

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Melissa Sledge Dixon**

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Comment: 50th anniversary of the Charles Whitman
shootings at the University of Texas in 1966

10 Pages



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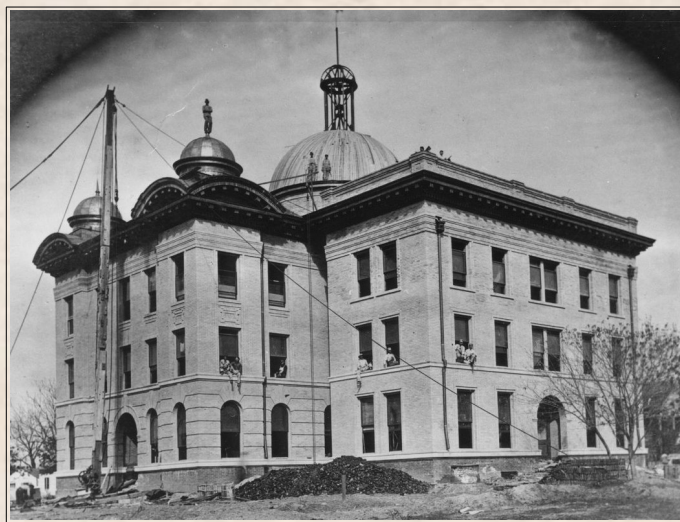
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Transcript

MCCAULEY: Melissa, tell us your full name.

DIXON: My name is Melissa Sledge Dixon.

MCCAULEY: Where were you born, and when did you move or come to Fort Bend County?

DIXON: I was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, grew up in Tennessee and Mississippi. My father was stationed in Texas, preparing for World War II. He loved Texas, and he brought us to Houston in August of 1963. I moved to Fort Bend in September of 1994.

MCCAULEY: Where did you go to high school?

DIXON: Robert E. Lee High School in Houston.

MCCAULEY: Part of what we are going to talk about today is a specific incident. This year is the 50th anniversary of the Charles Whitman shootings at the University of Texas in 1966. You were on campus that day, right? Let's talk about how you decided to go to the University of Texas.

DIXON: That was funny. My father and all of my uncles went to the University of Tennessee. My great-uncle was on the board at the University of Tennessee. We moved to Texas, and I wanted to go to the University of Tennessee. I was an only child. My daddy said no to the distance. Then he said no to the out-of-state tuition. We toured several campuses. He okayed the University of Texas because the initials were correct and the colors were close. (laughs)

MCCAULEY: That's a great story. I know some other people who are from Tennessee who made similar allusions. So, what were you going to study?

DIXON: I was interested in historic preservation. My degree was in interior design. It was in the Home Economics Department. I was the ONLY one in our class of about 20 who was interested in historic interiors. But the head of the department had opened Williamsburg as her first job out of graduate school.

MCCAULEY: You graduated from high school in 1966?

DIXON: Yes.

MCCAULEY: Was it in August when the incident took place at the University of Texas? How did you happen to be in Austin earlier than that?

DIXON: I needed one more grade to get into school. I always earned whatever grades were necessary, and I miscalculated. So, I went to school early that summer; earned three As and a B and I got into the University of Texas and graduated in 1970. I moved to Austin, something like June the 3rd, and I lived in the Scottish Rite dorm. It was on the north side of campus, just off of campus. I think it is 31st Street.

MCCAULEY: So you were going to a class on August 1? Is that why you were on campus that day?

DIXON: Yes, I had a math class. I was alone. I walked from the Scottish Rite dorm, across the mall and down what we call the six pack to the math building.

MCCAULEY: So you approached campus from the north, I think the last major street that you would cross would be 26th Street – now they call Dean Keetan, on the north side.

DIXON: Yes, I was two blocks north of that. There is also an Episcopal Church across from the Scottish Rite dorm.

MCCAULEY: So for people listening to this interview, you were approaching The Tower from the northwest corner of the campus.

DIXON: Yes, I came down the street in front of the dormitories, near the Little Field House, and between The Tower and Harry's Place, the library. I walked catty-corner across the Mall to the South Mall that went down near the statue with the horses.

I think my class started at ten or so. I got out about probably at eleven-fifteen. He let us out a little bit early that day. So, I walked across the Mall probably around eleven-thirty and was down on the South Mall.

I left class. I walked up that South Mall. Then was right out on the Main Mall where several people were shot. There were no shots going on at that time. I ran into a friend of mine. She and I met right there on the Mall. We decided to go on to The Co-op. So, we walked down the West Mall almost to Guadalupe, and changed our minds. We decided that we would go to lunch first and then come back. So, we went back up the West Mall between the library and The Tower again. We walked down in front of Caruthers Dormitory, Little Field and Kingsolving, and headed for SRD. We crossed what is now called Dean Keetan. There is an Episcopal Church.

When we got to the Episcopal Church, we were talking, and we looked over and saw a car that had a window shot out. We walked up to the car with our backs to The Tower and each put our finger in the hole. "This looks like a bullet hole." Then we thought—oh, we are going to miss lunch. So, we went into the dorm. They sent us straight down to lunch. We didn't think anything about it. We may have been hearing the shots. So, we ate lunch. They never told us anything. They let us out from lunch. We went to our rooms, then decided it was time to go over to The Drag. So, we went to the front door. We were told we could not leave.

THAT'S when we found out what was going on. BUT come to think of it, I just realized this. One reason we decided to go on was because we were hearing the gun shots. We were freshman. A lot of things happened on campus that were fun. We wondered what they were doing on campus. "Let's go on over there now." So that's what started us. Then we came BACK into the building. We started remembering who we were missing. I was rooming with Laura Garner Nesuda. I still keep up with her. She wasn't back. We were really getting scared.

MCCAULEY: Were there people in the dorm who were doing a head count?

DIXON: No, they weren't encouraging us to do anything. We could sit in my room and see the smoke from the shots at The Tower.

MCCAULEY: Were you in anyway fixated on that? Is that what you did at that time?

DIXON: Oh, that is the only thing we did! We did go up to the fourth floor to the library in the dorm, and we looked out because we had a better view. Nobody told us we couldn't! (said in disbelief). After we had been looking out the windows a little bit, we decided that if we could see him, he might see us and maybe we should get away from the window.

MCCAULEY: This is an event that has become somewhat iconic in a negative way in our culture. We deal with these issues of school shootings and mass shootings have an American fingerprint. A lot of people invoke the Whitman shootings as part of that. Were there students and professors and others on campus that tried to respond ahead of first responders? Were there people who had weapons in their dorms or apartments who came out to try to defend the campus or to take Whitman out while this was going on? Did you see any evidence of that?

DIXON: Not at the time. We were listening to the radio. I have always believed that they asked people to bring their deer rifles and come. I'm trying to remember whether I actually heard them ask that.

MCCAULEY: I think the author, Laverne, may have given some suggestion that the media was encouraging people.

DIXON: They were. I heard later. I would really like to research this...that this was kind of the beginning of SWAT. I did ask an FBI man one time, and he wasn't aware of that.

Growing up, my father was a hospital administrator in north Mississippi during the Cuban missile crisis. As a child, I went with my parents all over the state of Mississippi to view preparations for an attack. We had a bumper sticker on our car so that we could get through wherever we needed to. We could not make long distance calls from the phones in our dorm rooms, so I went down to the basement and placed a long-distance phone call to my parents to let them know I was okay. I got through immediately! The lines later jammed. My grandmother was in Tennessee, and she knew about it. She was at work, and they were trying to keep her from finding out, but she found out. The wife of one of my mother's old bosses owned the radio station in Memphis and told her. They couldn't tell her if I was reported dead, but they could tell her I was not on the list. So, it was good that I called.

MCCAULEY: Am I right that at least one of Whitman's victims was killed not far from you? There was a barbershop somewhere, north of The Tower, where one of the people was shot. But most of them were on the South Mall.

DIXON: And up and down The Drag.

MCCAULEY: How long were you in the dorm before there was some sense that things were concluding?

DIXON: Well the news media came on, and they said he was dead. THEN everybody waited for the people who had been trapped on campus to come back. We waited on Laura and she came back. She had been trapped in the first building on the east side on the South Mall. They had been lying on the floor, on the second floor in that building because he was shooting in their windows. She was shaken up, but she was okay. Another guy that I knew was in the English building, directly across on the west side of the Mall. He was looking out the window, saw Whitman take aim at the policeman that was killed right down there, tried to warn him, and watched him shoot him.

MCCAULEY: Was there an effort by the dorm or anyone else to sort of coordinate you? Today you'd imagine on a school you'd have crisis counselors and people trying to respond. At that time, this didn't exist. Nobody was thinking that way.

DIXON: No, there was absolutely nothing! We wanted to go out. We had befriended our counselors who were both graduate students. One of them had a car. I guess there were two or three of us. They put us in her car, and we drove out late in the afternoon. They didn't stop us. Once the shooting was over, there was never anything done for us. I do remember driving down The Drag in front of the jewelry store. There was still blood on the ground on the sidewalk and over by the church where he had picked the men off who were cleaning the front of the church. The blood was still on the outside of the church.

MCCAULEY: How close did you say you were to the church?

DIXON: My class was in the building across the street from the church. When I walked out my door, I was less than half a block from where he picked them off.

MCCAULEY: Is it your understanding that the shooting was going on as you left your class? Was he actively shooting then?

DIXON: I didn't hear it. I don't think he was actively shooting until maybe I got back to the foot of The Tower. He had already shot that car window out.

MCCAULEY: That's true.

DIXON: I went back over there this year. I do not allow myself to think about it when I am over there for fun. But this year, when I went back for the memorial, I walked BACK up to the Scottish Rite dorm and retraced my steps completely. I went down to the Math building and then back up to the Mall. It was kind of an interesting thing. I stopped and talked to one of the security guards at the entrance, just the north side of the Mall, to ask him a couple of questions about where to go. While we were doing that, another security guard came up with a whole stack of traffic sawhorses. He picked one up and dropped it to get it into place.

MCCAULEY: Sounded like a gunshot?

DIXON: Yes. I gasped! That's the third time that's happened to me.

MCCAULEY: You brought up the commemoration of the event that was held this year. 2016 obviously marks the 50th anniversary of the shootings. Has the school asked you or any of the victims' families about your knowledge before this year?

DIXON: The school doesn't ever talk about it. The statement was formally made at the memorial service that every effort had been made not to mention it. That was the reason that no memorial has ever been put up. They did not want The Tower to become a symbol of a mass killing.

MCCAULEY: So this was the first real established or formal ceremony related to the event? The memorial that's been staged is to the north of The Tower, near what the students often call the Turtle Pond. The pond is near the science buildings, back behind The Tower to the north, and behind the undergraduate library. So, right in the area that you had been walking near—pretty close to. How were you invited to the event? Did you have any misgivings about attending the event?

DIXON: There was no invitation! There was no big announcement about it. They pretty much kept it quiet. It was circulated by word of mouth. I think I found out about it because I was on a committee, and I heard it. It wasn't publicized. There probably weren't more than 200 people there.

The other problem that we had at that point was that it was the first day of the open carry situation that's going on right now. They kept it low key because they didn't want any protestors. I was over there for work. I had a student tour. We were supposed to do a tour of the University of Texas campus. Frankly, we did not do it because we were afraid there would be some kind of a protest. We got the kids/students out before anything could happen, if it had happened. Then I went to the memorial service.

MCCAULEY: I am also a University of Texas graduate. So, I had a little connection to this story. The Tower reopened for tours. I don't remember exactly when but between ten and 20 years ago. It had been closed after the shootings. It was an occasional suicide site as well. There were many reasons that they had restricted access to The Tower. You and I discussed having toured The Tower. Your experiences were much different than mine. It was a little surreal that the tour guides, mostly students, were asked not to talk about the incident.

What kind of experiences did you have touring The Tower?

DIXON: I've toured it twice. The first time, I remember the student saying that they only answered questions that they were asked. Apparently, if nobody asked, they didn't even mention it. The second time, we knew it was 50 years, and there were several of us. I was the only one that had been there. It was a sorority reunion. I guess, like the old World War II vets, we didn't talk about it then, we talked about the good times. We didn't talk about the bad times. But you can see the bullet holes. And there is a huge FENCE up there that wasn't there before.

MCCAULEY: Yes, there are bullet holes in the face of The Tower from the people on the ground who were trying to shoot at Whitman to stop him from continuing to shoot from the top of The Tower. That evidence is still pretty obvious.

DIXON: Oh, it is very obvious. People went up there to shoot at him. One of them was the manager of the bookstore, The CO-OP. Another one was a policeman. As a matter of fact, I met his nephew. I actually dated his other nephew while I was at The University of Texas. I have since talked to the one I dated via email. They were up there.

MCCAULEY: So four years later you had your degree. Was that the end of your Austin adventure?

DIXON: Unfortunately, that was the end of my Austin adventure. I married and moved to Washington, D. C.

MCCAULEY: Most of us can only imagine being that close to a moment that is a pivotal reflection point in history. Was it a tough point for you over these last 50 years? You mentioned the incidence of hearing bangs and being drawn back. What has been your experience with the Whitman shootings as your life has progressed?

DIXON: Well I have had two other incidences with the bangs. One was that I was taking my oldest child to tour a campus, Lamar in Beaumont. There is a tall building there and they were doing some roof repair and dropping stuff off the top. I didn't even realize I did it, but the student that was doing the tour all of the sudden turned around and said, "Are you all right?" My husband was really nice. He said, "Aw, she was on the University of Texas campus. Don't worry about it."

The other time, I still don't know what happened. But I do know exactly where I was in Alief. I heard a shot. I was driving, and I just got away. I must have been four miles away before I realized that I was just getting away as fast as I could. Not to be paranoid, but I don't look out a window if I hear something like that. I was in a store when one of my

children was too young to control really. There was a bank robbery in the parking lot. Everybody else lined up at the window. I made a nest for the two of us in the back of the store and figured I was going to put my hand over his mouth and nose until he passed out. I make these crazy plans. But I am not going to give up going places.

MCCAULEY: So there is that aspect that keeps you connected to Austin and the 1960s. How much of your time is invested in thinking about this experience? Is it fully over, fully in the rearview mirror but for these rather unusual instances?

DIXON: Yeah, I kind of control it. When I go up there for fun, there is no way I can't think about it. If I go up in the winter and if it is rainy and cold—I CANNOT get out of Austin without thinking about it. I will say that. But on a hot summer day, if I am on campus, it is on my mind at this point.

MCCAULEY: Let me transition to a conclusion by asking a question. You are a commissioner for the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. You mentioned earlier that you were studying historic preservation in college.

DIXON: Oh, yeah. I love history.

MCCAULEY: So was there anything about that experience that compelled you to research, to learn. Was there something that you were motivated by because of it?

DIXON: I think I already had that motivation. But I do read up on it – everything new thing that comes out. Like for example, Whitman married a girl from Needville. So sometimes I'll read up on it. Sometimes I don't want to read up on it.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read Kenneth Bryce Otto's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=37523>

MCCAULEY: Sure. I think there have been two prominent books written in the last two decades. There have been a couple of recent efforts to revisit it. Is there anything else that you felt was striking from that day or just something that sort of crystallizes your memory of being in that moment that you wanted to share?

DIXON: Well, one of the other things that was important came out the next day or so. Two of the waiters at the Scottish Rite dorm, Grover and another guy, managed an apartment complex for their rent. And they worked at a mortuary at night for their spending money. They were some of the ambulance drivers. We knew that they were down there.

I see a lot of pictures of them when I look back at the old pictures. I know exactly where they were loading the casualties. There is a shadow in a circular drive, between the library and the Mall, that is too close to the main building for Whitman to have been able to shoot down there.

MCCAULEY: Right. He couldn't get an angle down that way.

DIXON: So, that's where they loaded everybody in. I did walk around there when I went across and looked up at The Tower and all those places. I had never allowed myself to do that before. This was the year I thought it was time to go back and look at all of that.

MCCAULEY: I'd like to ask you about your work in the professional tour business. You mentioned, as part of your summer experiences with the 50th anniversary, that you planned a student tour of the University of Texas. Is that part of things that you share with people when you are touring the campus?

DIXON: Yes, and I ask the chaperones with this group. They were a FANTASTIC group of kids. I asked them if they wanted me to share it because I didn't want to if it wasn't fitting into their curriculum and they asked me to. So, I did tell them. The kids really did listen. I mean they really cared. I did it at the end so that it was an afterthought as to the way the university was depicted. They were from Oklahoma so they weren't our fans anyway.
(laughs)

MCCAULEY: Well I really appreciate you taking time with us today.

DIXON: Thank you!

Interview ends