

The ‘Boys’ in the Bunkhouse

Toil, abuse and endurance in the heartland.

THIS LAND By **DAN BARRY** MARCH 9, 2014

WATERLOO, IOWA — A man stands at a bus stop. He wears bluejeans, cowboy boots, and a name tag pinned like a badge to his red shirt. It says: Clayton Berg, dishwasher, county sheriff’s office.

He is 58, with a laborer’s solid build, a preference to be called Gene and a whisper-white scar on his right wrist. His backpack contains a jelly sandwich, a Cherry Coke and a comforting pastry treat called a Duchess Honey Bun.

The Route 1 bus receives him, then resumes its herky-jerky journey through the northeastern Iowa city of Waterloo, population 68,000. He stares into the panoramic blur of ordinary life that was once so foreign to him.

Mr. Berg comes from a different place.

For more than 30 years, he and a few dozen other men with intellectual disabilities — affecting their reasoning and learning — lived in a dot of a place called Atalissa, about 100 miles south of here. Every morning before dawn, they were sent to eviscerate turkeys at a processing plant, in return for food, lodging, the occasional diversion and \$65 a month. For more than 30 years.

Their supervisors never received specialized training; never tapped into Iowa's social service system; never gave the men the choices in life granted by decades of advancement in disability civil rights. Increasingly neglected and abused, the men remained in heartland servitude for most of their adult lives.

This Dickensian story — told here through court records, internal documents and extensive first-time interviews with several of the men — is little known beyond Iowa. But five years after their rescue, it continues to resound in halls of power. Last year the case led to the largest jury verdict in the history of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: \$240 million in damages — an award later drastically reduced, yet still regarded as a watershed moment for disability rights in the workplace. In both direct and subtle ways, it has also influenced government initiatives, advocates say, including President Obama's recent executive order to increase the minimum wage for certain workers.

Overall, the Atalissa case has been a catalyst for change, according to Senator Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa, a longtime champion of people with disabilities, who still struggles with what these vulnerable men endured in his home state.

"I hate to see what happened to them," the senator says. "But, by gosh, something might happen *from* them."

The dark tale of Mr. Berg and his work mates has spurred introspection in Atalissa and beyond about society's perception of those with disability. About what is noticed, what is not and what remains in need of constant vigilance.

“The turkey plant case has really haunted all of us,” says Curt Decker, the executive director of the [National Disability Rights Network](#). “This is what happens when we don’t pay attention.”

This Waterloo bus does not go to Atalissa. But the man in cowboy boots, rocking to its gentle sway, needs only to notice that telltale scar on his wrist, and he is instantly returned.





Gene Berg waiting for the Route 1 bus in Waterloo, Iowa, and on his way to his job as a dishwasher at the Black Hawk Sheriff's Office. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The Scene

A veteran social worker named Denise Gonzales drove past the winter-quiescent fields of 2009 to some town called Atalissa. She had to see for herself what subordinates were telling her.

She pulled uphill to an old schoolhouse, its turquoise exterior garish amid the sleeping acres of snow-dusted brown. She found an open door and stepped into a wonderland nightmare, with walls painted playhouse colors, floors speckled with roaches and the air rank with neglect.

From the squalid building's shadows emerged its residents, all men, extending hands in welcome, their long fingernails caked with dried blood. A few hands looked almost forked. "From pulling crop," they explained, a

term that she soon learned referred to the yanking of craws from freshly killed turkeys.

You the boss lady? they asked, with grins of gaptoothed decay. *You in charge of us now?* A few led her on a tour past the soiled mattresses, the overloaded electrical outlets, the trash bins collecting the snow melt dripping from the ceiling — their home.

The schoolhouse was crime-scene crowded. Law enforcement investigators. Social workers. The nervous caretakers. A woman just up from Texas, identifying herself as a co-owner of Henry's Turkey Service and describing these "boys" as employees who were like family.

"Dressed to the nines," Ms. Gonzales recalls. "And right outside that room were these men needing medical attention, malnourished, with mice crawling in their rooms."

Two decades on the front lines of human frailty had not prepared her for this. But Ms. Gonzales suppressed her panic to focus on the names of these 21 Texans soon to be in her care. Gene. Willie. Henry. Frank. Keith. The Penner brothers, Billy and Robert. Others.

All the while, she kept thinking: How in God's name did they wind up here?

Goldthwaite, Tex.

On a dormant ranch outside the central Texas town of Goldthwaite, a man hunches over his walker to study a framed collage of faded photos. Dozens of young men in baseball caps, cowboy hats and even clown costumes smile back.

“Tiny, we called him, a colored boy who was here for several years,” he says, pointing. He studies their faces. “Uh, let’s see, who’s in there. Gene Berg ...”

The man, Kenneth Henry, 73, directs his walker to a dim office that features an aerial photograph of the Atalissa schoolhouse. He takes a seat, then a breath, and tries to explain.

Kenneth Henry, the co-owner of Henry’s Turkey Service, far left; the Johnson ranch in Goldthwaite, Tex., where the turkey service got its start, above; Gene Berg, left, in younger days. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Back in the late 1960s, Mr. Henry, a turkey insemination expert, became partners with T. H. Johnson, the larger-than-life owner of this ranch. With the government’s blessing, the rancher was running a for-profit program that took in young men from state institutions and trained them in agricultural work — and some basic life skills.

He called his philosophy “the magic of simplicity.”

Unregulated arrangements like the Johnson ranch would later be derided as exploitative. But at the time they offered rare alternatives to institutions like the Abilene State School, where thousands with disabilities, from infants to the aged, lived in wards divided by need, often with little or no contact with families.

“A different time,” says Jaylon Fincannon, a consultant in developmental disabilities and a former Texas deputy commissioner for intellectual disability services. “Thank God it’s different now.”

More than 1,000 young men were chosen over the years to embody this magic of simplicity, including Gene Berg, from the Abilene State School, by way of a small town outside Dallas.

He had been a well-behaved boy whose profound learning issues left his parents feeling helpless. One day they took him, their only son, to the sprawling Abilene institution, and were told not to visit for a while so that he could become acclimated. Gene was 12.

“It killed him,” says his mother, Wanda Berg LaGrassa, her voice shredding. “It killed us.”

Also chosen was Willie Levi, from the Mexia State School, by way of the city of Orange. His mother cleaned hotel rooms, and his father drank. “Had to pour cold water on him,” the son recalls. “That’s the only way I get him up.”

Mr. Levi excelled in sports at Mexia. In 1970, the local newspaper reported that he had won the 880-yard race at the state championships for special schools.

“Gold medal,” he says.

Among the many others were Billy and Robert Penner, sons of a long-haul truck driver and a housewife in Amarillo. One day their older brother, Wesley, came home after a long absence and was told that the boys had been sent to the Abilene school. The reason given: “Mom couldn’t handle them anymore.”

Most turkeys are bred with breasts so unusually large that they cannot reproduce naturally. This requires that the toms be caught, stimulated and milked; the semen rushed to the henhouse; and the females caught, flipped and inseminated. The young men who went to Goldthwaite often worked in turkey insemination, catching the birds.

The workers lived in a bunkhouse, and spent most of the little money they received every month at the Johnson family's roadside country store. "Hamburgers, and peanut brittle, and some soda water," Mr. Levi says. "Them long candies, Butternut."

The job could be difficult, and Mr. Johnson mercurial, but most of the men had nowhere else to go. At least in Goldthwaite, they were welcome at Johnson family gatherings — "Everybody was included," Mr. Henry says — and were counted when the boss man, T. H., made bed checks at night.

"One of those people you could love real easy and hate at the same time," Robert Womack, a former business partner, says. "The son of a bitch is dead and gone, but he cared about those boys, and he took care of them."

Before long, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Henry had secured contracts in several states for their turkey-savvy crews, including one at a processing plant somewhere in Iowa.

Atalissa, Iowa

The advance man for Henry's Turkey Service could not believe his fortune. Sent to Iowa in 1974 to find a building suitable for a men's dormitory, he had spotted an old schoolhouse rising from a hill, just six miles from the turkey plant.

Memorabilia like this trophy were removed from the old schoolhouse to make room for the new tenants from Texas. Behind it hangs an illustration of the Atalissa schoolhouse in its heyday. *Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times*

The town agreed to a few hundred dollars a month in rent. In came appliances and dozens of beds; out went portraits of the class of '17 and other relics from another time. These items recall an earlier Atalissa, when a farm community named after an Indian princess grew into a local hub,

with a bank, a hotel, a railroad depot — and a two-story school, built in 1911, whose bell summoned generations of children uphill for lessons.

Now the schoolhouse was a bunkhouse for a growing number of Texas men with developmental disabilities, and jobs.

At 3 o'clock every weekday morning, they were roused, fed and driven through the black-and-blue night to the huge Louis Rich processing plant, looming over West Liberty from its 10 feather-flecked acres. Along with their nondisabled colleagues, they put on protective gear, including lab coats and rubber boots, before entering a workplace of clamor and gore.

Stacks of turkey coops were trucked into the “live dock,” where the men grabbed toms weighing about 40 pounds — more if it had rained — and hung them by their feet on an overhead conveyor’s metal shackles. A typical day meant 20,000 turkeys.

The frightened birds often beat back with powerful wings. But Willie Levi possessed a rare gift for calming them down. He’d talk turkey, he says. “And they’d talk right back to me.”

His soothing would continue as he prepared the birds to be stunned, slit and bled out. “Pat them on the belly when I get them on the shackle,” Mr. Levi says. “I say, ‘O.K., O.K., tom, quiet down ...’”

Some of the Atalissa men worked as “pinners,” pulling off stray feathers, while others, working as “rehangers,” shackled the carcasses to a second conveyor that led to evisceration. Billy Penner did this work for decades, and hated it: “Too bloody.”

Down the line the turkey swung, a hole sliced well below its breast, its viscera — heart, intestines, liver, gizzard and spleen — pulled down for

scrutiny by a federal inspector. Then, after its heart, valve stem and lungs were snipped or sucked away, the bird went to the “croppers,” who pulled out its feed-filled digestive system.

A company document explains this least-desired job:

1: Reach under neck skins and grab the windpipe and the top of the crop.
2: Pull down until both the windpipe and the crop come out of the bird cavity. 3: Place the windpipe and crop in the trough of running water — known as “the river” — to go to offal.

“Two fingers,” recalls Henry Wilkins, one of the Atalissa men. “Take this finger up there, pull the skin apart, take both your fingers up there, pull it straight down, and the crop’s out. Throw it in the trough.”

VIDEO | 1:11

The Job

The men were occasionally ridiculed, and even pelted with turkey slime; more often, though, they were admired for their work ethic. Dave Meincke, the plant’s evisceration supervisor, has never forgotten “how they took me under their wing” when he joined the assembly line more than 30 years ago, or the pride they had in letting no shackle pass empty.

“They came in, and they got it done,” he says.

But the men did not earn the same as their nondisabled colleagues.

WORK AGREEMENT

An example of some of the paperwork required for an employer to pay an employee with disability a subminimum wage.

Henry’s Turkey Service, which was paid directly by the plant for the men’s labor, was capitalizing on a section of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938

that allows certified employers to pay a subminimum wage to **workers with a disability**, based on their productivity when compared with that of nondisabled workers.

ATTACHMENT TO TEMPORARY CERTIFICATE FORM WH-224		U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR Employment Standards Administration Office of Fair Labor Standards			
Check whether: ☒ or ☐					
APPLICATION FOR A WAGE LESS THAN 50 PERCENT OF MINIMUM					
PART A. To be completed by vocational rehabilitation counselor or Veterans Administration training officer, (Complete all items as instructed.)					
1. Name, address (and ZIP Code) of firm Hill Country Farms, Inc. Box 169 Atalissa, Iowa 52702		2. Date of application 6/20/75 6/20/76			
3. Name, address (and ZIP Code) of trainee (Specify Mr., Mrs., or Miss) Clayton G. Berg Box 169 Atalissa, XXX Iowa 52702		4. Date of birth [Redacted]			
5. Description of handicap (If wage requested is less than 50 percent of minimum wage, furnish sufficient details to justify wage requested.) [Redacted]					
6. Occupation for which training is being given Turkey Processing Plant Worker		7. Outline of training plan Hanging turkeys by legs, neck and joints; pulling intestines and inserting pins; loading on trucks.			
8. Temporary certificate issued by rehabilitation agency (May not be more than 90 calendar days.)		9. Wages recommended: (a) For extension certificate, if needed, or (b) for less than 50%, if applicable.			
WAGE	FROM	TO	WAGE	FROM	TO
XXXX \$1.05	XXXX 6/20/75	XXXX 9/20/75	XXXX \$1.05	XXXXXX 9/21/75	XXXXXX 9/21/76
10. Name and title of vocational rehabilitation counselor or Veterans Administration training officer (Please type or print.) Tommy B. Brock, Counselor		11. Signature of vocational rehabilitation counselor or Veterans Administration training officer <i>Tommy B. Brock</i>			
12. Area code and telephone number [Redacted]		14. Signature of trainee <i>X Gebe Berg</i>			
13. Name, address (and ZIP Code) of vocational rehabilitation agency or Veterans Administration facility Texas Rehabilitation Commission 1204-A Main Street, Gatesville, Texas 76528					
PART B. For use by State vocational rehabilitation agency only.					
1. Complete this item when a State vocational rehabilitation counselor or Veterans Administration training officer is requesting a wage less than 50 percent of the minimum wage. DO NOT ISSUE A CERTIFICATE Is this person's earning capacity so severely impaired he is unable to earn at least 50 percent of the minimum wage? ☐ YES ☐ NO					
2. Name, title, address (and ZIP Code) of vocational rehabilitation agency official (Please type or print)		3. Signature of vocational rehabilitation official			
4. Date					
DISTRIBUTION: #1 Employer #2 Trainee #3 ESA-RO (file) #4 ESA-RO (NO - primary) #5 ESA-RO (NO - follow up) #6 Supervising rehabilitation agency					
1. EMPLOYER COPY					
Form WH-225 (Rev. 3/72)					

The company also deducted hundreds of dollars from the men's earnings and Social Security benefits for room and board — and “in-kind” services, like bowling, dining out and annual visits to an amusement park. The rest was deposited in individual bank accounts in Goldthwaite that the company dipped into to pay for incidentals and medical costs, since the men had no health insurance or Medicaid in Iowa.

In the end, they received about \$65 a month. Mr. Johnson, who all but moved into the bunkhouse, might also slip a man \$50 for his birthday, or tell him to keep the change after running an errand to the Atalissa Mini Mart.

But Henry's Turkey Service raised suspicions from the start, prompting a review by an Iowa social worker named Ed George. In a pointed memorandum to his supervisor in December 1974, he described an exploitative operation devoid of basic freedoms. He called the business model "obscene."

Mr. George's prescient memo of outrage changed nothing. The days bled into years. Hang. Rehang. Pull guts.

Outside

As the Atalissa fields marked time in the crop rotation of corn and soybean, the men in the hilltop schoolhouse aged into their 30s and then their 40s. But in keeping with their static existence, they remained the "boys."

"Even though they were adult men, they were boys to us," says Carol O'Neill, a member of a women's group called the Atalissa Betterment Committee. "They were like — our boys."

When the dozens of Texans first came to town, raising its population to a record 360, T. H. Johnson invited Atalissans to the schoolhouse for Christmas socials and summertime barbecues. The men showed off their pool table, exercise equipment and shared bedrooms, leaving a favorable first impression that would last.

Dennis Hepker, a former Atalissa mayor, remembers the envy he felt. “I was living on popcorn and Falstaff,” he says. “I thought these guys had it made.”

On Sunday mornings, some of the men walked down to the small Zion Lutheran Church, where a painting of Jesus holding a lamb adorns the altar. Unable to recite the Lord’s Prayer, they hummed to its rhythmic entreaties instead, and often sang at the close of service.

“Amazing Grace,” recalls Mr. Levi, who also played a tambourine. “Surely Goodness.’ ‘Give Me That Old-Time Religion.’ All that.”

The men pretty much kept the minimart open with their patronage, and were as central to the annual Atalissa Days parade as the fire trucks. A few would appear on a float in clown costumes and makeup — the Pagliacci of the cornfields.

The outfits were the handiwork of Wilma Rock, their beloved “Grandma.” She wore a clown costume, too, Mr. Berg recalls. “She was a friend to us.” And on weekend nights, you could expect to see some of the men at the Corner Tap bar, or the Old University, eager to socialize, eager to hug.

True, some local residents cringed when the “boys” walked in, reeking of turkey, interrupting conversations. Sometimes you just did not want to hear again about Willie Levi’s birthday, or Gene Berg’s fascination with John Deere tractors, or how much beer Henry Wilkins planned to drink at the county fair. Sometimes you just did not want a hug.

Then again, you might welcome a hug, or even a dance. “And if you danced with one of them, you danced with all of them,” says Vada Baker, of the

Atalissa Betterment Committee, who learned the Texas two-step from the men.

The Neighbors

They were as present in Atalissa as the grain elevator beside the railroad tracks. You could easily forget how far these men were from home.

A lucky few returned South for a week's vacation every year. Others tried to stay in touch with family by schoolhouse telephone, some of them calling disconnected numbers, over and over, year after year. Or they lingered at the post office, where there was rarely anything for them, other than the candy on the counter.

But every once in a great while, a lucky man received a birthday card or Christmas letter, sent from another world.

Inside

Atalissa will tell you: The men never complained.

People just assumed that the schoolhouse's immaculate exterior mirrored a similar order inside. They say they had little else to go on, since those invitations to Christmas parties had been replaced by No Trespassing signs.

Even so, warnings kept sounding. In 1979, an investigation by The Des Moines Register strongly suggested that the Henry's program took advantage of men with disabilities. Mr. Johnson defended his operation as a success unfettered by bureaucratic nonsense, and explained that these "boys" might otherwise be wasting away in institutions.

But nothing changed. Henry's Turkey Service continued as a for-profit business that limited freedom and used punishment to foster good behavior and a productive work ethic. Men could be banished to their rooms, and forbidden to watch television or listen to music.

"You had to do some things like that to make the boys bathe, to make the boys brush their teeth, to change clothes," Mr. Henry says. "The same thing as you would do with a 12-year-old."

Some men escaped their drudgery by looking forward to the annual county fair, or watching a University of Iowa football game. Others simply escaped.

Gene Berg first ran away in 1981. After attending his father's funeral in Texas, he was sent back to Iowa by his mother, only to hitchhike his way home a couple of days later. Taken by a kindly trucker to a rest stop outside Dallas, Mr. Berg had 25 cents, a Bible and his mother's phone number scribbled on paper.

Another time, he says, the supervisors were riding the men too hard with "You're too lazy to do this, too lazy to do that" kind of talk. So he bought some Honey Buns and other supplies, waited for the right moment, then slipped under the cold curtain of night.

Although caught before he got too far, he says, he still cherishes this distant snatch of freedom. Hiding and shivering in a culvert beside the main road. Laughing to himself as he ate Honey Bun after Honey Bun.

Mr. Berg wasn't alone. A man named Alford Busby Jr. is remembered for having a limp, for unloading turkeys on the live dock and for disappearing into a morning snowstorm in January 1987.

“And away he went,” Mr. Henry says. “We never did know why.”

But the men knew. Mr. Busby had been sent to his room for not doing some job properly, Mr. Levi says. “And he say, ‘No, I’m not going to bed, I’m going to watch TV like everybody else.’ ”

“They pissed him off,” Mr. Wilkins says. “And he walked out.”

Train tracks running through the heart of Atalissa; the feather-flecked property of the West Liberty Foods turkey processing plant in West Liberty, six miles from Atalissa. Left, Kassie Bracken/The New York Times; right, Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

DEATH CERTIFICATE

According to a county medical examiner, Alford Busby Jr. “wandered away from home in sub-zero temperature.”

Local officials searched the wintry landscape without success. Three months later, during the spring thaw, a farmer found a body along a field’s fence row, a quarter-mile from the main road. Mr. Busby was 37, or maybe 43.

“Mentally retarded man wandered away from home in subzero temperature,” his [death certificate](#) says, citing hypothermia.

His body was returned to his mother in Texas. But a memorial plaque planted on the Atalissa schoolhouse’s front lawn kept the fate of Alford Busby fresh in the minds of those he left behind.

Decline

Beyond Atalissa, life evolved.

As the decades passed, the “R-word” disappeared from the professional lexicon. Inclusion replaced exclusion. Class-action lawsuits, media investigations and groundbreaking government legislation further

established the rights of people with a developmental disability to have choice in their lives.

The men of Henry's Turkey Service, though, remained trapped in Atalissa amber. No cellphones. No romantic relationships. No choices in where to live. Other than the gray-white dusting in Willie Levi's hair, or the lines creasing Henry Wilkins's face, or the bodily damage done by decades of assembly-line toil, nothing changed, including their pay.

PAYCHECK

After the myriad deductions, the paychecks the men received never exceeded \$65.

The 2007 time sheets for Mr. Wilkins tell the tale. No matter how many hours he worked — 163 hours in one period, 139.59 in another — his earnings were always shown to be exactly \$1,041.09. And his **take-home pay** never exceeded \$65.

That same year, the turkey plant paid Henry's Turkey Service more than \$500,000 for services rendered.

By this point, a married couple, Randy and Dru Neubauer, had been the men's hands-on supervisors for several years. Like their predecessors, they had no training in caring for people with disability; Mr. Neubauer's previous experience was in landscaping.

When the boss man, T. H. Johnson, died at 74 in early 2008, the Neubauers became the sole on-site managers of a business now cruel in its simplicity.

The men continued to rise at 3 a.m. for a breakfast prepared by an older housemate who always made sure to wash his hands after killing another bug while cooking. Still, many men ate with one hand over their plates to block the roaches falling from the ceiling.

“

The aggrieved workers could have enjoyed a good life. Instead, they lost decades of healthy life experiences.

Sick time was not always an option. Mr. Berg pulled guts while struggling with throat cancer and chemotherapy treatment. “I threw up at my house and I threw up at work,” he says.

The men also say Mr. Neubauer and an assistant often harassed them to quicken the pace on the assembly line. “They wanted me to work faster,” Mr. Wilkins says. “I can’t do that.”

One day in 2007, Mr. Neubauer sent a slight man named Johnny Kent sprawling to the ground. Mr. Neubauer called it accidental, but Mr. Kent disagrees: “He knocked me down.”

The turkey plant, now owned by West Liberty Foods, notified Henry’s Turkey Service by letter that Mr. Neubauer had been seen “abusively yelling at Henry’s workers and physically punching them.” Barred from the plant, he still kept his job at the schoolhouse, overseeing those he had been accused of abusing.

On the drive home, the Henry’s vans sometimes stopped at a local market, where the men could dash in to buy a can of Copenhagen snuff, a

Mountain Dew, a Honey Bun. But if supervisors thought that a man hadn't been working hard enough, they'd order him to remain in the van.

"Damn lie," says James Fowler, who pulled guts. "I did work hard enough."

The punishment continued at the schoolhouse. A man might be told to pull weeds. To stay in his room, with no television or radio. To forget about going to church on Sunday. To place both hands on a pole and stay that way until supper. To walk in circles while carrying heavy weights.

"They said I wasn't doing a good job," Mr. Levi says. "So — 'Get your black butt up and get them weights.' "

A gut puller named Tommy Johnson suffered more than most. Short, stout and with a constant expression of woe, he rarely cleaned his room, often picked through the trash and sometimes ran off. "I would walk," he says, moving two fingers along a table to illustrate.

A couple of times, Mr. Johnson was handcuffed to his bed overnight. Another time, he says, "one of them kicked me in the nuts" — an injury that later caused testicular problems.

Mr. Neubauer declined to comment for this article. But he acknowledged in court testimony and in interviews with investigators that he sometimes disciplined the men. He alternately admitted and denied handcuffing Mr. Johnson. As for the carrying of weights, he said: "The doctor wanted them to do exercises."

VIDEO | 0:57

The Abuse

The men suffered the abuse collectively, as if they were all Tommy Johnson. And every now and then, someone rose in defiance, as when Billy Penner stood up for Mr. Levi after his friend was ordered again to grab the pole and not move.

“He say: ‘You leave him alone,’ ” Mr. Levi recalls. “He say, ‘I’m going to deck you one!’ ”

In the end, the men of Atalissa had only one another, their everyday lives unaltered by those rare moments when the world beyond Atalissa seemed to take note of their existence.

The federal Department of Labor cited Henry’s Turkey Service for not properly compensating the men; the company promised to comply, but didn’t. The Iowa Department of Human Services received several complaints over the years, including similar allegations of abuse from a relative and a former worker. Nothing changed.

Mr. Hepker, the former Atalissa official, tried to alert the Department of Human Services after noticing that the schoolhouse’s front door was padlocked. “I was told that they were understaffed as all government agencies are, and did I have any evidence,” he recalls. “And I said, ‘Well, just the door being padlocked shut.’ ”

The padlock disappeared. But the incident continues to vex Mr. Hepker. If he had called about a skinny dog in someone’s yard, he says, the response would have been quicker, and better.

At night, life in the schoolhouse wound down.

Supper with hands held over plates. Medication collected from a dingy come-and-get-it board. Laundry done by a resident who scrubbed away

the signs of denied bathroom breaks. Sleeping on beds dampened by ceiling leaks. Lights out.

And 32 men went to sleep, only to do it all over again at 3 o'clock in the morning.

Goodbye

It was time.

More than 30 years of assembly-line drudgery had taken its toll. Sensing that its “boys” were slowing down, Henry’s Turkey Service worked out a staggered separation with the processing plant. Several of the 32 men would be retired, without their input, by the end of 2008, with the rest leaving by the next spring.

“The birds were too heavy,” says one of the men, Tommy House. “That’s why we got retired.”

Those with no family in their lives had long been promised a happy retirement back in Texas, to a building on the Goldthwaite ranch that was being renovated with money deducted from their pay. The men sometimes talked of nothing else.

But the renovation was never completed. Mr. Henry cites Mr. Johnson’s death and his own health problems, and adds: “We didn’t get there.”

The first round of men with nowhere else to go were taken to a nursing home in Midland, 250 miles west of Goldthwaite. Those still in Atalissa, meanwhile, were asked by the turkey plant to train their nondisabled replacements in the skills they had mastered.

The evisceration supervisor, Dave Meincke, says his friends approached this final task the way they approached every workday for decades: “With pride.”

Henry’s Turkey Service nearly left Iowa with this as its parting impression: proud men with disability, training their nondisabled colleagues before leaving for a well-deserved Texas retirement. The fuller, more disturbing story might never have been told, had one of the men’s relatives not inquired.

Sherri Brown had learned that after decades of turkey-plant toil, her older brother Keith had about \$80 in savings. Failing to get satisfactory explanations from several state agencies, the furious sister contacted Clark Kauffman, a reporter at The Des Moines Register, who started making calls of his own.

These inquiries led to the chaotic scene that the Department of Human Services supervisor, Denise Gonzales, encountered that February afternoon in 2009: an eerie schoolhouse crowded with investigators, social workers, company representatives and 21 disheveled, frightened, vulnerable men.



The garishly painted interior of the Atalissa schoolhouse; a scar on Frank Rodriguez's hand, left by a surgical repair required after years of repetitive work. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

A SWAT team of government officials assembled in the cockroach-rich kitchen. When the state fire marshal announced that he was declaring the building uninhabitable, all eyes turned to Ms. Gonzales.

“It was like I just gave birth to 21 men,” Ms. Gonzales says.

She gently instructed the schoolhouse residents to pack for an overnight adventure at the Super 8 Motel in Muscatine, 15 miles away. Her happy message: “We’re going on vacation.”

The men, some excited, some anxious, filed into vans that soon slipped through a town in late-night repose. The lights of Atalissa vanished in their wake.

After sleeping on clean sheets and eating waffles for breakfast, each evacuee was assigned a social worker. Soon these caseworkers were filing into the motel's kitchenette, where Ms. Gonzales had set up her makeshift office, to provide harrowing updates.

Here was a man who had suffered from hearing loss for years, because his ears had never been cleaned. Here was a man with dental wires jutting from his bleeding gums. Here were men with missing fingernails, forked hands, curving toenails cutting into the pads of feet.

The social workers cut toenails, bought Orajel for mouth pains and listened to the men speak of being alone in the world. (“Just me and my brother,” said Robert Penner.) Afterward, some of the workers found someplace private, and cried.

On the fourth day, two yellow school buses pulled up to the Super 8, “Exceptional Persons Inc.” written on their sides. This was the name of the nonprofit organization in Waterloo that Ms. Gonzales, who is now with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, had chosen to help the men find a new life.

Carrying spare belongings in boxes and bags, the men climbed aboard. As the school buses lumbered north to Waterloo, many of them clapped and sang.

VIDEO | 0:59

The Revelation

Waterloo, Iowa

With its shops, restaurants and parks, the city of Waterloo was a wonderland of the possible. Some of the men exulted in their unshackling, while others did not yet trust what was happening.

“A lot of them wanted to be assured that their former caretakers wouldn’t be coming to get them,” recalls Susan Seehase, the services director for Exceptional Persons.

The nonprofit set up meetings with Medicaid case managers, made medical and dental appointments, and arranged for mental health evaluations. Some employees spent their own money on clothes for the Atalissa refugees.

Many of the men focused on what they had left behind: televisions, winter coats, those blankets that an Atalissa woman had spent a year quilting for each of them. So Ms. Seehase and a few colleagues drove down to collect

what could be salvaged, only to find clothes and quilts worn and soiled, and appliances riddled with roaches.

The people of Atalissa could not believe that the boys had been spirited away overnight. “Like someone swooping in and taking your children for reasons you don’t know,” says Lynn Thiede, the former pastor at the Zion Lutheran Church.

They were especially upset that their requests to contact their longtime neighbors were being denied. But many of the men were suffering from post-traumatic stress, Ms. Seehase says. “We were trying to give them a break from that life.”

The Iowa news media flocked to Atalissa to ask how such abuse could have happened there. Defensive residents recalled the parades and dances, and explained that they had not been inside the schoolhouse for many years. Still, the criticism tugged at the collective conscience.

“I’m sure some of us — a lot of us, maybe — had second thoughts,” Mr. Hepker says. “That we should have looked into it a little deeper.”

The Atalissa soul-searching held no interest for Ms. Seehase. Now that this case had pierced her social worker’s protective armor, she was on a mission.

Several of the schoolhouse evacuees had moved South to be with relatives, leaving a dozen others in need of permanent housing. They also needed basic life lessons in how to interact with women, say, or how to make nutritious food choices. Ms. Seehase notes that they were adamant on one point: no turkey.

The men divided themselves into compatible sets of three and four, and went house-hunting. Social Security benefits and money earned from jobs would cover the rent, while Medicaid would pay for the on-site presence of Exceptional Persons employees.

A ranch house on a busy avenue. A split-level house on a quiet street. A house with red brick on a cul-de-sac. A few people new to Waterloo found homes and settled into the 21st century.

Living lives of independence: Gene Berg, making dinner in the kitchen of the house he shares with three other men, and Robert Penner, watering his garden at the house he shares with his brother Billy. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The Case

In the wake of the Atalissa revelations in early 2009, Iowa's governor at the time, Chet Culver, acknowledged that "every level of government has failed these men since 1974." Hearings, investigations and interagency finger-pointing predictably followed.

But no criminal charges were filed. Law enforcement officials concluded that the men's accounts lacked consistency, and that the person most responsible for the abuse, T. H. Johnson, was dead — even though the squalor worsened considerably after his death.

Sheriff David White of Muscatine County saw nothing to pursue. The men "had about every game, game table, yard games, etc., to play in their off hours both indoor and outdoor," he wrote in a recent email. "I don't believe there is any one of my staff that felt that these individuals were in any way abused or mistreated."

Henry's Turkey Service was eventually cited for various wage violations by state and federal labor agencies. But the men's last, best hope for justice, it seemed, rested with Robert Canino, a regional attorney in the Dallas

office of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The chatty, tenacious lawyer took the case because it touched on one of his areas of expertise, human trafficking.

First, Mr. Canino won a \$1.3 million judgment for two years of back wages, arguing that his 32 clients deserved to be paid the same as nondisabled colleagues doing similar work. He then set out to prove emotional harm, in what the law calls the “loss of enjoyment of life.”

The lawyer spent many hours with the men. When their stories became almost too much for him — too upsetting, too complex — one of the men, Henry Wilkins, placed a hand on his shoulder and said: *Don’t worry, Robert, we got your back.*

The case against Henry’s Turkey Service unfolded last April in a courtroom in Davenport, where the blond wood and recessed lighting clashed with descriptions of boarded windows and moldy mattresses.

The men of Atalissa did not testify. Many others spoke in their stead, including Sue A. Gant, a nationally recognized expert in developmental disabilities who had gotten to know the men. Decades earlier, she had helped thousands of people living in New York’s infamous Willowbrook State School to integrate into the community.

In clinically precise language, Dr. Gant laid out the profound physical and mental harm done to each of the men. “The aggrieved workers could have enjoyed a good life,” she testified. “Instead, they lost decades of healthy life experiences.”

After Kenneth Henry and Randy Neubauer took the stand to deny responsibility and blame each other, the jury awarded \$7.5 million to each of the Atalissa men, for a total of \$240 million. Mr. Canino knew instantly

that the judge would soon reduce the amount to about \$1.6 million, the cap allowed by law for a business with fewer than 101 employees.

Still, hearing the decisive verdict, he wept.

Robert Canino, a lawyer for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, visiting the vacant Atalissa schoolhouse; news of the jury award in the case filed against Henry's Turkey Service, the largest in the commission's history. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The verdict conveyed the communal outrage felt about a case that, in courtrooms and the halls of government, has become shorthand for the segregation and exploitation of people with disabilities.

In particular, the Henry's case has cast a harsh spotlight on the provision of the Fair Labor Standards Act that allows employers — whether Henry's Turkey Service or a sheltered workshop — to pay subminimum wages to employees with disabilities.

“Much as Willowbrook challenged us all to re-examine our assumptions and look more deeply into residential institutions, Henry's Turkey Service has challenged us to look more closely at employment institutions,” Eve Hill, a deputy assistant attorney general in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, said in a recent email.

As a result, she says, the federal government has expanded its efforts to crack down on “unnecessary segregation in employment systems,” and has already challenged an overreliance on segregated sheltered workshops in Oregon and Rhode Island.

Finding a solution is complex, with some fearing that dismantling the provision would leave even fewer employment options for people with disabilities. But many disability rights advocates argue that it has become a license to exploit, citing the Henry's case as Exhibit A.

“The verdict in the Henry’s case demonstrates that this way of thinking has to go,” says Steven Schwartz, the legal director for the Center for Public Representation.

Advocates also say that the case played a role in the ultimate inclusion of people with disability in Mr. Obama’s executive order to raise the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour for workers employed under certain federal contracts.

What’s more, Senator Harkin says the case gave impetus to his fight to add a long-sought provision to the Obama administration’s signature health care act of 2009: an option that encourages states, through financial incentives, to support people with disabilities in the community, rather than in the forced segregation of institutions.

What happened in Atalissa is hard to shake, the senator adds. “It’s as close to involuntary servitude as I’ve ever seen.”

Several weeks after the trial, Mr. Canino drove up from Texas to update the men in Waterloo on their case. Walking into the conference room, he spread his arms for the hugs sure to come from those eager to fill him in about dishwashing jobs, plans to go camping and girlfriends who like to slow dance.

“I know that some of you don’t want to talk about Atalissa anymore,” Mr. Canino began.

Several shook their heads. “No way,” said James Fowler, who had pulled guts for 30 years. “No part of that.”

Slowly, but without condescension, Mr. Canino said each man had been awarded roughly \$100,000 in damages and back pay — money that has

yet to be received. He explained that collecting the money from Henry's Turkey Service would be another challenge.

"I can't promise you what I can get you," he said.

A quiet took hold. Then Mr. Wilkins said, "I got your back on that."

Mr. Canino smiled to the floor. "Well, that's why we won," he said, voice trembling. "People knew you had my back."

Today

The Route 1 bus continues its heave-and-sigh through Waterloo, passing strip malls and golf courses and dozens of side streets, down which thousands of ordinary lives unfold.

In an off-white house with a generous backyard, the late-morning air hints of fried eggs and strong coffee. Henry Wilkins, 69, is working on a needlepoint pattern of the Chicago Cubs logo in his bedroom. On the dresser sits a photograph of him conquering the Log Ride at Adventureland near Des Moines, bony arms raised in joy.

Down to 115 pounds when he was rescued, the gangly Mr. Wilkins has regained weight, but he has emphysema and some trouble walking. If he still has relatives in Texas, he says with a half-smile, heaven only knows where they're at.

A backyard gardener and a Nascar fan, he recently decided to shake things up by having his gray hair colored red. He sat in the dining room, a towel draping his shoulders, while a social worker applied the bold dye.

"Autumn," he says, modeling his new punk look.

The Penner brothers, both with saucer eyes and straggly gray hair, are finishing their coffee in the Folgers-perfumed kitchen, where containers of classic roast fill a cabinet. Coffee, their drink of leisure, matters.

“

It's a new world. You do what you want to do.

Billy, 69, the more talkative brother, keeps nine pens in his shirt pocket and a ring of many keys jangling from his belt; he likes to be seen as in charge. After decades of pulling feathers from freshly dead birds, he says, he is happy to be doing nothing.

Robert, 64, who spent half his life pulling guts, cleans up at a local pizza parlor. The yellow Atalissa T-shirt that he wears, from a long-ago town celebration, is misleading. Deeply traumatized by his time in that town, social workers say, he often lets his older sibling speak for them both.

Their parents and younger sister are dead. But a couple of years ago, their older brother, Wesley — whom they haven't seen “in two dog ages,” Billy says — mailed them photo albums filled with black-and-white snaps of their boyhood in Abilene, posing like Wally and the Beaver in front of big sedans, in that time before being sent away.

“You want some more coffee?” Billy asks, holding up a coffee mug.

“Nah, I'm fine,” Robert answers.

“Guess I’ll wash them out then.”

The fraternal conversation turns to dinner options.

Not far away, in a tan split-level house, Willie Levi prepares for a date with his girlfriend, Rose Short, who also has an intellectual disability. Dinner first, then maybe some dancing.





Clockwise, from above left: Billy and Robert Penner, in their kitchen; Willie Levi; Henry Wilkins; and Gene Berg, with his beloved John Deere lawnmower. Above, top right and near right: Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times; far right: Kassie Bracken/The New York Times



Mr. Levi, 67, is wearing an orange shirt, a red St. Louis Cardinals cap and a pair of red-and-black basketball shorts. Two plastic spoons are tucked in a high black sock, in case someone calls for music. He can also do a turkey gobble that goes right through you.

After his rescue, Mr. Levi underwent surgery for a broken kneecap and counseling for other damaged parts; he hasn't had contact with a family member in decades. But he has found a rhythm in life that includes a weekly date with Ms. Short, who keeps her black hair short.

An Exceptional Persons staff member drives the couple to a sports-centric grill in Cedar Falls, then leaves them to themselves. Sitting side by side in a booth, they order cheeseburgers and fries, a Diet Pepsi for her, a root beer for him.

As televisions blare and children quarrel over foosball, Mr. Levi and Ms. Short talk about their favorite subject, birthdays. She once gave him a Jeff Gordon T-shirt, and he once bought her perfume at JCPenney.

The two friends split the bill. Using his debit card, Mr. Levi pays his share and leaves a dollar tip.

“It’s too late for the dance,” Ms. Short says.

“Yep,” Mr. Levi says.

“Raining,” she says.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “It’s raining.”

The Route 1 bus lumbers on. Its passengers include a scowling man in a sleeveless Iowa Hawkeyes T-shirt, a young woman in a Burger King uniform and Gene Berg. Just another working stiff, with a lunch bag in his lap and a faint scar on his wrist, marking where surgery repaired what pulling guts had damaged.

Mr. Berg has never returned to the ranch in Goldthwaite, where Kenneth Henry now clatters his walker down the darkened hall of the never-completed retirement home, wishing that he had done some things differently, but still very proud of how his company empowered the men.

“They were paying their own way, they were holding down a job, and they weren’t depending on the government,” he says. And yes, he says, he misses the “boys.”

“It’s like children. You know?”

Mr. Henry says he is appealing the unfavorable verdict in the E.E.O.C. case. As for all those lawyers and social workers and “bureaucrats” who say the company exploited the men — well, he says, they were hoodwinked.



“They got conned,” he says. “Some guys with I.Q.s of 60 and 70 conned them, and they never even knew it.”

Mr. Berg has also never returned to Atalissa, where old friends like Vada Baker, who once learned the Texas two-step from the men, harbor guilt about telltale signs missed or maybe ignored. “I hope God forgives me,” she says.

The convenience store, where so many Honey Buns and Mountain Dewes were bought, is shuttered. The Lutheran church, where the Lord’s Prayer was hummed, has no pastor. And the town hopes one day to knock down that old schoolhouse on the hill.

“Out of sight, out of mind, maybe,” Mr. Hepker says. “We just need to get rid of it.”

End of the line, downtown Waterloo. Mr. Berg says goodbye to the driver and walks along Sycamore Street. Past the Paradise Café. Past the convenience store where he sometimes buys a soda.

This afternoon he will return by bus to his home on the cul-de-sac, where he lives with two friends from the old schoolhouse, James Fowler and Kenny Jackson. Atalissa rarely comes up.

Tonight, Mr. Berg will most likely call his mother in Kansas on his cellphone. He might mow the lawn with his new John Deere. He might go out for dinner, or just throw a steak on the gas grill that he bought with his earnings. He hasn’t decided, he says, but it’s his to decide.

“It’s a new world,” he says. “You do what you want to do.”

First, though, Gene Berg has a shift to work, washing dishes at the Black Hawk County Sheriff’s Office. He walks into the building, flashes his identification badge, and is waved in.

The Men of Atalissa Today

Douglas Barco, 65

Lives in a nursing home in west-central Texas.

Leonard Barefield, 68

Lives in a nursing home in west Texas.

James Keith Brown, 63

Lives in an apartment in Arkansas.

Clayton Gene Berg, 58

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

David Crouch, 73

Lives in a group home in central Texas.

Clarence Dunning, 63

Lives in a group home in west-central Texas.

James Fowler, 68

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Pete Graffagnino

Died in 2011. He was 64.

L.C. Hall, 60

Lives in a nursing home in west Texas.

John David Hatfield, 67

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Paul Hayek, 65

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Tommy House, 63

Lives in a group home in west-central Texas.

Kenny Jackson, 61

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Tommy Johnson, 61

Lives in a nursing home in west Texas.

Carl Wayne Jones, 67

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Johnny Kent, 64

Lives in a nursing home in west Texas.

Ronald Lashley, 62

Is living with relatives in southeast Texas.

Willie Levi, 67

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Jeffrey Long, 54

Lives in a group home in north-central Texas.

Johnny McDaniel, 61

Lives with a relative in west-central Texas.

Joe Morrell, 70

Lives in a nursing home in west Texas.

Bill Murray, 65

Lives in an assisted-living facility in central Texas.

Robert O'Bier, 66

Lives in a group home in central Texas.

John Orange, 54

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Preston Pate, 64

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Billy Penner, 69

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Robert Penner, 65

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Frank Rodriguez, 63

Lives in an apartment in Waterloo, Iowa.

Doyle Trantham

Died in 2011. He was 81.

Raymond Vaughn, 62

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

Brady Watson, 44

Lives in a group home in north Texas.

Henry Dewey Wilkins, 69

Shares a house in Waterloo, Iowa.

The latest development in the Henry's Turkey Service case appeared in The Des Moines Register on March 7, 2014. The story was written by reporter Clark Kauffman, who helped to expose the abuse and neglect in 2009. [Read the Full Story »](#)