

Interview with Gerald D. Skidmore

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Date of Interview: April 21, 1986

Location: Killeen Daily Herald Building, Killeen, TX

Begin Tape 1, Side 1

James N. Mortimer: April 21, 3:00 [p.m.]. Gerald Skidmore interview at the *Killeen Daily Herald*. Mr. Skidmore, you signed the release, and you understood that this tape will be placed in the SWT library, and you freely consent to release it?

Gerald D. Skidmore: Yes, I do.

Mortimer: Okay. I was wondering if you could tell me your impressions of Killeen when you arrived here, and when that was?

Skidmore: I arrived here for the first time to live between Christmas Day and New Year's Day in 1954, and I started to work with the *Killeen Daily Herald* on January 1, 1955. When I arrived, of course, Killeen was a very small town, and it was—had not yet really begun its growth spurt, so I found it a little bit depressing, but at the same time, I would not have been here had I not thought it had great promise, and so that's—there were very few businesses; there were no places to live, hardly at all. I had to end up renting a one big room with bathroom [in a] four-plex apartment, in which I had at least three rooms of furniture to fit into, but that was the only place in town, so it was already experiencing lots of the problems that became more acute as time went on, but it was a very small-town atmosphere, but one that showed great promise of being something different, which it certainly has.

Mortimer: What circumstances prompted you to come to Killeen?

Skidmore: At the time, I was a general assignments reporter in Wichita Falls working for the *Times* on my very first job out of college. I had met and married a Wichita Falls girl. We were both working on the newspaper there, and after we got married, of course she decided to—since one of us had to leave the paper—she decided to go into radio-television—but two of our friends there were also a married couple, and they in the meantime came to Killeen and started working—started running the *Killeen Daily Herald*—so we came down for a visit and liked what we saw, went back to Wichita Falls, wrote them and said we like to come and work with you on building a newspaper in Killeen, which—so that's how we came to be here. They hired me as,

whatever title I had, I did everything, just about, in the news departments; so we were hired, came down, and started work at that time on a very, very small newspaper.

Mortimer: Was the *Herald* daily then?

Skidmore: It was daily; that was in on January 1, '55, and January of '53 it had become a daily newspaper five afternoons a week.

Mortimer: Could you estimate what circulation was?

Skidmore: I believe when, after I came, there was a great effort to go through the files and weed out all the mail circulation that was not legitimate circulation, but papers being sent to people's friends and that sort of thing. And so I think when we finally arrived at some type of circulation figure, it was something below a thousand circulation.

Mortimer: And what would you estimate that it is now?

Skidmore: It's, we're running somewhere between 18,500 daily and between 21,500 and 22,000 on Sunday, so it varies a little bit on Sundays.

Mortimer: Quite a bit of growth then?

Skidmore: Very much so.

Mortimer: Would you say that's a reflection of the general growth trend in Killeen?

Skidmore: Absolutely. The newspaper has simply grown up with the town. As the town grew, so did the newspaper. And of course, we like to think that we had some little influence on the growth of the city, too, because we've been very supportive of the city and its growth, so forth, but we also realize that the town grew and the newspaper grew because Fort Hood grew, so that's the whole—the history of Killeen is almost tied in directly with the history of Fort Hood, as far as the growth factors are concerned.

Mortimer: So, Fort Hood has had a very strong impact on Killeen?

Skidmore: Very definitely. Had Fort Hood not come along in 1942, Killeen would have probably continued to be a relatively small agriculture town and probably—unless some other situation had developed similar to Fort Hood—would have continued to be an agricultural community and probably would have never grown more than most other agricultural-type centers in the state.

Mortimer: Was there any concern when you first arrived here that maybe Fort Hood wouldn't be a permanent base?

Skidmore: That has always been a concern, at least until—well, when I came, Fort Hood had already been designated a permanent post. That was done in 1953. But there was always the possibility that it would get so low that it might be—just be totally eliminated as an army post. And I think probably until about—probably in 1957, when it was designated as a two-division post, I mean in 1967, I believe it was, when it was designated as a permanent two-division post, that it was pretty well established that Fort Hood was here to stay, and it would stay a very large military installation. So, until that time I guess, there was always the uneasiness, and there were times when troops would be moved out, and the community would really feel the impact of that, and people would begin to get a little bit afraid, and there were times when some businesses went under, and apartments got vacant, and houses got vacant, and so the economy suffered, but then I think after the designation as a two-division post, it's been nothing but trying to keep up rather than being short.

Mortimer: Do you have any recollections of the impact of national events like the Cuban Missile Crisis in '62?

Skidmore: The Missile Crisis in 1962, I think probably hit—(inaudible)—with most communities in the United States. I don't think anybody really realized how close to war that we really were then. I think we realized it because our people were being shipped out to Georgia, Florida, and the places that were the jumping-off place for Cuba, and we knew this, although it was classified information, we knew that all our troops were going out. We saw the trains with all the equipment. We knew the men were going because they were our neighbors and so forth. So, I think Killeen probably realized the seriousness of the crisis a lot more than, say, some town, similar town in anywhere else in the United States that didn't have a military base because it, although it was a big news event, I think it was brought home to us a lot more than “Hey, these guys are down there, and they're ready to go to war,” and so we didn't know until finally it eased off, and they announced finally that the troops were down there and were getting ready to come home. That it was—it just had a much greater impact on Killeen than it would have some other place because we were that directly involved. And I think that's true of almost any international incident or anything that happens that could eventually lead to troop involvement. I think we feel a lot more. I think we felt the Vietnam War a lot more than most communities because it was our neighbors and friends and everybody that—we had more people over there that were from Killeen than other places because many of the families of the military men stayed here, so I think we feel that a lot more, and we have a lot more empathy here with the military families than you would find, say, somewhere else.

Mortimer: From the newspaperman's perspective, did Fort Hood authorities make a formal or informal request that you would hold certain stories during that situation or others?

Skidmore: It was an established thing then that all troop movements during that period—you're talking about the Vietnam crisis, I mean the Cuban Crisis—yeah. It was all troop movements

were classified. So Fort Hood could not even confirm the troops were there even after they were there. The way we finally got word that—we got official word—so that we could say the troops were in Georgia was when President Kennedy visited the First Armored Division. He inspected the troops and visited them and thanked them for being there, and then the national wire services carried this information, and at that time I called—I knew where they were—so I called and talked to General Haines, who—Ralph Haines—who was Commander of the First Armored Division, on the phone after the president had been there, and the word was that he had visited the First Armored Division and then it was general knowledge, so I called and talked to General Haines, and I think that was the first time we had actually said in print that the divisions were down there. And it was not Fort Hood's fault. It was a national thing that all troop movements were classified, and they still are, for that matter. If troops left Fort Hood today to go to someplace, that is still classified information, and although we may know about it, we would not say so because it is classified and we have always respected the army's—request that this be classified information. And a lot of times we think it's ridiculous because everybody knows what's happening, but at the same time we still respect that request. And then, in turn, the army's pretty, at least Fort Hood, is pretty cooperative in giving us the information they can as quickly and as safely as they can. So, we've never had really too much of a problem like that.

One incident that occurred during the Cuban Crisis was I had sent a photographer out in my car to take pictures of the trains, of the passing, one of the intersections out on the road out of town a little ways to get pictures of the equipment trains. And this car I had just bought and—sometime late in the night, that night, the previous owner of the car got a telephone call wanting to know—it was the CID [Criminal Investigation Division] at Fort Hood—wanting to know why his car was out there and why someone was out taking pictures of these trains going so—and he quickly told them that the car now belonged to the editor of the *Killeen Daily Herald*, and they said “Oh.” So I guess they figured out why it was out there. And, in fact, just this afternoon I was looking through some things, and I ran across one of those pictures I made out there, and it says on there, “This picture was not used at the request of the Army because it was classified information,” but we made it for historical purposes, so.

Mortimer: How would you characterize the overall—relationship with Fort Hood?

Skidmore: Well, I think my relationship was always, has been, very good. It has changed. The newspaper's relationship with the Army has changed vastly over the years. And I think this came about during the Vietnam War years. When I first came, Fort Hood furnished us with practically every story [that] came from the base; they prepared it, brought it to us, and later when we had two divisions out there, they were very competitive, even to the point of almost measuring how much stories one division got and how much the other one got and saying, “Okay, you're giving more to the second than you are—or, the fourth—than you are to the first.” Then we had the First Armored and Fourth Armored. And—their public information officers were very competitive to

get stories in. And Fort Hood was very anxious to get stories in, favorable stories about people and so forth. Sometime during the Vietnam War, when the military began to distrust the news media, and then it became vice versa because of the, I think, of the conflicts and the reporting of casualties, some of those things. The army's attitude changed so that the public affairs officer sort of became more of watchdog-type person than someone to get information out. They are available to help you get information, but they don't supply as much information anymore as they used to. In fact, whereas we used to have to call stories, now we have to go out and get them, so I have two reporters assigned out there now. Whereas [it] used to, I didn't have anybody assigned [to] that beat specifically, but they would bring in more stories than we could use, and, so that sort of thing has changed.

Now, the relationship with the Army has not changed. It has always been good. They're very helpful; anytime we want anything, they will almost always knock themselves out to get it for us. Our military reporters have had excellent working relationships with the Army. We have hired people who know military background, both, our—we have a photographer who retired from the military, we, our main military reporter, the one who covers the troops, so forth, is [a] retired intelligence officer—so he knows the Army backwards and forwards, so we send people out there who are knowledgeable to start with. So they know when they do something, they're going to do it with good solid background, and that they also understand that things can be classified and that these areas where you should not try to force your way, and so forth. And so I think that has worked to our advantage in that we have very skilled military people who are representing us out there. So we have always had a good relationship, and I think this is true with the town and the post—there's very few military towns, I would think, could have had a better relationship with the military than Killeen has with Fort Hood. I don't know how it could have been any better, because there have been many times that there's ever been any conflict, between the towns and the post.

Mortimer: That's good. What do you think are, from a journalist's perspective, the essential differences in reporting in Killeen, than say, another town of about equal population?

Skidmore: The difference in reporting? Well, for one thing, everything that you report almost, in one way or the other, has some kind of military implication, so you either have to be a little bit knowledgeable about the military or you have to be willing to learn because any time the city government takes any kind of action, some way or another it will affect Fort Hood. Every time Fort Hood takes some kind of action, it will in some way affect Killeen, Harker Heights, or Copperas Cove areas—surrounding areas—so you have to be aware of that. Outside of that, I would not think it would be too much different from another town of this size. We have basically the same type of news events. The city governments are basically the same. The only difference being that ours—we're sitting here with a big city right next to us that's different in that it's a military post rather than another town. So, I think we have to keep that in mind in just about

everything we do and how it affects us. I don't know if that's a good answer to your question, but that would be the only real difference I would see.

Mortimer: You mentioned earlier than you had quite a few people with military backgrounds that work for the *Herald*. Think that holds true for much of other businesses throughout Killeen?

Skidmore: We had information, and I don't know that this has been verified, but it came from former Governor John Connally, so I suppose it would be very—fairly—authoritative—that now Texas has three main centers of retired military population. San Antonio, which [has] always led the nation in number of retired military people. Then Texas has El Paso, which is a big city plus a—another large military installation. And then third in number of retirees in the state is Killeen. So, we are becoming—and this is something is growing just as fast as the area is growing in population—is our retired military population is growing, and all of these people—well, I say all—most, or many, are people who are starting second careers because when they retire from the military they—ordinarily—they're very young. So, in all, almost any business you will find in Killeen that there are a number of retired or military dependents employed. And we estimate—I had those figures not long ago, but I think—well, let me just tell you in my department I have thirty-two or -three employees—have the photographer I mentioned who's retired military; I have a least four women who are dependents of military personnel working out of my thirty, so, you see how it goes. Our circulation manager is retired military, his assistant is retired military. We have one or two retired military people who are advertising salesmen. We have any number of military dependents who work in our classified display advertising and in the business office, so it's all very much—

Mortimer: Significant?

Skidmore: Right.

Mortimer: I was wondering if you could tell me maybe a few notable moments in Killeen's history. Something—things that stand out in your memory.

Skidmore: Do you mean from since I have been here or—or what I have heard or whatever?

Mortimer: Since you've—

Skidmore: Since I've been here—since Killeen is very much a growing and fast—growing community—some of the, really, highlights, of course, have been—I guess the growth in population, the growth in businesses, and just the general growth, but some of the, some of the specific events, like the establishment of the first really nice hotel in Killeen came in 1962 when there was a community effort and in fund raising. We had a fundraising group come in—they raised nearly a million dollars to build a community-owned hotel. That's—was named the Cowhouse Hotel. You probably don't remember when it was the Cowhouse, but it now is a Red

Carpet Inn because later after the town became a little more established and we started getting motels. The businessmen were still running the community hotel, so it was sold and it became later—now—is a Red Carpet Inn. But that was a very exciting time because we had there were more than a thousand stockholders in the hotel. So, people were giving \$100, were buying \$100 worth of stock in the hotel, just so the community could have a hotel. That was an interesting time, a fun time.

We've always had a tremendous problem with automobile accidents—the post being—Fort Hood being a place where there are a large number of young, and usually men, until more recent years—there's been more and more women now, than—young men who were driving a lot on the highways. We had a tremendous number of accidents. One weekend alone we had like fifteen people injured and about thirteen killed just in this area in that I covered—in accidents, so one of the big things was when our highway starting developing—U.S. Highway 190, the one that's right here by us now—four-lane divided highway was one of the biggest, nicest things that ever happened to this area because—it started in 1971, and they was finished in '78. Cost about \$41 million—which is cheap by today's standards—but there is no way to tell how many lives have been saved just because we had the highway, so that was a big deal.

I think the first mall, the Mid-Town Mall, which is now is a sort of a rejuvenating period, but it was a big thing when that came years ago, it was a big thing when Gibson's Discount Store came in here because we had no chain stores to speak of. And Bealls Department Store came here, and so that was a big event for the, because we were finally beginning to get some chain-type stores in Killen. And then, of course, the really big thing, economically, was when Killen Mall was built—we finally came into our own as a retail center where you didn't have to go somewhere else to buy what you wanted. The really tough times were during the Vietnam War. We had to deal with the anti-war demonstrations and so forth and, I don't know if you're aware of it, but at that time, Jane Fonda, who was very active in the anti-war movement came here and, and participated in demonstrations, and this was a very tense time because this was a town that was still thought military and supported the people in the war, and so it was very tense—

Mortimer: Excuse me—

End Side 1, begin Side 2

Skidmore: That, those were very difficult times, and, of course, we were also at—during that period—we were having—some people killed in Vietnam, and that was very traumatic. I guess one of the, the more, not serious, but interesting times was the brief period that Elvis Presley was stationed at Fort Hood. It was one of the times when I had, I guess, some of the strangest and most unusual experiences because I had newspapers calling me from all over the world every time they'd hear a rumor about Elvis Presley; well, they'd call the newspaper and say, We hear Elvis Presley has bought a mobile home and lives out in the country. Or, We hear Elvis Presley

has fallen in love with a local girl. Or was fixing to get married or just any, anything that happened. Well, it was almost every day that I could get some kind of call from anywhere in the United States or from London, England, or just anyplace, you know, I'd never knew what was going to happen next. And so that was not a very serious-type thing but was one that was, I guess, was a very exciting thing to a lot of people because it certainly created a lot of [excitement] around here.

Mortimer: Do you know how long that he was stationed here?

Skidmore: A little—about a year. He was here for just about a year. He did his advanced individual training for the Second Armored Division, coming here after basic training, going from here to Germany, where he was sent.

Mortimer: What year was that?

Skidmore: It was in fifty- —I don't remember exactly what, what year it was, but it was a very interesting year though, from the standpoint of—

Mortimer: Caused quite a sensation—

Skidmore: Right. Some of the other things that we just, that were not big news items but were very significant things was the designation of Killeen as a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, which meant that because we had reached a population that would qualify us for that—this was done by combining Killeen, Temple, and all of Bell County and Copperas Cove and all of Coryell County and Fort Hood, so we became large enough to be a SMSA, and this qualified us for a lot of grants and that sort of thing that were helpful in developing the city, plus it made us a more recognizable part of the state and sort of put us in the position of where people starting knowing that we were here. For instance, when I came, I'd like to never find Killeen on the map the first time I came down here to see it because I didn't even know how to spell it. And so that still is true to a certain extent, but I think most people when you say Killeen and Fort Hood now, they know where you're talking about. I say this; we got a package envelope addressed today to the *C-O-L-L-E-E-N Herald* so maybe I, maybe we haven't got as well-known as I think we have, but it certainly has been helpful. And I think the growth of our city government and its transition from a small town-type government to a really metropolitan type government. And all of these things, the chamber of commerce, everything had grown.

And, then I guess, another one of the really big events that could have been very—could have been a tragedy ended up being a very well-done thing, and that's when Killeen schools were integrated in 1955. This was a very solid white community, and people thought in those terms, and up until that point, high school students had been bused to—the black students—had been bused to Belton to school. And so when the school district finally made the decision—and this was very much influenced by Fort Hood again—that they would integrate the high school. It was

a very tense time in Killeen because nobody really knew what was going to happen, and it went off beautifully. We had very, practically no incidents, even minor incidents connected with it, and so for that, you know, it was a very tense time but proved to be a very smooth—(inaudible)—so, I think the school board members and the administration at that time did a tremendous job. I think having a great deal to do with that smooth transition was that Fort Hood happened to have a person there who was an excellent athlete, so we had a black athlete who was exceptionally good on the football field but was even better as a person, and he, I think, pretty well carried this on his shoulders by himself. So, a lot of it had to do with that sort of transition, but at the same time we encountered lots of problems, like with our athletic teams, we had schools that refused to play us and would not let us play in their schools, so that was a very tense time, but one that worked out beautifully.

Mortimer: Do you recall that athlete's name?

Skidmore: Yeah, if you'll let me think about it for a minute—let me tell you in a minute. I'll think of it. I had thought of it just a bit earlier. Where—those are the main things now that I think of that—that are sort of stand out in my mind, and these may not be the most important things because there are, sort of, left impressions on me as being, I guess, an observer of the town and so forth. Are there other questions now?

Mortimer: The other thing I was interested in knowing is, how is your location downtown—I mean, did you ever have problems? Killeen is notable for Avenue D and prostitution along that street.

Skidmore: We, of course, tried very hard to stay downtown. We had great desire for the newspaper to remain in the downtown area—we tried, when the decision was made that we had to move into a new building, we—the officials of the company began looking for sites downtown; that was the first choice. The problem was that we needed a city block for the newspaper, the parking, and all the things that we needed, and it was impossible to put together a city block so we could get the whole block and stay in the downtown area, so that's when the decision was made to move out. It had nothing to do with the situation downtown. Had we'd been able to find the land, we would have still be down there. We did have, there were problems at times—we were a little bit concerned because of what you were talking about—the situation there—that with our employees having to leave sometimes very late at night and our parking lot was, you know, half a block away and had to walk out there at night and so forth, so there was a little bit of apprehension about that. As far as it ever directly affecting us, I think not. We had a pretty bad situation at times when the apartment complex across the street from us was very rundown, and some of the people who lived there were not the kind that you really enjoyed having as neighbors, but then after it was redone and made into a nicer apartment complex, well, it attracted much nicer people—at the time we left, we didn't have any problems done there, the problem was that we couldn't find the space to—build a new building the size that we needed—

And if [it's all] right to put it in now, the football player's name was Joe, I was needed to think about it, S-E-A-R-L-E-S and we had, we got in touch with him on the one hundredth anniversary of Killeen's founding to get a little story about him and the role he played, and he still says that his fondest memories are of Killeen and his association with the schools here, so forth, so he is still a really fine person that just had a tremendous load, I feel like—he later, I think I'm correct in saying, that he became the first black member of the New York Stock Exchange—he really did well in his business life-period—now, we were talking about downtown—did that answer your question?

Mortimer: Yes. Well, that's all the questions that I had, unless you wanted to add something else.

Skidmore: Well, I think probably just to kind of sum up, thirty-one years doesn't seem like a long time to be in any place, but for me, it's just been incredible the changes that have taken place, not only in the newspaper business—because we have grown and changed so many of the things we do—but also the town; like thirty-one years ago, I would have never dreamed my office would be sitting next to a four-lane divided highway that goes through this area, which used to be out in the country—it's just been remarkable, and I think the growth, especially the business and in the schools. I'm sure you're aware that Killeen has the largest school district between Dallas and Austin on Interstate 35, and it's equidistance between Dallas and Austin on Interstate 35, and its equidistance east and west, so, you know, it's just been amazing and how the town has grown, and it's been fun being a part of that growth, even as an observer more or less, participant in some things—and I really appreciate the opportunity to talk to you—I hope this is helpful for what you're trying to do.

Mortimer: It is, very much. Thank you very much.

End of interview