



Santae Tribble

In the early morning hours of July 26, 1978, John McCormick, a 63-year-old cab driver, was fatally shot outside of his home in Washington, D.C.

His wife, Belva, heard her husband pleading for his life and then a gunshot. When she looked out a window, she saw a man wearing a stocking over his head and called police. Her husband's body was found on their front porch.

A police dog found a stocking on the sidewalk a block away. Inside, police found a several strands of hair. The hair was sent to the FBI for analysis and one strand was determined suitable for comparison.

The shooting was the second murder of a middle-aged white man in that neighborhood that month. William Horn, a 52-year-old employee of a floral shop, was robbed and shot to death on July 13, 1978.

Ballistics testing indicated that both men were shot with the same 32-caliber pistol.

Nine days after McCormick's murder, Bobby Jean Phillips told police that Santae Tribble, 17, and Cleveland Wright, 20, sold a .32-caliber revolver for \$60 to her roommate, who was Wright's girlfriend.

Phillips turned over some shell casings from the gun to police, but the gun was never recovered. Police were unable to link the casings to the bullets that killed Horn and McCormick. Police did find .32-caliber ammunition at Tribble's mother's home and at Wright's home, but could not connect the bullets to either crime.

Ronald Willis, 17, told police that Wright was involved in Horn's slaying, but that Tribble was not involved. In November 1978, however, Willis told a grand jury that Tribble admitted to him that he acted as a look-out for Wright in the Horn murder.

In August, 1978, Wright and Tribble were charged with both murders. Wright was accused of being the gunman and Tribble was accused of acting as the look-out.

In November 1978, Tribble took and passed a polygraph examination, denying that he was involved in either murder.

The cases against Tribble and Wright were severed. In 1979, Wright was convicted of the murder of Horn and Tribble was acquitted. The primary evidence against them was the testimony of Willis, who testified pursuant to a plea agreement under which he received two years' probation after robbery charges and a probation violation were reduced to lesser violations.

In 1980, Tribble went on trial for the murder of McCormick. The first witness was an FBI agent who testified that he had compared the hair from the stocking with a head hair from Tribble. He said the hairs were identical and that the hair in the stocking came from Tribble.

State: District of Columbia

County:

Most Serious Crime: Murder

Additional Convictions:

Reported Crime Date: 1978

Convicted: 1980

Exonerated: 2012

Sentence: 20 to Life

Race: Black

Sex: Male

Age: 17

Contributing Factors: False or Misleading Forensic Evidence, Perjury or False Accusation

Did DNA evidence contribute to the exoneration? Yes

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Phillips testified that Tribble told her he was with Wright when Wright shot McCormick, although portions of her testimony conflicted with evidence gathered by police. She said that Tribble told her they hailed McCormick's cab and that Wright shot him after they went a few blocks—a story that the defense called ridiculous because it meant that McCormick picked them up a few blocks from his own home and drove them to his house.

Tribble took the witness stand and testified in his own behalf, denying any involvement in the murder. Several other witnesses testified, including friends and relatives, who said he was asleep at his mother's apartment in Seat Pleasant, Maryland, at the time of the shooting.

The prosecution, in closing argument, hammered at the hair evidence, saying that the two hairs "matched perfectly."

The jury sent out one question during deliberations, asking about the stocking found on the sidewalk. They convicted Tribble on January 20, 1980 of murder and armed robbery. He was sentenced to 20 years to life in prison.

Tribble's conviction was upheld in June 1982.

Tribble served 25 years of his prison sentence and was released on parole in April 2003. He later served an additional three years after he was returned to prison for parole violations.

In 2009, Tribble read a news article about the exoneration of Donald Gates who had been convicted of murder in Washington, D.C., on the basis of hair analysis by the FBI. Mitochondrial DNA testing of the hair evidence in Gates' case showed that the hair used to convict him was not his.

Tribble reached out to Sandra Levick, of the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia, who had represented Gates.

The hair evidence from Tribble's case was sent for mitochondrial DNA testing. Wright, who had been acquitted, also submitted his DNA for testing. On January 5, 2012, DNA testing excluded both Tribble and Wright, and proved that the hair used to convict Tribble did not come from him, or from his alleged accomplice.

In April 2012, U.S. Attorney Ronald C. Machen Jr. agreed to drop the charges against Tribble and on May 11, District of Columbia Superior Court Judge Laura Cordero vacated the conviction and dismissed the charges.

In December 2012, a Washington, D.C. Superior court judge granted Tribble a certificate of innocence.

– *Maurice Possley*

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