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SPECIAL EDITION

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Dear Client:

Fifty years ago, August 1, 1966, one of this nation's most horrific crimes occurred in Austin. Its ultimate impact changed the city, and even cities all over the US. The story of the sniper who climbed to the top of the UT Austin Tower, and in broad daylight, killed many innocent people, is now being re-visited in the media nationwide. I had a unique vantage point having broadcast live on the radio, within range of the sniper's fire, for more than 90 minutes. In this edition, I'm going to take the liberty to share some little-known aspects of that day.

For a perspective, it helps to recall what it was like back then, when the population of Austin was little more than 200,000. **The small city's economy and life revolved around UT Austin and the State Capitol.** The city's first suburban shopping mall (Highland Mall) didn't open until five years later. The words "high" and "tech" were not used in the same sentence. Many residents did not lock their cars or their front doors.

There was no such thing as a cell phone. Landline telephones were rotary dial. Small transistor radios were the preferred method to receive mobile news and music. **TV stations broadcasted in black and white**, with "Live" capability in its infancy. No stations had helicopters or satellite transmission capability. It was a simpler time and, until August 1, 1966, **no modern-day mass murders had occurred out in the open on a scale of what happened that fateful day in Austin, Texas.**

Other media outlets have approached this 50th anniversary with extensive coverage of the horrible event. I've been interviewed countless times for their coverage for two reasons: 1) because I became the **voice/face of the gun battle** that covered almost 90-minutes, and 2) because I have been the **keeper of the original film footage that captured the event as it happened.**

So, this week, it seemed appropriate to depart from our usual newsletter approach and share with you some **insights and perspectives you may not be able to get elsewhere – with a few observations tossed in for good measure.** What can you expect in the next few minutes? Insight into some personal moments – such as the fact that the sniper was **listening to my broadcast as he mercilessly gunned-down victims** on the UT Austin campus. And, among other things, **a link will be provided so you can listen to an abbreviated version of the broadcast as it occurred 50 years ago.**

Why is this horrible Austin event -- where so many died, and so many were affected for the rest of their lives -- important a half century later? Historians will write how it was the first shooting of its kind, how it led to the creation of SWAT teams, and how it sparked heightened security in public places that is the norm to this day. I'll leave this to historians. But, offered here is an observation about why it continues to be resurrected year-after-year.

In recent years, there have been numerous mass murders – many with greater loss of life. So why does the UT Austin Tower Sniper incident remain so prevalent? The main reason is somewhat grisly. **Sniper Charles Whitman's rampage occurred out in the open. And it was captured on black and white film, as it happened.** Dead bodies and the wounded were lying in the very hot noonday sun. Ambulances were screaming. People were shouting. Many were huddled behind cars, buildings, trees, even flagpoles. All this was filmed. And, the university Tower still stands as a prominent and iconic reminder today for all to see.

Now think about other incidents. **There were more victims in a shooting on Virginia Tech's campus. But it occurred *inside* a classroom.** There was no visual record of the incident, except for exterior scenes after it was over. The same with Columbine High School. The most dramatic image showed a student fleeing the building by dropping out of a window. Nothing like the UT Austin campus.

None of the other mass murders were captured on film or video as they occurred. So, film of the Tower Sniper incident has been used time and time again in connection with other shootings. And it is a key part of current stories running nationwide as the 50th anniversary of the tragedy approaches.

To this day, people will tell you they watched the scenes of the Tower Sniper carnage "Live" as it happened on TV. No, they didn't. They just think they did. The Austin campus scenes were all on film that had to be processed and edited. The first time the images were on TV wasn't until 5:30 pm CT, almost 4 hours after the ordeal had ended. Well then, what makes them *think* they watched it unfold on "Live" TV?

They *heard* it on television. What? Here's what happened. During our radio broadcast, the university TV station wheeled a clunky studio TV camera to an open door and aimed it at the top of the Tower. Their picture was static, showing only the observation deck and the Tower clock. Our TV station picked up their static image of the Tower and used my radio description of the mayhem for the audio, creating "Word Pictures." That was the "Live" TV.

Radio "Word Pictures" can be quite compelling. Think of a radio broadcast of a sporting event. **It can be riveting and create an image in your mind's eye.** Back then, battery operated **transistor radios were all the rage. Most every person had one. (And so did the sniper!)** In a minute, we'll give you a link so you can *hear* portions of that original broadcast.

It was a compelling radio broadcast, but also creepy. How's that? Creepy is the best word we can come up with to describe the feeling when it was discovered that sniper Charles Whitman was listening as I described his murderous rampage. How sick!

A transistor radio was part of the guns, ammo, food, supplies that Whitman stuffed in a foot locker when he went unimpeded (remember, there were no security scanners back then) to the Tower's observation deck – killing tourists who were in his way as he reached the top. **After he was killed, you could hear my broadcast blaring out of the sniper's transistor radio.**

Obviously there was no way of knowing he was listening. I've often thought what might have been done had we had known he could hear me. **But, likely nothing would have made a difference. After all, the sniper was relishing what he was doing.** In fact, one shooting victim told us Whitman put down his rifle and looked at him through binoculars to determine his damage. Unimaginable.

Want to hear what Whitman heard as he was killing innocents? **We've put together an abbreviated audio tape below of the original broadcast as it occurred 50 years ago.** To listen [Click Here](#).

Courage and heroism were on display throughout the campus that day. Many deeds have been the focal point of media stories recently. But, there is one poignant story overlooked for decades. It involved a woman whose story has been virtually lost in the aftermath.

Claire Wilson was Whitman's first shooting victim. He carefully aimed and shot the 8-months' pregnant student in the womb, then killed her boyfriend who was walking beside her. **The blistering sun bore down on Claire. She lay wounded out in the open on searing hot pavement.** Then, amid gunshots, sirens and screams, a young lady rushed out to her.

Rita Starpattern didn't know Claire. But, Rita ran from a protected area to comfort a fellow student, who was lying beside her dead boyfriend. Rita ended up lying next to Claire and talked encouragingly to her for close to an hour, while the shooting continued. **Then two other students braved the gunfire to run out and pick up Claire, taking her to an ambulance.** Rita escaped the other way. And, her story was one that was virtually lost in the aftermath.

Claire's boyfriend? Another student, a Vietnam vet, ran out and picked him up. Discovering he was dead, he still carried his body out of the line of fire.

Though Rita Starpattern later became a prominent 60s and 70s activist **very few were ever aware of her courageous act that day.** She is now dead. But, her actions along with many others that dark day – help brighten, somewhat, our memories.

Two practices of journalism, still in effect to this day, were broken in Austin on that tragic day August 1, 1966, with both a good and bad impact. How did this come to be, and what was the effect? We'll explain why direction was given for this to happen.

UTAustin and state government dominated Austin life back then. The city had a small-town feel in more ways than one. **Most everyone had some connection with UTAustin**, even if all they did was drive in the vicinity. So when the live broadcast began, phone lines were jammed as callers searched for information about loved ones or acquaintances.

That's when I made the decision to release the names of those who were rushed to Brackenridge Hospital's ER **without knowing whether they were dead or alive, and without notifying next of kin**. It was comforting for many (the greater good) to not hear familiar names. But, it was devastating to those not so fortunate.

The man who hired me, and whose job I inherited when he went into semi-retirement, **Paul Bolton**, rushed to the station to help us out. And, he heard his grandson's name read on the air. His voice quivering, he went on the air and said "Joe, Joe, can you read those names again. **Everyone's interested in those names. I think you have my grandson on that list.**" He was right. **Paul Bolton Sonntag was killed by the sniper**. We live with that heartbreak to this day.

Also, prior to that day, we had never shown a dead body on our TV newscasts, even though some other US TV stations had not exercised such restraint. **But, after witnessing and describing the event as it happened on the UTAustin campus we never wavered in deciding to show the filmed horrors of August 1, 1966 on TV**. Nothing like this mass school shooting had ever occurred in the US. **It was unbelievable, almost beyond comprehension, unless you could see it with your own eyes**. Yes, maybe we should have put up a disclaimer in advance. But the chaos of the day did not allow the time for such a nicety.

Soon after the event, I came to be the keeper of the original film and a copy of the live radio broadcast. The film footage is what has been shown worldwide for the last 50 years. Because it was history, albeit a very dark history, the film has been made available to all who needed it – without charge.

Sincerely,



Editor/Publisher