

note

1966 UT Tower Shooting: Memories and Vantage of a Tragic Day by a Geologist

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Below is a summary of the events, requested by a friend, of my memory of the August 1, 1966 UT Tower shooting by Charles Whitman. Whitman killed 14 people and wounded 31 during his shooting spree from the observation deck of the UT Tower.

In 1966 I worked for the Texas Water Development Board as a geologist. At the time of the Whitman shooting our offices were in the Sam Houston State Office Building that is located immediately northeast of the State Capital Building one and a half blocks east of North Congress Avenue on East 14th Street. I was in a large room where three of us had our offices on the 6th floor that faced north toward 14th Street.

Typically at lunch time I turned on my hand-sized transistor radio to listen to the news and eat my brown bag lunch. Normally I listened to KTBC where Neal Spelce presented the noon news. When I turned on my radio this time Neal was obviously excited and reporting that someone was shooting a gun from the observation deck of the UT Tower. Those of us in our office immediately looked at the tower and could see puffs of white dust randomly showing up around the top portion of the tower. In that we were located on 14th street and the Main Building Tower is located about 23rd Street, some 9 blocks, we were about seven tenths of a mile slightly southeast of it. We heard from the news accounts that the white puffs of dusts were the result of bullets from the ground shooting at the Tower. Being on the 6th floor of the Sam Houston Building gave us a good view of the Tower (Figure 1).

The equipment in our office included survey instruments. I opened the support tripod for a survey instrument and put a survey level on it. With the magnification of the lenses of the survey level, I was able to view the observation deck of the Tower much better (Figure 2). I saw Whitman moving around on the deck wearing his red checker long sleeve shirt. I did not see anyone else with him from my view of the southeast corner of the observation deck. Neal reported on the radio that the police did not know how many were firing from the deck. After watching Whitman move about the deck for a while, I was convinced that he was alone. At that time I called the police department and told them who I was, where I was looking from and how, and that I only could see one person on the observation deck. I hoped that my call would be of some help, for the police were very busy.



Figure 1. Image from Google Earth showing the 2013 view of the UT Tower in relation to the Sam Houston Office Building. Many of the taller buildings were not present in 1966.

During this time numerous ambulances passed in front of our building going east on 14th en route to the emergency room at Brackenridge Hospital.

It doesn't seem like very much time passed when I noticed the south entrance of the observation deck of the Tower began to open very slowly. Slowly two Austin policemen came through the door. One went west, and the other went east, then north. Shortly after that they both returned to the door and tried to signal the shooters below, but instead kept their heads down due to gun fire from below and went through the door. As I remember it, Whitman was in the northwest corner of the deck when the two policemen arrived and they shot and killed him there.

Another part of my story includes my father, James W. Sansom, Sr., who worked as a Plasterer for UT's Physical Plant. The Physical Plant for UT includes all the maintenance and repair personnel that are necessary to keep UT operating like carpenters, electricians, welders, yard maintenance people, power plant operators, painters, etc., and one plasterer, my Dad. Many of UT buildings were built in the 1930s when plaster was used for the interior walls. UT has continued to grow over the years from a student population in those days around 20,000 to over 50,000 today. Repairs and alterations to these building required the services of Physical Plant personnel many times. On August 1, 1966, my father was doing some plastering work in the Tower. He exited before noon and drove his truck back to eat lunch at the Physical Plant facilities located on 24th street about one block west of its dead-end into San Jacinto Street on the northeast side of UT's campus. He had to just miss Whitman because he used one of the

same elevators that Whitman did when he went to the top of the Tower. Due to the tragedy, telephone service was not very good with everybody checking on relatives, and of course we did not have cell phones in those days. I was able to talk to my mother and later she called to tell me that dad got through to tell her that he was safe.

Within the next few weeks, Dad was given the job to patch some of the bullet holes in the limestone walls of the Tower that were the result of police and others firing at Whitman. He told me that the stairway from the elevator to the observation deck was still very bloody when he was there.



Figure 2. Example of Surveyor's Level from AGS member John Mikels. This level was likely manufactured in the late 1800s to early 1900s.