Uvalde's Darkest Hour by Craig Garnett (review)

Rusty Williams
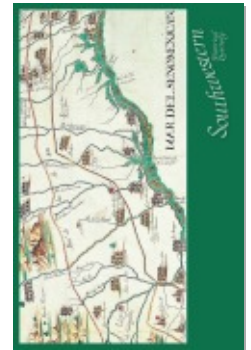
ritorial New Mexico, Wallace weaves the impact sheep brought to Navajo society and the other Native peoples of the region into his narrative.

An expanding marketplace greeted Mexico's independence in 1821. Americans, too, appeared by then, and an eastern marketplace utilizing the Santa Fe Trail began to replace trade to the south. More Americans began finding their way there. The conclusion of the war with Mexico in 1848 and gold discoveries in California furthered mercantile sheep production in the southwest. Anglos joined with Hispanic *ricos*. Intensive overgrazing, the end of the "open range," and improvements to the traditional churro sheep followed. The sheep business echoed the cattle business of the post-Civil War west and, in some cases, even replaced it after large cattle operators experienced market collapse and weather catastrophes in the closing years of the nineteenth century.

Wallace tells a subtle story of settler colonialism, of the reach of American capitalism and its impact on New Mexico's social and financial landscape. He reveals the role sheep played in New Mexico's long history as a colonial outpost of imperial aspirations. Although sheep no longer occupy the central role they once did there, Wallace affirms that the "West's oldest sheep-growing region . . . became integrated into the . . . US economy . . . under the impetus of the sheep industry" (p. 224).

The Colony   MICHAEL M. MILLER

Uvalde's Darkest Hour. By Craig Garnett. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2024. Pp. 232. Photographs, notes, index.)

"The police scanner is the exposed nerve of a small-town newspaper," author Craig Garnett writes in the opening paragraph of *Uvalde's Darkest Hour*. On most days, the police dispatcher's voice was crackly background noise in the newsroom of the twice-weekly *Uvalde Leader-News*. But at 11:28 a.m. on May 24, 2022, the dispatcher announced that a truck had crashed behind Robb Elementary and the driver opened fire on civilians who approached. Moments later the voice from the scanner said the shooter was walking toward the school.

At 11:33 a.m., a troubled local high school student armed with AK-style automatic weapons and 2,000 rounds of ammunition walked through an unlocked door into Robb Elementary school where 250 youngsters ages six to twelve sat in brightly decorated classrooms. During the next seventy-seven minutes, the gunman wandered through interconnected hallways and classrooms, taunting, wounding, and killing children and teachers while a crush of 300 sworn law enforcement officers filled hallways and play areas waiting for leadership. During those seventy-seven minutes, nineteen fourth-graders and two teachers lost their lives. Others suffered life-altering wounds.

The first half of *Uvalde's Darkest Hour* tells of that horrifying seventy-seven minutes when parents and bystanders who gathered outside the school begged

law enforcers on scene to take some action—*any* action—to stop the killer's gunfire that continued to echo from the classrooms.

Garnett is the owner and publisher of the *Uvalde Leader-News*, and his community newspaper profession informs the voice and style of this book. And that is a good thing. Garnett brings a local's perspective to his descriptions of the streets, neighborhoods, and history of Uvalde. He is respectful of the families who lost loved ones during the seventy-seven minutes at Robb Elementary (including a valued staffer from his newspaper). The scenes in the classrooms are gruesome, but he avoids painting the pages with bloody details. Garnett's clear narrative presents ample justification for calling the delay "the most damning police response to a mass school shooting in US history" (p. 13).

The book consists of thirty-five chapters, short "takes" that allow a reader to catch a breath between powerful events. With twenty-one victims, plus parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other close relatives, there are a lot of names to keep straight, but a detailed index helps sort out families and relationships. One thing missing, however, is a diagram of the school grounds and hallways. A reader might need to seek out an online map to understand the layout, relative distances, locations, and sightlines at Robb Elementary school.

In the latter half of the book, Garnett becomes a fire-breathing crusader when describing the aftermath of the shooting, which was hardly less painful. The school district lawyered up, refusing to share evidence with investigators. Other public officials were responsible for misinformation, misleading narratives, and news leaks. Local, state, and federal law enforcement bodies practiced obfuscation, deceit, and betrayal, according to a later U.S. Justice Department report. And city officials balked at plans to place a memorial to victims in the downtown area.

The Uvalde school shooting is just one of six mass shootings in Texas since 2017. As victim advocates from Sutherland Springs, Santa Fe, El Paso, Midland-Odessa, and Allen trooped to Austin asking state legislators for stronger gun control laws, so did relatives of the Uvalde victims. For the most part, Gov. Greg Abbott and the legislature ignored them all while steadily enacting laws that *loosened* restrictions on buying and carrying firearms.

Uvalde's Darkest Hour is based on Garnett's own day-by-day journal entries and *Uvalde Leader-News* coverage. His account of that seventy-seven minutes and the grief, questions, recriminations, and disappointments of the following two years is personal, readable, and a more complete narrative than any of the fragmented news accounts since the schoolroom massacre of twenty-one Uvaldeans in 2022.

Dallas   Rusty Williams