

Fifty years on, 'Tower Sniper' sheds new light on Texas tragedy

By Alyson Ward | July 29, 2016 | Updated: July 31, 2016 3:35am

After five decades, you might think there's not much more to be said about Charles Whitman and the UT Tower shooting.

We all know what happened: On Aug. 1, 1966 - 50 years ago this week - a 25-year-old ex-Marine talked his way into the tower on the University of Texas campus in Austin, took a footlocker full of guns up to the observation deck and, around lunchtime, started shooting. From his perch more than 200 feet in the air, he gunned down people on campus and nearby streets, killing 16 and wounding 31. It was the first mass shooting on an American college campus, and the image of that sniper in the tower still haunts today.

But as often as the story's been rehashed, remarkably, there's still more to discover. A new book has unearthed a few more facts, stories and details. And, like everything else about that violent day, they're riveting.

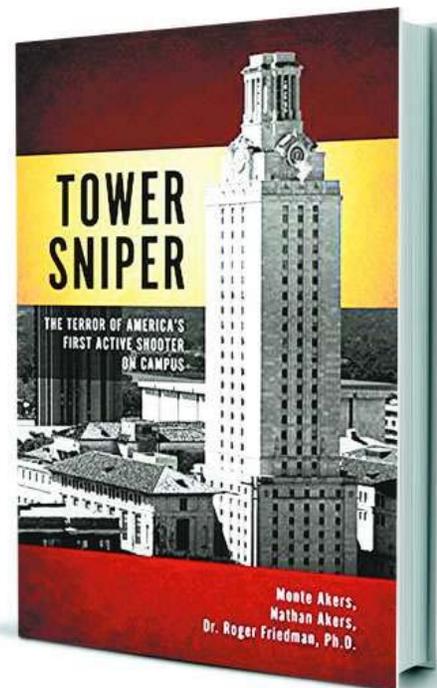
It looks a little textbook-dry, with its footnotes and crime-scene photos, but "Tower Sniper," written by Monte Akers, Nathan Akers and Roger Friedman, is a good read.

Monte Akers, an Austin attorney, has a tangential connection to the event: His wife's first cousin was in the campus co-op nearby when the shooting started, and she knew people who were killed and wounded. For years, he and his son, Nathan Akers, kicked around the idea of writing a book about that day.

"We were not by any means experts, going into this project," Monte Akers says. But the Austin History Center offered a large archive of primary material, and they could rely on witness accounts from a half-century of books and news stories. They decided to seek witnesses who hadn't been interviewed multiple times already, and that led them to Friedman, a Maryland psychologist who lost a childhood friend in the shooting.

Remarkably, the authors did find a few witnesses who haven't been heard from before. And they've managed to shed light on some of the myths and mysteries surrounding the tragedy.

Most notably, the book reexamines the motive behind the shootings. For years, it's been conventional wisdom that Whitman's behavior can be explained by a brain tumor. The day before the shootings, Whitman wrote that he'd recently had "tremendous headaches" and "many unusual and irrational thoughts." He wondered whether he had some physical disorder. And in fact, an autopsy showed a small tumor in his brain.



"It was what a nervous public wanted to believe," the book says. If Whitman had an illness, then his senseless act could be explained. People still prefer this explanation, Monte Akers says: "You can go online today and find all sorts of wild theories about the effect of a tumor on the amygdala and how it explains everything."

The more the authors of "Tower Sniper" researched, though, the more they realized the issue was "not so black and white." So they asked a top neurosurgeon to take a fresh look at the evidence, and he determined there's no way Whitman's small tumor - similar to those he's seen in thousands of patients - could have affected his behavior. It doesn't even explain Whitman's headaches, he said.

If it wasn't the tumor, why did Whitman do it? "Tower Sniper" explores possibilities, but as always, a definitive answer is elusive.

The book shifts smoothly between a play-by-play account of the action and a more removed, explanatory tone. Archival photos and maps help place the reader squarely in the scene. And each chapter is followed by pages of careful footnotes.

Toward the end, "Tower Sniper" examines the 1966 shooting's place in history. Dozens of mass shootings have happened since, on college and high school and elementary campuses, in movie theaters and nightclubs, in city streets and churches. But in 1966, this killing spree was an innocence-shattering first.

"It was a different time, a different world," Monte Akers says. The event was so unfathomable, Gov. John Connally formed a commission to try to explain Whitman's actions. Today mass shootings occur almost weekly, and the crimes nearly blend together in a public narrative of violence.

But if the shooting took away a sense of safety, it also made us more prepared for violence. "If this happened today in Austin, there would be a SWAT team on site within minutes that would probably take the shooter out," Monte Akers says. The two policemen who killed Whitman were armed with nothing more than a shotgun and a revolver.

Did the world need another book about a shooting spree that already has spawned a half-century of theories and analysis, stories and suspicions?

Had the authors known that this 50th-anniversary summer would churn with so much death and turmoil, Monte Akers says, "we would have given serious thought to whether it was a good idea to even focus on this particular topic." Some of the witnesses they interviewed were careful to insist that the book not glorify Whitman's violence. One refused to say Whitman's name; two more refused to participate so as not to give the gunman any more publicity.

But the Akerses kept turning up new information, new voices and new ideas. They got tips, lucky breaks, phone calls out of the blue. "Some of what we learned or gathered for the book, it almost fell into our laps," Monte Akers says. Fifty years after that August afternoon, it's still a story that wants to be told.



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