

## [Transcript] Sword and Scale Nightmares / Culture War

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Just before Christmas in Amarillo, 1997, tensions between two major cliques in the neighboring high schools had reached an all-time high. Something bad was about to happen. But no one expected things to escalate to murder. No one thinks to be scared of a group of football players and punk kids duking it out in a parking lot after school. But tensions in this town had escalated beyond your average schoolyard brawl. This time, someone wouldn't make it out alive.

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Some say the panhandle of Texas is the only place you can watch your dog run away for two weeks. One portion of the panhandle, a full quarter of its acreage, is called llano estacado, or staked plain. This part of the land was once a part of something even bigger

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called the Great American Desert. It's one of the largest expanses of flat land in the world, because of the terrain the prime industries in the panhandle are petroleum, agriculture, and cattle. Not a surprise at all. Many of us know North Texas to be kind of a yee-haw cowboy land, even though that's mostly a Hollywood fiction. But what isn't fiction is the fact that a third of the beef in the United States comes from this region. Amarillo is smack dab in the middle of the panhandle. It's a super famous city sitting right along Route 66, and they have that 72-ounce stake challenge and Cadillac Ranch. Locals don't know this place as Amarillo, though. They call it Bomb City. Ominous. I know. But that's for a good reason. Amarillo got its nickname because it's home

to the Pantex plant. This facility is the last remaining plant in the United States that assembles and disassembles nuclear weapons. They play a very important role in the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, and they're a prime target for attack in the event of a nuclear war. So anyway, Bomb City. You got this dichotomy between cattle and agriculture, and the dark reminder of impending nuclear war altogether. Seems fun.

The people of Amarillo are no different. There's one group of people who are kind of the stereotype. Cowboy hats, Christianity, clean cut good old farm boys, and then there's this subculture, exactly the opposite of what I just described. In the late 1990s, it had a life of its own, but the broader community preferred to keep this subset of Amarillans hidden.

It wasn't as palatable as the all-American clean cut Christian image, of course.

Now, obviously, the cowboy thing is a bit of a stereotype. There are definitely people in Amarillo who fit the mold, but it's not everyone or even the majority. Conservative Christian values are common in Amarillo, though. North Texas is, after all, considered part of the Bible Belt.

So let's rewind back to the year 1997, when the social climate in Amarillo was way more conservative than it is now. Dustin Camp was a 17-year-old high school student. He was a pudgy, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, clean-cut jock. He was popular. He came from a well-off family and was really good at sports, most notably football. He also wasn't horribly ugly, and that's about all it takes to climb the ladder of social hierarchy in high school, isn't it? Anyway, Dustin had a lot of friends, and girls seemed to like him quite a bit, too.

Dustin and his friends were the letter-jacket-wearing type, and often wore baseball caps, representing college football teams like Notre Dame. When they all hung out together, they looked like they belonged together, if you know what I mean. Dustin's parents were super supportive of him and whatever he wanted to pursue. They bought him a beige-colored 1986 Cadillac,

and that thing was Dustin's most prized possession. He was now the cool kid who could drive his carless friends around the town. It's an instant formula for popularity.

Dustin just knew the other kids were jealous. Dustin made good grades, and he was well on his way to college, maybe even with a football scholarship. He played for the junior varsity team at Tascosa High School in Amarillo. The two schools in this area, Amarillo High and Tascosa, were rivals. Because there wasn't much to do, teens from both schools would often congregate on Western Street.

There were 24-hour drive-through restaurants, convenience stores, and lots of empty parking lots to use for tailgating. Frequently, though, fights would break out. Scheduled fights between social groups also occurred on Western Street. It wasn't just the two schools that hated each other's sports teams, though. As per the stereotype, the jocks had a long-standing rivalry with the

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punks.

The jock clique was known for wearing these white baseball caps, hats that represented prominent universities, so anyone who was harassed by them called them the white hats. According to witnesses, the high school jocks at both schools often harassed Amarillo's punk, goth, and alternative communities. They leaned out of their nice cars as they drove down Western Street yelling out obscenities at the people they didn't like, even throwing beer bottles at the other kids, sometimes hitting and injuring them. Now, the punks were the polar opposite of what Dustin was used to being around. No one in Dustin's family or friend group looked like these weird kids. Because we're talking about the late 1990s here, we have to remember that high school kids would have been born in the late 70s to early 80s. Bands like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, Black Flag, and Minor Threat were all getting international attention by the time these kids were born. And if their parents were punks, they grew up seeing mom and dad rock liberty spiked hair and studded leather like it was normal. Chris Holes was one of those kids. He'll be important later. Some of them were carrying on their parents' punk legacies into the 90s, but others may have been rebelling against their strict conservative households. You see, Dustin's group of friends cared a lot about fitting into society and playing by the rules. But the punks couldn't care less. They valued individuality, often to an extreme, going directly against societal norms to prove a point and elicit shock from conservative onlookers. These punks weren't nearly as scary as they looked. In fact, they seemed to have a closer, more genuine camaraderie amongst members of their group than the White Hats did. Dustin's clan seemed to be bonded by alcohol, stupidity, and unprovoked violence. The punk kids were really more concerned with putting on good concerts, having fun, and unfortunately defending the violence constantly sent their way by the White Hats. Dustin and his clan spat on the punk kids, messed with their cars, ganged up on them and beat them in unfair fights, and sometimes even swung at them with baseball bats from the beds of pickup trucks as they whirled around their victims. Tensions were growing day by day. Firecracker wars, beatings, and property damage eventually culminated in a fight between the jocks and the punks in the parking lot of the IHOP across the street from the Western Plaza Shopping Center. This was a popular spot both groups often hung around. On December 6th, as per usual, a confrontation broke out at the IHOP. This time, the fight was between some members of the punks and the jocks, including Dustin Camp. Chris Oles has looked back on this and stated that he acknowledges his role as the antagonist to those that were offended by their appearance. He never intended to incite violence only to make people think. Chris just wanted narrow-minded people to realize that he and his friends weren't hurting anyone, and they weren't strung out on drugs. Many of the punks, including Chris, were actually straight-edge, and they wouldn't even smoke cigarettes. Chris had stated that he regrets anything he may have done to invite persecution, but then again, he was just a teenager. On this particular night, one of the witnesses outside of IHOP remembered that Dustin jumped a median in his car to try to run down some of the punks. When he missed, John King allegedly hit Dustin's windshield with a police baton, but Dustin and his friends deny that this event ever took place. John was known to have a big mouth, so it was entirely possible that he made the whole scenario up or blew it way out of proportion. Either way, when John went back to his friends and told them what happened, the punks, wide-eyed and angry, knew that things were escalating and something had to be done.

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All of this had to come to an end. Before, it was just like any other teenage street fight. Now, it seemed like the jocks were actually trying to kill them, or maybe it was just Dustin Camp.

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After John King returned home with a witness testifying to the attack on December 6th, the punks were on edge and ready to retaliate. Tensions rose for the next week, and a fight was planned for December 12th. No one could have imagined the chaos that would ensue.

This would be unlike any fight the jocks and the punks had before, and not everyone would make it out alive. So it's December 12th, 1997. It's a frigid night for a southern state. Dustin's in his Cadillac with a couple of friends. They've been drinking all evening, and Dustin decides to drive over to the IHOP anticipating this fight. He's got a male friend in the passenger seat and a 16-year-old girl named Elise Thompson in the back seat. So they're approaching the parking lot and they wait for the punks. And as soon as they arrive, it quickly becomes an all-out brawl. There are more than 50 kids. The jocks are massively outnumbering the punks.

Punches are being thrown, chains with heavy locks are whipping through the air, baseball bats, police nightsticks, you name it. These kids had it. Both groups were armed with just about everything a teenager can get their hands on in the way of self-defense. Things are getting pretty scary, and Dustin, who at this point has gotten out of his car and into the brawl, retreats back to his Cadillac with his two friends. It looks like they're leaving, but just as Dustin begins to pull out of the parking lot, he whips his car around and points it toward the horde of fighting teens. He guns it, and Dustin's Cadillac hits something. A body rolls up over the top of the windshield and over the car. It's Chris Olds. He falls to the ground. He survives, but has a few injuries. His friend, a kid named Brian Denneke, is standing right in front of the car with his back to the grill. He's got a mohawk and a black stick, and like it's all in slow motion, he turns toward the car with a wild, horrified look on his face. Dustin says, I'm a ninja in my caddy, and hits the gas again. There's a thump, and the boy's body rolls up onto the hood before being sucked under the car. Another thump and a second set of wheels rolls over him,

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and Dustin says, I bet he liked that one. Then he drives away from the scene. Elise is looking out the back window. She sees the image of people running toward a crumpled, bloody body. The boy's limbs are bent in ways. They shouldn't be. Elise is stunned. She yells, what did you do? What if he's dead? Dustin seems unconcerned. He continues driving. Dustin takes his friends home, and then he goes home, and goes to sleep. He parks his precious caddy right in its usual spot. He doesn't think he's done anything wrong. Dustin, at this point, didn't realize that the young man he had viciously plowed down with his car didn't survive. He probably didn't care either way, but the boy he hit with his car died on the asphalt of that cold parking lot, surrounded by friends who knew him as more than just another punk. The kid Dustin murdered was Brian Theodore Denneke, and he was somewhat of a celebrity in the Amarillo punk scene. Brian Denneke was a 19-year-old that had recently been a student at Amarillo High. Though he was a couple of years out of school, he still remained friends with a few of the punk kids that hadn't yet graduated. Brian was born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1978, the second child after his brother Jason. Jason was also a punk, and was involved in the same friend group Brian kept. Brian and Jason's parents weren't former punks, but they loved their sons for their individuality, even if they sometimes rolled their eyes at what they were wearing or what music they were listening to. There's even a photo of Brian's parents, Mike and Betty Denneke, grinning and holding a picture of their son decked out in punk attire. They were not ashamed of him, they were proud, and for good reason. Brian lived a dreamy life for a punk. His house doubled as a building they called the Green Room or the Eighth Street House. They used it to book concerts for bands that came through Amarillo, like Blank 77, Link 80, and Family Values. These were not small shows, at least as far as the local shows go. They took quite a bit of coordination, and Brian was good at that. Brian's taste was anarcho-crust punk, while Jason liked to listen to street punk. Brian liked bands like Subhumans, Nausea, and Dead Kennedys. Brian was also in his own band called the White Slave Traders, a name his mother didn't particularly like. He explained to his parents, though, that were all slaves to society, to the government, to the rat race, he said. Brian and his friends knew that punks were often thrown into the racist neo-nazi category. They wanted to be clear with everyone that they were anti-racist. They wore the anti-nazi insignia on their clothing and spoke loudly against racism in both their own subculture and amongst quote-unquote upstanding people, like the jocks. In addition to planning concerts, Brian and his brother Jason worked for an artist in Amarillo named Stanley Marsh III. Stanley partnered with the art group Ant Farm in the 1970s to create Cadillac Ranch. The project Brian and Jason worked on is called Dynamite Museum and it's still in Amarillo. It's an ongoing project replete with fake traffic signs that all said different things, like the long parade to the graveyard and I'm still alive. Stanley would give Brian and Jason the phrases and they'd make and install the signs. Stanley loved Brian, even nicknaming him Sunshine. He'd sometimes let the kids take his pink Cadillac out on the town while he worked. He trusted them. These were not bad kids. Brian was not a degenerate criminal. He just contributed to society in a non-traditional way and some people hated him for it. So now we're back to the night of Brian's murder and Dustin is at home asleep. The other kids? Not so much. As soon as the other two get home to their respective parents, they wake them up and frantically explain what just happened. Soon enough the parents are on the phone with each other and they all march down to the police station.

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Early the next morning around 6 a.m. Dustin is awakened by police at his door. He's like, what on earth could they want from me? Well, they want to see his car. They find Brian's blood covering the grill and undercarriage and in the trunk they discover a nearly empty bottle of Crown Royale and an 18 pack of Bud Light with 13 missing cans. With his parents watching in horror, the police arrest Dustin in connection with Brian's death. At first it seemed like this case was going to go through the normal motions of justice, but things were about to take a sharp turn. Now that police had 17-year-old Dustin Camp and custody in connection with the death of Brian Denneke, they had to get Dustin's side of the story. As you can imagine, Dustin's skills in taking ownership were severely lacking. In his written statement, Dustin said, I was just going to knock him down with my car. It was icy on the ground, my car slid and I guess he slipped and my car went over him. My car went over him, he said. Not, I continued to drive my car over him. Dustin went on and said, I didn't know what to do so I took my friends that were in the car home. I went straight home after that. In the taped versions of his confession, Dustin said, there was ice over there and when I hit my brake and it just kept, my car just kept going and the guy like slipped on the ice or something and the car went, went over him and I got scared and took off. Witnesses that were there that night say, that's not at all what went down. Elise Thompson herself would later testify in court that Dustin wheeled his car around and aimed for Brian Denneke. Elise specifically stated, Dustin headed straight for a guy who was standing on one of the medians on the parking lot. The guy had his back toward us. Right before we hit him, he turned and saw Dustin's car coming. We were going fast. Dustin was driving right at the guy. When we hit him, his torso came up on the hood toward us and he slid under the car. We hit the median he was standing on and I felt a big bump. I just prayed the bump was the median and not him. When Dustin was officially charged with murder, his family hired a pretty good attorney. No surprise there. This attorney would attempt to totally flip the script on what happened that night, bastardizing Brian Denneke's memory in front of his friends and family in the process. The punks sat with their leather and mohawks behind the prosecution's side and Dustin's white hat jock friends sat behind the defense. While prosecutors argued that Dustin was acting in a drunken rage, his defense attorney William L. Clark argued that Dustin had done the town a favor. He was acting in defense of his friend, who was in imminent danger of being attacked by Brian Denneke. He cross-examined Brian's friends and insulted them, calling them armed goons. He tried to paint Dustin and his crew as law-abiding good boys. He dramatized the image of the punks, painting them in a negative, violent light by highlighting their clothing, hair, and band names. All the things the punks wore were meant to shock and offend people like William L. Clark, people who didn't understand them. Apparently it worked, but none of the punks ever expected it to affect their lives on a judicial level. Whatever this defense attorney said must have worked, because the jury convicted Dustin Camp not of murder, but of manslaughter. The judge sentenced him to 10 years probation, a sentence both Dustin's defense attorney and the prosecution thought was unusually light. Dustin's parents stood behind him. They didn't understand the outrage that came after their son's merciful sentencing. Debbie Camp said, quote, it was about Dustin seeing his

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friends

getting killed and doing something about it. He was very brave and courageous and were supportive of him. The Camp family planned to help send Dustin to college after everything had settled down. Though they did have some supporters, not everyone was in agreement with the Camp family, even Kel Seliger. Amarillo's four-term mayor turned senator spoke out about the case, saying he felt compelled to speak more forcefully on behalf of respect for differences among people. But it would be wrong to condemn Amarillo because of the verdict. It was not a community verdict. It was just 12 random people. Dustin was honored at his high school graduation for his football skills, and he made plans to attend college the following year. Brian Denneke was dead. Brian had played his last show. He had installed his last traffic sign. He would never hug his parents again. Dustin, true to form, couldn't even keep himself out of prison with the gracious sentence he received. He would have never had to see the inside of a jail cell in his whole life despite having murdered someone. But Dustin went and violated his probation stipulations. A judge sentenced Dustin to prison for eight years for consuming alcohol, being in a place where crimes were in progress, breaking curfew and fleeing from police. Are we even surprised? This case has been in and out of the local and national news for decades now. A movie was even filmed based on this story. It's called Bomb City. Check it out. Chris Oles and Jason Denneke make very quick cameos, in fact.

While Chris participated in making the movie, he says most of it is cinematic bullshit. There are a few things that really happen, things we already talked about in this episode, but a lot of it is made up. The movie is well done, though, and helps to keep Brian's memory alive, at least. Oh, and right now, there's a petition online to rename a skate park in Amarillo after Brian. People in town haven't forgotten about him, which is probably why Dustin Camp is nowhere to be found online.

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