the *Current* didn’t mention CCA again until the center opened in December. In a photograph from the opening ceremony, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson stands at a lectern in the dirt, clad in a windbreaker. The morning fog has burned off, and the old oil field workers’ mobile homes are visible behind him. Construction of new trailers was in progress beyond the frame. Nobody from the Dilley City Council was present. The first families would arrive four days later.

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Jose Asuncion, thirty-nine, assumed office as a county commissioner on January 1, 2019, though when I met him in early 2018, in his late grandfather’s garage, where he’d set up a desk, he reminded me less of a politician than of a graduate student in Austin or one of the visiting pro bono attorneys, thanks to his affinity for flannel shirts and high-top sneakers. He had an air that was part mad scientist, part Erin Brockovich. He

had become overwhelmingly fixated on how the detention center was impacting Dilley and had spent the last two years amassing public records to find out. Since my first visit to the town in 2015, I’d been reporting on deportations from detention centers to Honduras, asylum-seekers at the U.S.–Mexico border, and smuggling at the end of I-35, in Laredo. The work kept leading me back to Dilley, a place from which one can study aftershocks from the war on drugs. For the residents of the town, Jose said, the center had come in “completely under the radar”; it was “out of sight, out of mind.” Like many a young politician, Jose has an easy smile, and he often tells stories about disorder in small-town politics. When he tells them, he pauses before the most outlandish parts, interrupting himself to say, “And get this!” Then he goes on, and laughs for a long while, in part because of the story, in part because, it seems, he still can’t believe he’s out here, in the town of Dilley, an elected official. He told me he thought CCA had chosen a dysfunctional town as the location for the detention center for a reason—it was the kind of place where city council minutes might go missing.

When we met, Jose lived with his ninety-year-old grandmother in a small clapboard house behind the garage. The yard backs up to farmland, which looks quaint until you realize it’s the Briscoe prison fields. This is the closest you can get to the prison without going inside. Incarcerated men pick crops right up to the fence. Jose and his parents aren’t from here, though he did spend his childhood summers in Dilley. His father is from El Salvador, but he wasn’t in the picture, and his mom grew up in the Chicago suburbs. She was one of the first female bag haulers at O’Hare and a trailblazing Machinists union representative. She raised Jose in Wicker Park—before it got gentrified, Jose told me. Her parents were from Dilley, though they moved north in the fifties, like a lot of South Texas autoworkers and farmworkers, because that’s where the jobs were. But eventually they moved back, and Jose spent summers with them, here in the heat that would rise to 104, 105.

After studying literature at University of Illinois at Chicago and earning an MFA from the University of Southern California’s film school, Jose became a documentarian in Los Angeles and started a production company with a former classmate. Their first project was a friend’s film about the South African comedy scene and a rising star, then relatively



Jose Asuncion before the fields of the Dolph Briscoe Unit state prison.

unknown, named Trevor Noah. The film, *You Laugh but It’s True*, came out in 2011 and is now on Netflix. He also made music videos, among them one for La Santa Cecilia, a band that would win a Grammy in 2014. By then, Jose had moved to Dilley to look after his grandfather, who’d gotten sick, then care for his grandmother after his grandfather’s death. The grind of Los Angeles had been getting to him, and initially Dilley felt like a reprieve. He knew how to repair windshields, so he turned his grandfather’s auto-body garage into an auto-glass shop—the same one where Daniella worked. Then he read a newspaper article that referred to an “internment camp at Dilley.” He decided he’d probably make a documentary about it. He thought he could make the *Titicut Follies* of detention.

If detention center access for lawyers was difficult, artistic access was nonexistent. Jose applied for a job at the detention center in 2015, thinking he could be a sort of mole, but, like those of a lot of people in town, his application was denied because of bad credit. He started filming city council meetings, setting up his tripod and leaving the camera running straight through. People didn’t know him then, or they just knew him as Pipo’s grandson with the long hair. The more he tried to dig into public information, the more frustrated he became. A position for the Dilley reporter at the *Current* opened in spring 2016—Marc Robertson had left and gone to work in communications for the sheriff’s department one county south. Jose took the job; he thought it might better situate him

to access records. Writing came naturally to him, as did investigating. He started following a paper trail to the detention center.

Something peculiar caught his attention. In August 2014, the Department of Homeland Security had released a perfunctory environmental assessment for the proposed facility and found that the detention center would cause “no significant impact” to local infrastructure and estimated that, between detainees and employees, it would consume and produce 228,000 gallons of water and wastewater per day. But in CCA’s agreement with the town, that estimate is quoted at 100,000 gallons per day. Based on the lower figure, the Dilley-CCA agreement outlines improvements to the water and wastewater system and provides that the town be given





A map of Texas in the lobby of the *Frio-Nueces Current* offices.

\$600,000 to complete them. But the agreement stipulates that the improvements need not be completed before the center was put to use, and that if the cost were to exceed \$600,000, it would be up to the town to pay for the rest. The City of Dilley hired a firm who estimated that improvements would cost about \$3 million, well above the \$600,000 cap. In the fall of 2015, the City of Dilley took on \$2.5 million in non-voter-approved debt for water and sewer system improvements, among other repairs. Of CCA, Jose said, “Nobody calculated that there would be a cost to them being here.”

In July 2016, Jose went to a city council meeting and set up his tripod. A CCA representative was in from Nashville to speak to

an item on the agenda: a vote on allowing the prison company and the city attorney to negotiate a new agreement for the family detention center on behalf of Dilley. Oddly, back in 2014, the one-billion-dollar, four-year contract between CCA and the federal government had been routed through Eloy, Arizona, a small town, once known for its cotton fields, between Phoenix and Tucson, nearly a thousand miles away. Eloy was home to four CCA facilities: three prisons (totaling about 7,000 beds) and a 1,596-bed immigration detention center. The new Dilley family detention center was tacked on to the old Eloy Detention Center contract. Eloy would get \$438,000 a year for being an administrative middleman—fifty cents for every bed, re-

gardless of how many families were detained. Meanwhile, Dilley signed a separate agreement with CCA to provide local utilities to the family detention center. In exchange, the agreement stipulated, Dilley was to receive about one million dollars over the course of four years, plus the \$600,000-up-front allotment for infrastructural improvements. A city council agenda from the time said the center would “provide a minimum of \$6.9 million dollars in direct economic benefit,” but those profits have not been accounted for. Jose was glad that the contract might be renegotiated, so that Dilley could be the main beneficiary instead of Eloy.

The mayor proposed to move the agenda item up, before public comment, but Jose

butted in, asking the council to hear from citizens first.

“We deserve to reap the benefits of having this here,” he said. “[CCA] gets almost \$300 million per year for that facility from the Feds. . . . Who is their loyalty to?” The flag of Texas hung in the background. In Jose’s footage from the meeting, council members in the frame look dumbfounded and frozen. “Why would you outsource the negotiating to them?” he said, referring to CCA. “That’s what we have *you* for.” He brought up the cap on wastewater improvements, but the mayor cut him off. Jose demanded more time and addressed Bobby Maldonado, the city attorney who represented Dilley in the family detention agreement: “You snuck this in here one day before the application deadline, to pressure everyone into agreeing to this. You didn’t respect—.” The mayor stepped in, saying they needed to move on, but Jose kept talking. Two police officers in uniform approached him.

“Come on!” he yelled. “Am I being arrested?”

“Jose, you’re under arrest,” one cop said, the first-name basis betraying a small-town familiarity. He was handcuffed and taken to county jail for the night. The minutes state plainly: “Mr. Asuncion grew upset and was arrested.”

That day, the council voted unanimously to let the negotiations go on as proposed. David Weed, CCA’s senior director of partnership relations—formerly a director of government relations at an international scrap metal corporation—said the company had always talked about transferring the contract to Dilley “at the appropriate time.” He said CCA would come back to them, that the town wouldn’t be left in the dark. Maldonado said that the facility had not cost the community “a single penny.” Ultimately, Dilley didn’t get the contract until 2018, after a toddler died soon after her release from the detention center and the mother sought \$40 million in damages from Eloy, whose city council then voted to cancel the contract. The mother is also suing CoreCivic.

After the arrest, Jose was let go from the paper. He started a blog, Dilley Aguas, and quickly became an autodidact in Texas records law. He wondered what work had been done to upgrade the town’s wastewater system in order to accommodate a detention center nearly two-thirds its size, and he still wonders. Two operational wastewater plants are in Dilley: one at the prison next door

to the detention center, and a bigger plant in town. The City of Dilley claims that all sewage from the detention center flows to the bigger plant. But in early 2015, after the detention center opened, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) began sending notices about overages at the prison plant. City officials attributed those overages to fluctuations at the prison, where inmates might shower more in warmer months. (Texas doesn’t require its prisons to have air conditioning.) According to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, however, the number of people incarcerated at Briscoe remained virtually unchanged. In a 2016 campaign advertisement in the *Current*, Mayor Mary Ann Obregon, who has held that position for more than a decade, blamed the prison plant’s elevated *E. coli* levels, which at one point in 2016 were nearly ten times the permitted limit, on wildlife: “As all of you know, ducks will go when they want to go and they do their business wherever they are.” Obregon declined to be interviewed or comment on behalf of the City of Dilley for this story. CoreCivic maintains that its 100,000-gallon-per-day estimate was sound and that necessary improvements to the wastewater system were completed.

The City of Dilley approved a \$7 million bid for a new prison wastewater treatment plant that has never been built. Since 2016, the council has spoken of a project to divert 150,000 to 200,000 gallons of sewage per day from the prison plant across town to the main plant. The latter, though, has also been under duress; in 2017, it had a 20,000-gallon sewage spill. The wastewater operator who had reported the spill to TCEQ later sued the City of Dilley over the Texas Whistleblower Act, alleging that he had been forced to resign from his position in retaliation. (The case was settled last year for an undisclosed sum.)

Dilley’s wastewater issues were Jose’s rallying cry, but eventually he felt like he was banging his head against the wall. The document-digging became a sort of obsession; he told me that there were nights when he was so engrossed in records that he didn’t sleep. And there was the question of proof: Jose had spent countless hours and more than two thousand dollars requesting public records but he was still coming up short in documenting precisely how the detention center’s infrastructure had been set up. Jose started encouraging political novices to run for city council, thinking that transparency would only come with change. Except for

the mayor, the entire council has been overturned since that 2016 meeting, a feat for a city whose councilmembers have historically served for terms at a time. In November 2018, Jose ran for Frio County Commissioner for the Dilley precinct on the promise of holding local elected officials to a higher standard. He won 517 to 465 against an owner of a local tow truck company.

Soon after he moved his computer from the auto-glass shop to the county annex building, I visited Jose in his new office. He wore a plaid shirt and an Apple watch and sat at a beat-up laminate table across from a filing cabinet with the label “Closed Cases 2007–2008.” The office building is a block away from A&A Ballroom and used to be a Western Auto, which shut down not long after the Walmart opened. The train whistle was loud even inside. Jose was optimistic enough in his ability to make change to have run, though now he seemed to have little faith that things in Dilley could be different. “I think I overestimated my abilities,” he told me. “I just saw a vacuum; I thought that to make a more immediate impact we need people in office, not just people watchdogging, which is what I was doing. It only gets you so far if there’s no one in office to enact change.”

First on his plate was the Frio County jail, which was out of compliance with state standards—again. The jail had first closed in 2015, only the third jail to be shut down in the Texas Commission on Jail Standards’ forty-year history. The jail had reopened two months later, but the man hired to manage it was found to be a con artist and is currently in federal prison. A county with two immigration detention centers totaling 4,300 beds (Pearsall, the county seat, has a 1,900-bed facility run by GEO Group) was struggling to run its own small jail.

I followed up with Jose throughout 2019. The more settled into his new office he became—wall art, record player, standing desk—and his role, the more defeated he appeared. He told me it felt like the longest year he’d had all decade. “I’m lost in it. I’ve lost a lot of perspective,” he said. “Every once in a while, I can look back and measure and say we actually have made some progress.” The day to day was difficult, and he had few local confidantes. He organized a town hall meeting last June, Dilley’s first, but turnout was low. Civic engagement was harder to spark than he’d hoped, and, without the public putting pressure on the city government, there’s virtually nothing he can do

at the county level to influence what might happen with the family detention center. And, besides, the city itself has little sway. At a meeting in December, the new city manager (Dilley cycles through them quickly) recounted a phone call with a director at CoreCivic headquarters in Nashville. Dilley had signed a five-year contract in 2018, but “that’s not to say we still have another four years, because, basically the Feds can cancel the project at any time,” he said. At the next meeting, in January, Mayor Obregon complained: “CoreCivic is known to say one thing, and then,” she stammered, “and then they come back and they chop the deal.”

I wondered if Jose would ever make a documentary about the town or the detention center. A movie he’d helped shoot on a whim for some film school friends a few years ago, *August at Akiko’s*, had just been selected by the *New Yorker* as one of the best films of 2019. “There’s so much story,” he said—then, enunciating each word, repeated, “so much story.” To access information, he’d gotten too invested, too deep. “And then you’re in the story and it’s like, shit, I don’t know how to do that story, document something I’m involved with.” The police chief in Dilley had invited him on a tour of the detention center last fall, and he told me about what he saw. It had been his first trip inside, and the place looked just like it did in the videos: a gym, a tent, adorable children. A few of the kids came out back to look at the cop car. “You just see all the Resident Supervisors watching in the distance,” he said. “That’s what crept me out more than anything. The grounds are eerily quiet.” The place was charged with an undercurrent of surveillance.

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To the wider public, Dilley is a dateline in stories about detention. To Texans, it is a dying town. But at church on Sunday mornings and, in the fall, at high school football games on Friday nights, that impression falls away. No fewer than ten churches are in town, and the football stadium is usually packed for games. After a touchdown, parents yell and ring cowbells. Sometimes the sound-off for a touchdown happens at the same time as the whistle of the train and people laugh a little, like someone in the caboose is rooting for the Dilley Wolves.

There’s a jadedness to much of Dilley, a hardness thanks to residents’ impression that Washington and Austin have forgotten

the town. There’s also a wide resentment of welfare and social services, and many people talk about how the detention center has better services than they do, as though refugees from Central America might actually be coming for the so-called amenities. Companies in the confinement industry seek places like Dilley, small towns not just in Texas, but across rural America, that are eager for a boom, that need one. Eagerness can be a blinding thing. I wonder what will remain when CoreCivic leaves, if there will be any marker like the one at the internment camp in Crystal City, or if the memory will solely live on in the minds of mothers like Celina, who was released in September 2015.

Last summer, I went to Eden, a town at the end of the Hill Country and the beginning of the West Texas plains, where CoreCivic had shuttered a 1,558-bed immigration detention center in 2017. The detainees had accounted for about half the town’s population; employees were offered transfers to company facilities across the country. Eden was once best known for its sheep ranching. Two lots down from Southwest Wool and Mohair, the front gate of the detention center was ajar when I went; CoreCivic had decided to re-open the center, and locals were applying and training for jobs. The parking lot was full. It was a lifeline: a frack sand mine nearby had recently closed, laying off hundreds. The company had relocated west to the booming Permian Basin. I walked past several coils of razor wire and inside, it was nearly empty and very quiet, except for the sound of a steady voice over a speaker—it sounded like a training video. I spoke with a woman at the front desk who, after the closure, worked for the company in Montana and Indiana and, eventually, Dilley. In that regard, the prison industry is like the oil industry—labor moves with it. Except incarcerated people are not oil. That most locals think of those jobs as interchangeable is, I’ve come to realize, part of the point.

At a meeting last spring, the Dilley City Council discussed a recent contest to replace the Welcome to Dilley sign. “There’s a company that’s willing to pay,” a council member said. The city council wanted to erect six signs at different entrances to town, and someone asked: “Was the company that was going to pay, were they just going to pay for one, or were they going to pay for all?” The then city manager replied, “They said they would pay for all of them.” Drawings were passed around: depictions of an

assortment of oil wells, watermelons, deer, water towers, the Dilley Wolves’ mascot, all rendered in colored pencils and marker. “The company” continued to be evoked, and the council members bickered over whether to choose one design or six; the choice was tabled. Next, the council discussed the annual watermelon festival. The conversation grew heated over how much Tejano versus country music should be played. After the meeting, I chatted with Jose and a former city council member. The “company” that was going to pay for the new “Slice of the Good Life” signs, they said, was CoreCivic. I considered how this was demonstrative of a dysfunctional paternalistic dynamic: CoreCivic was promising to bankroll Dilley’s Slice of the Good Life, but at the time of this writing, nothing had come of it. In a meeting ten months later, the new city manager said that CoreCivic had only agreed to give the town two thousand dollars for the project, which the council doubted was enough for even one welcome sign. (A company spokesperson told me that CoreCivic had agreed on funding one sign and had not yet received a cost estimate from the city.)

The geographer and prison scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore wrote that “forgotten places are not outside history.” That Dilley is most proud of an all-but-lost industry—watermelons—speaks to a place at the margins of itself. I went to the watermelon festival last June. You could hear the music across town. The heat of the day waning, couples danced and drank beer late into the evening under the basketball pavilion. Vendors sold watermelon-themed goods. The county sheriff was out front, and the Catholic priest wore a watermelon festival t-shirt and a bucket hat. A new city council member introduced herself. She’s a schoolteacher, and her husband is one of the correctional officers on horseback at the Briscoe prison fields. “They’re probably the ones doing all the farming around here now,” he said, referring to the incarcerated men. Briscoe sends the produce to a county foodbank and to prisons across Texas. “Melons, cabbage, cayenne peppers.” Another city council member joined us by the Dos Equis stand. He grew up picking watermelons on school vacation. After high school, he worked at Briscoe for ten years, then on the power lines, then in oil field equipment rentals. “A company named Halliburton is coming here to drill one hundred fifty wells!” he said. “It’s oil and corrections out here.” He was optimistic about another boom. 🌱

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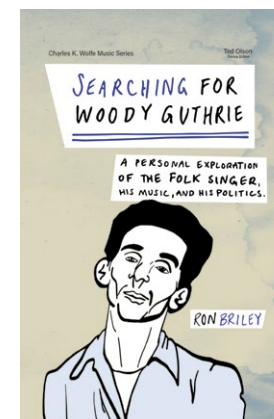


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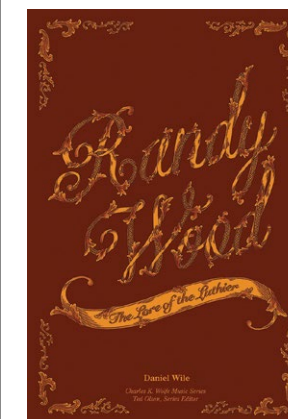
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