

= The Town That Dreaded Sundown =

The Town That Dreaded Sundown is a 1976 American slasher film by producer and director Charles B. Pierce who also co @-@ stars as a bumbling police officer named A.C. Benson , also known as " Sparkplug " . Pierce 's fifth film is narrated by Vern Stierman who had previously narrated Pierce 's 1972 film The Legend of Boggy Creek . Ben Johnson stars as Captain J.D. Morales , the fictionalized version of real @-@ life Texas Ranger Captain M. T. " Lone Wolf " Gonzauillas . Dawn Wells (Mary Ann of Gilligan 's Island) appears as one of the victims . Cindy Butler (Pierce 's girlfriend at the time) plays Peggy Loomis , the trombone victim . The Phantom is played by Bud Davis , who later worked as stunt coordinator on films such as Forrest Gump , Cast Away , and Inglourious Basterds . The film was mostly shot around Texarkana , and a number of locals were cast as extras . The world premiere was held in Texarkana on December 17 , 1976 , before its regular run in theaters on December 24 . The film is an early example of a slasher film , having been released two years before Halloween (1978) , and just two years after Black Christmas (1974) , a film considered as one of the earliest in the genre .

The film is somewhat loosely based on the actual crimes attributed to an unidentified serial killer known as the Phantom Killer ; it claims that " the incredible story you are about to see is true , where it happened and how it happened ; only the names have been changed . " The actual Phantom attacked eight people between February 22 , 1946 and May 3 , 1946 in or near the town of Texarkana , Texas , which is on the border of Texas and Arkansas . Most of the murders occurred in rural areas just outside Texarkana , in Bowie County , Texas , while the film has them occurring in Arkansas . However , the general outline of the murders largely follows the reality , with mostly minor artistic license taken . As in the film , the real killer was never identified nor apprehended .

The film is loose enough with the facts that one family member of a victim filed a lawsuit in 1978 , over its depiction of his sister . The fabricated facts in the film have also caused rumors and folklore to spread for generations around Texarkana . The film 's tagline claims that the man who killed five people " still lurks the streets of Texarkana , Ark . " , causing officials of that neighboring city to threaten Pierce over the ads in 1977 ; however , it remained on the posters . A meta @-@ sequel with the same name was released on October 16 , 2014 .

= = Plot = =

Before the " Phantom @-@ attacks " , which occurred about eight months after World War II , Texarkana was pleasant and citizens were preparing for a good future . On the night of Sunday , March 3 , 1946 , Sammy Fuller and Linda Mae Jenkins park on a lovers ' lane . Soon , the hood of the car opens and closes and a man with a bag over his head with holes cut out for his eyes is seen holding wires he had yanked from the engine . While Sammy tries starting the car , the man breaks his window and pulls him out , cutting him on the broken glass . The man then gets inside the car with Linda .

The next morning , Linda is found on the side of the road barely alive . While at the crime scene , Deputy Norman Ramsey reports that both victims are still alive . He leaves a message for Sheriff Barker to meet him at Michael @-@ Meagher Hospital . At the hospital , a doctor tells Sheriff Barker that Linda was not raped but that her back , stomach , and breasts were " heavily bitten ; literally chewed . " At the police station , Barker suggests to Police Chief Sullivan to warn teens and college students from parking on lonely roads .

On March 24 , while investigating a lovers ' lane in heavy rain , Ramsey hears gunshots and finds Howard W. Turner dead in a ditch and the corpse of his girlfriend , Emma Lou Cook , tied to a tree . Ramsey spots the hooded man escaping in a car . Panicked , the town sells out of guns and other home safety equipment . Sheriff Barker calls in help and tells Ramsey they are getting the most famous criminal investigator in the country , the " Lone Wolf " of the Texas Rangers , Captain J.D. Morales . After arriving , Morales explains he 'll be in charge of the investigation and calls the unidentified attacker a Phantom . Ramsey is assigned to assist Morales , and Patrolman A.C. Benson " Sparkplug " is to be his driver .

At the barber shop , Ramsey explains to Morales his theory that the Phantom attacks every 21 days . The next attack falls on the day of a high school prom , and decoys are set up on the edges of town . After the dance , on April 14 , trombone player Peggy Loomis leaves with her boyfriend Roy Allen . Despite her worries , they go to Spring Lake Park in the middle of town . When they leave , the Phantom jumps on the driver 's door and pulls Roy out of the car , causing Peggy to wreck . She flees as the Phantom beats Roy , but he catches her and ties her hands around a tree . Roy awakens but is shot to death while attempting to escape . The Phantom attaches a pocket knife to Peggy 's trombone and kills her while " playing " the instrument .

Morales and other officers meet with psychiatrist Dr. Kress at a restaurant where he explains that the Phantom is a highly intelligent sadist with a strong sex drive , between the ages of 35 and 40 . As Kress expresses his doubts about their chances of capturing the Phantom , the Phantom 's shoes are shown , revealing that he had heard the entire conversation . At the station , a man named Johnson says that he was robbed and forced to drive a man to Lufkin at gunpoint . While on the road , Ramsey receives a report about an armed suspect , and a brief chase ensues . The suspect , Eddie LeDoux , at first denies everything , then confesses to being the Phantom , but Morales is unconvinced . Johnson identifies him as his robber .

On May 3 , Helen Reed is seen by the Phantom leaving a grocery store . At home that night , Helen asks her husband Floyd , who is sitting in front of a window in his armchair , if he hears somebody walking outside . After he replies that he does not , the Phantom shoots him through their window . Helen inspects and sees Floyd dying . As she uses the telephone to call police , the Phantom breaks through the screen door and shoots her twice in the face . Despite her wounds , she drags herself out of the house and into a cornfield while the Phantom inspects Floyd 's body . The Phantom stalks her with a pickaxe , but leaves when she gets help at a nearby house . News of this attack causes the town to panic , and people begin boarding up their windows .

Later , Morales and Ramsey receive a report about a stolen car that matches the one from the Turner and Cook murders . While investigating a sand pit , they encounter the Phantom . Morales shoots at him but misses , causing him to run into the woods . The Phantom escapes by jumping past a moving train , but is shot in the leg . While waiting for the train to pass , the Phantom escapes . They continue their search but never find him . Years later , the film " The Town That Dreaded Sundown " premieres in Texarkana and the shoes of the Phantom are seen standing in line .

= = Cast = =

Ben Johnson as Captain J.D. Morales , based on the lead investigator , Captain of Company B Texas Rangers , M. T. " Lone Wolf " Gonzallas .

Andrew Prine as Deputy Norman Ramsey , a fictional character slightly based on Bowie County Sheriff Bill Presley .

Dawn Wells as Helen Reed , based on the real @-@ life victim Katie Starks .

Jimmy Clem as Sgt. Mal Griffin

Jim Citty as Police Chief R.J. Sullivan

Charles B. Pierce as Patrolman A.C. Benson (" Sparkplug ") , a comic relief fictional character .

Robert Aquino as Sheriff Otis Barker

Bud Davis as The Phantom

Mike Hackworth as Sammy Fuller , based on the first victim Jimmy Hollis

Christine Ellsworth as Linda Mae Jenkins , based on victim Mary Jeanne Larey

Steve Lyons as Roy Allen , based on victim Paul Martin

Cindy Butler as Peggy Loomis , based on victim Betty Jo Booker

Joe Catalanatto as Eddie LaDoux

C. Alexander Dawson as hotel doorman

= = Production = =

Principal photography began on Monday , June 21 , in the very hot summer of 1976 for about four

weeks . Locations included Scott , Arkansas , Shreveport , Louisiana , Garland City , Arkansas and Texarkana , Texas . The last scene filmed was the first attack , which was shot in front of Pierce 's home in Shreveport . About 19 Texarkana locals starred in the film along with several extras .

Pierce called Dawn Wells on July 8 , 1976 , to star in his film . She arrived by plane in Texarkana before noon the next day . She stayed in Texarkana for six days but completed her scenes in the first two . While filming the cornfield scene , Wells was almost attacked by a bulldog , but the crew scared it away by shooting at it . Wells wanted to talk to the real @-@ life survivor of her role , Katie Starks , but Katie refused . The Town That Dreaded Sundown was Wells ' fourth film and her second time working with Pierce . During her stay , she did not read the script ; she relied on the director instead . She said that was the way she wanted it . Wells explained , " Acting @-@ wise , it 's an extremely emotional role . I didn 't want to pattern my interpretation after anything . I wanted to go on my own feelings . " Being shot was a new experience for the actress . " They planted a charge in the receiver , so I was standing there holding the phone , shaking , expecting the receiver to blow up in my face . "

Andrew Prine , who played Norman Ramsey , wrote the last fifth of the film because it had no ending . Both he and Ben Johnson were hungover while filming the train scene after partying the night before . During the rain scene with Ramsey , a snake made its way on the set . Crew members were yelling at Andrew that there was a moccasin , but Prine wanted to finish his scene without re @-@ shooting , so the crew killed the snake afterwards . The last shot of the film where the killer is seen standing in line at the movie theater was Pierce 's wife 's idea .

= = = Production notes = = =

The film is one of several so @-@ called " drive @-@ in " films that were presented as true stories (à la 1972 's The Legend of Boggy Creek ; 1973 's Walking Tall ; 1974 's The Texas Chain Saw Massacre ; 1975 's Macon County Line and 1976 's Jackson County Jail) when most , if not all , of what was portrayed on screen was outright fiction .

= = Promotion and release = =

The film 's poster art was painted with acrylic by a graphic illustrator named Ralph McQuarrie , then an unknown . McQuarrie had painted the poster for Peirce 's The Legend of Boggy Creek , then later for his films Bootleggers (1974) , Winterhawk (1975) , and Winds of Autumn (1976) . McQuarrie became recognized for his talent and went on to paint posters for Creature from Black Lake (1976) , Battlestar Galactica (1978) , Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977) , Back to the Future (1985) and the original Star Wars trilogy . His concept art was used to help convince 20th Century Fox to fund Star Wars . The advertising department placed the controversial phrase , " In 1946 this man killed five people ... today he still lurks the streets of Texarkana , Ark . " on the poster . After Texarkana city officials threatened to sue , Pierce tried having the statement removed . The last part of the phrase was censored or removed in advertisements , but it remained on several posters .

The film was released theatrically in the United States by American International Pictures on December 24 , 1976 , and internationally in Sweden (1977) , West Germany (1978) , and the Philippines (1979) . It was played at drive @-@ ins until the end of 1977 and made its television debut by June 1978 . It was released on VHS in 1983 by Warner Home Video who then re @-@ released it in 1988 . Good Times Video also released it on VHS on May 15 , 2001 . The Turner Classic Movies (TCM) cable channel occasionally airs widescreen versions of this film , with the most recent showing scheduled for March 14th 2015 . The film finally had a digital release on May 21 , 2013 when Shout ! Factory released it on a Blu @-@ ray / DVD Combo Pack including Pierce 's 1979 film The Evictors .

= = = Reception = = =

===== Contemporaneous =====

Larry Fisher , a film critic for the Delta Democrat @-@ Times , gave the film a three star rating out of five . He said Ben Johnson gave a superb performance as Captain J.D. Morales , and that " Although the picture lacks a strong ending , Pierce does one of the most credible jobs of engineering the tense , horrifying murder scenes . " Mark Melson , Shreveport Times Amusement editor , claimed that it " may prove interesting to some viewers for one reason or another " but was " ultimately unsatisfying . "

William Whitaker of the Abilene Reporter @-@ News gave the film a negative review , stating , " where I was expecting a dramatic retelling of the mysterious case concerning the phantom killer and his bizarre murders , I was greeted with an extremely uneven picture , collapsing into the most sickening , blood @-@ weltering scenes one minute and then lapsing into some incredibly bad comedy relief the next . " He continued , " Such vivid contrasts in the film 's approach to its subject lead to its downfall . Any effect the disgustingly boring and extremely brutal murder scenes have go to waste seconds later when director Charles B. Pierce leads the picture into some of the type of poor comedy relief that one is used to seeing in budget pictures of the ' 60s . As a result , the film is unable to conjure up any mood or suspense . " He concludes with , " All in all , the picture is an unpleasant little film and Pierce , after going overboard on the blood and gore scenes , never seems to be able to decide as to how serious the picture should be , " and that " both mature and immature minds should avoid the film . " A reporter in El Paso , Texas gave it a mixed review , writing that " this mixture of humor with fact saved ' The Town ... ' as it wakes the audience when things begin to lag . " He goes on to write , " All things considered , the movie is entertaining and would appeal to those who savor unsolved murder mysteries . "

===== Modern =====

Scott Weinberg from FEARnet gave it a positive review by claiming that it is , " Arguably the most accomplished feature from the late Charles B. Pierce , " and " while the movie offers a slightly stodgy ' voice @-@ over ' narration and some moments that seem plucked straight out of ' 1970s police procedural 101 ' , including a few painful moments of cop @-@ related comic relief , it also delivers some legitimately effective atmosphere , several cool character actors doing fine work , and a handful of sincerely creepy moments . "

Bloody Disgusting gave the film five " skulls " in a review by Patrick Cooper , who wrote that it is " a hugely entertaining atmospheric thriller , " and that " the only parts that fumble a bit are the regrettable comedic moments ... these well @-@ intentioned bits sharply interrupt the serious ambiance of the film , but at least they 're few and spaced far enough apart that they don 't ruin the whole thing . " Film review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes reported an approval rating of 50 % , based on 8 reviews , with a rating average of 5 @.@ 3 / 10 .

===== Historical accuracy =====

At the beginning of the film , it states that the first attack occurred on Sunday , March 3rd . In real life , the attack happened on Friday , February 22nd . Jimmy Hollis (portrayed as " Sammy Fuller ") was not pulled out of the window . The girl , Mary Jeanne Larey (portrayed as " Linda Mae Jenkins ") was told to run . She was then chased down and sexually assaulted with the attacker 's gun . She soon escaped and received help at a house . In the film , the doctor claimed that she was bitten and chewed , but Mary Larey only had a cut on her head from being beaten .

The next attack in the film claims that it happened on Saturday , March 24th ; in 1946 , March 24th was on a Sunday . In the film , " Howard Turner " and his girlfriend , " Emma Lou Cook " , were found dead outside of the vehicle . Emma Cook was shown tied to a tree with bite marks . In real life , both victims were found inside of the vehicle shot to death . The character " Deputy Ramsey " was patrolling the area and found the bodies . Afterwards , he sees the Phantom getting into a car and

leaving . On the real morning of March 24th , a passing motorist spotted a car and found the bodies of Richard Griffin and Polly Ann Moore inside before calling the authorities . By the time the officers were on the scene , the killer was long gone .

The film states that locals soon started buying guns and locks , but this did not happen until two months later in May . The characters in the film then brought in Captain J.D. Morales of the Texas Rangers . Truthfully , " Lone Wolf " did not come to Texarkana until after the second double @-@ murder near Spring Lake Park . The film has Morales naming the killer a phantom , but the naming of the killer did not come until after the murders in April , and by the executive editor of the Texarkana Gazette .

The film then shows a high school prom with the character " Peggy Loomis " playing a trombone . The officers were setting up decoys in an attempt to capture the Phantom . Betty Jo Booker , who played saxophone (not a trombone) was playing at a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) social event (not a prom) , and officers did not set up decoys until after her and her friend Paul Martin 's murder . In the film , " Peggy " and " Roy " are a couple , but Booker and Martin were only friends in real life . She and Martin were shot to death , and her saxophone was missing for six months . In the film , " Deputy Ramsey " collects the victim 's instrument as evidence .

In the film , " Helen Reed " sees the attacker before being shot . However , Katie Starks was shot through the same window as her husband and did not see her attacker until he tried crawling through the kitchen window . Mrs. Starks ran out of the house but was not chased . At the end of the film , the officers chase The Phantom and shoot him in the leg , but the real Phantom was never chased or shot at all .

= = Controversies = =

In February 1977 , Texarkana city officials voted to file a lawsuit against the ad campaign . When city officials visited Washington , D.C. , they were kidded about the film 's tagline which states : " In 1946 this man killed five people ... today he still lurks the streets of Texarkana , Ark . " Mayor Harvey Nelson explained : " The ad is too much ; that 's just not true . There 's objection that this whole thing will be spreading fear in the community . There are relatives of the victims still living here , and this is very unpleasant to them . " Pierce worked with American International Pictures to remove the " still lurking " statement , but it remained on the posters .

In 1978 , Mark Melton Moore , the brother of real @-@ life victim Polly Ann Moore , took Pierce to court for \$ 1 @.@ 3 million for invading his privacy . He claimed his sister , who was portrayed as " Emma Lou Cook " in the film , was depicted " as a high school dropout and a woman with loose and low morals ; when in fact none of such was true . " In real life , Polly Ann Moore graduated high school at the age of 16 . The court denied his claim in 1979 . Mr. Moore filed again in 1980 to the Texas Supreme Court . The Sixth Court of Civil Appeals in Texarkana agreed again that the film 's producers did not invade his privacy and that he was not entitled to any money .

On March 15 , 1978 , Gerald Gedrimas , a teenager , shot and killed his high school friend James Grunstra . In court , Gedrimas stated that he thought of his plan to be an " outlaw " like Jesse James (the infamous legendary outlaw of the Wild West) while watching The Town That Dreaded Sundown .

= = Tradition = =

In Texarkana (where the story is based) , this film is shown to the public at Spring Lake Park near Halloween . It is the last film shown for " Movies in the Park " , which plays a film on each Thursday during May and October . The showing of the film , which has been a tradition since 2003 , is a free event sponsored by The Texarkana , Texas Department of Parks & Recreation .

= = In popular culture = =

Jason Voorhees , the masked assailant from the Friday the 13th franchise , wears a gunny sack

over his head in Friday the 13th Part 2 (1981) , much similar to the Phantom 's with the exception of Jason only having one eye @-@ hole on the sack , whereas the Phantom has two eye @-@ holes . The Town That Dreaded Sundown is mentioned by a character in the 1996 film Scream . In Seven Psychopaths (2012) , a short scene shows a couple that kills the " Texarkana Moonlight Murderer " like the one in this film .

= = Sequel = =

A follow @-@ up meta @-@ sequel by Ryan Murphy and Jason Blum was released on October 16 , 2014 , in select theaters and then on Video on Demand the following day . The director , Alfonso Gomez @-@ Rejon , directed a script by Roberto Aguirre @-@ Sacasa . Addison Timlin plays the lead role and is supported by Gary Cole , Ed Lauter and Veronica Cartwright .