



FAMILY PHOTOS

For D.C. man, 28 years lost

Santae Tribble served his time. Now, the evidence that sent him to prison has fallen apart.

BY SPENCER S. HSU

Santae Tribble was watching Wolfman Jack on TV that Friday night in August 1978 when police surrounded his mother's house in Southeast Washington.

Tribble, downstairs in the basement with his girlfriend, thought the fuss was over two unpaid traffic tickets.

Instead, officers took the surprised 17-year-old to headquarters. Years later, Tribble, now 51, struggled to find the words to accept what ensued: a murder conviction and his imprisonment for nearly three decades.

"I just never believed — I never believed that — I never believed that they could prove a person ... guilty that was innocent," he said quietly in his lawyer's office. "I never thought I would be found guilty

until I was actually found guilty." He added, "I didn't see the light of day again for 25 years."

Tribble agreed to discuss his case while on lifetime parole and in the presence of his D.C. Public Defender Service lawyer, Sandra K. Levick. Tall, lean and possessing the watchful bearing of a man who has spent his entire adult life in prison or on parole, Tribble said he hoped that describing his case and the toll of lost decades would help prevent wrongful convictions, although his own fate remains pending before a judge.

Released from prison in 2003 after serving 25 years for a slaying for which he has always maintained his innocence, he spent an additional three years in jail for failing to meet his parole conditions. He left a halfway house

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Santae A. Tribble at the federal prison in Ray Brook, N.Y., in 1989; brother James Tribble, Santae's then-wife, Linda, and James Tribble Sr., visiting the prison in Louisburg, Pa., in 1990; Dorothy A. Tribble, in an 1989 portrait sent to her son; James Tribble, his future wife, Deborah, and brother Santae on a vacation to Atlantic City, circa 1975; James Tribble Sr., circa 1980, visiting Santae at Lorton Correctional Facility.

this fall and spent the winter staying with a friend and searching for work to pay rent.

At an age when others ponder retirement, he said his prospects of building a life without a high school diploma, work history or skills are “kind of bleak.”

“It’s hard to find jobs, and I’m not as qualified as many,” Tribble said. “. . . The fact I’m on parole for robbery and murder, that doesn’t help.”

Still, Tribble is more upbeat than he was in prison. “Many people [were] concerned about my adjustment back to society. I think the hardest thing to adjust to was leaving society,” Tribble said. “To be snatched away from everyone that you’ve ever known, your family,” he said, his voice drifting off.

The following account is drawn from interviews, Tribble’s trial transcript and other court records. The passage of time has dimmed memories, and several witnesses have died.

In Washington in the summer of 1978, President Jimmy Carter was preparing to host a Middle East peace summit between the leaders of Egypt and Israel at nearby Camp David, and a young city council member named Marion Barry was making in his first bid for mayor.

For Tribble, who had dropped out of school in the ninth grade, it “was an average summer” of sports and hanging out with friends and girls. But changes loomed as what would have been his junior year in high school ended, and boys in the neighborhood moved away, joined the service or took jobs. “I remember like it was yesterday,” he said with a smile.

Tribble and his brother and two sisters grew up working class, with a mother who worked full time as an assistant nurse at Glendale Hospital, then cooked her children “a proper dinner.” She took them on summer trips to Atlantic City and to see cousins in Austin. When Santae started elementary school, their father, a federal warehouse laborer, left home.

Santae drifted. After dropping out, he bused tables, pumped gas and held summer jobs. When his older sister, Jewell, gave birth to her second child and moved back home

with their mother, he helped take care of the children.

Tribble’s friend Cleveland Wright had other interests. Three years older than Santae, Wright came from rural North Carolina to the city and preferred catching crayfish and squirrels in the green spaces of Anacostia to the playground sports favored by local kids.

By Santae’s teens, the pair had found a shared taste for dice and cards, winning up to \$60 a day. Still, as he turned 17, Tribble said, he was spending more time with a girlfriend and thinking of his future.

Tribble thought he might follow his brother, James Jr., into the Army. But the new volunteer military was raising education requirements and accepting as few as one in 10 applicants from the District, where unemployment by 1978 had topped 48 percent for black teenagers.

Jewell suggested the Job Corps and a high school equivalency degree first.

But, Tribble said, “all that was halted in the summer of ’78 when the police came.”

The crime

That July, two men were killed within blocks of Tribble’s mother’s home. Both victims were middle-aged white men who were robbed and shot to death with a .32-caliber handgun in the early morning hours as they returned to their homes. William Horn, 52, was a floral-shop worker coming back from a night out. John McCormick, 63, was a Diamond Cab driver who was finishing the night shift.

No one could identify a shooter in either crime. But the commotion outside her house awakened McCormick’s wife, Belva, and she heard her husband pleading for his life. Through a window she saw a lone assailant wearing a stocking mask, then rushed to call police.



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Santae Tribble

McCormick's body lay on his front porch. A police dog found a stocking on a sidewalk a block away. Months later, the FBI would report that a single hair inside it matched Tribble's "in all microscopic characteristics."

Besides the hair, prosecutors' case was shaky, relying on two informants and a missing gun. Bobby Jean "B.J." Phillips told police nine days after McCormick's death that Tribble and Wright sold a .32-caliber revolver for \$60 to her roommate, who also was Wright's girlfriend. Phillips turned over shell casings she said were fired from the gun, which she later said had disappeared.

Meanwhile, a friend of Tribble and Wright's, Ronald Willis, also 17, implicated Wright in Horn's slaying. He told police that Tribble had nothing to do with it.

That November, Willis changed his story, testifying to a grand jury that Tribble told him he was Wright's lookout. On Jan. 17, 1980, the day Tribble's first-degree-murder trial began, Willis, who was facing charges for robbery and a probation violation, was sentenced in a plea bargain to reduced charges. He received two years' probation as a youth offender and was released.

Phillips's story also evolved. At first, she claimed that Tribble admitted to being "around" when Wright shot a man in circumstances matching Horn's death. Later still, Phillips said Tribble told her he was with Wright when he shot McCormick, although her story conflicted in several ways with what police knew about the crime.

Police determined that .32-caliber slugs recovered from both victims were fired by the same gun. But they could not link the slugs to the missing weapon sold by Wright and Tribble. Police found a box of bullets in Tribble's closet but could not link them to the shell casings turned over by Phillips.

Tribble was acquitted in Horn's killing after a jury, with no corroborating evidence, weighed the unreliability of an informant seeking reduced prison time. Willis spent most of the two decades after Tribble's trial in prison for burglaries, thefts, robberies and an assault on a police officer.

In his own defense, Tribble was adamant on the stand, in a lie-detector test and

in statements over the years about whether he had anything to do with the stocking, the robberies or the shootings: "No, sir."

Tribble and his brother, girlfriend and a houseguest all testified that Tribble had spent that night in Seat Pleasant at his mother's apartment while she was out of town. His record was clean, besides two \$10 fines he paid for playing dice in public.

Federal prosecutor David Stanley focused on the hair in his closing arguments.

"There is one chance, perhaps for all we know, in 10 million that it could [be] someone else's hair," Stanley said.

After a three-day trial, jurors deliberated about two hours before asking a question: "Which stocking was found at end of alley on 28th St" a block away? After it was confirmed it was the one containing a single hair that the FBI traced to Tribble, the jury's verdict came 40 minutes later: not guilty in Horn's death but guilty of murdering McCormick. Tribble was sentenced to prison for 20 years to life.

Wright had the opposite result: He was acquitted in McCormick's death but convicted of killing Horn.

Tribble was denied parole when he first became eligible after 20 years. Despite his clean prison disciplinary record, the parole board cited the severity of his offense and his age at the time of the crime. He ended up serving 25 years.

Finally, Tribble recalled, he heard an official on the parole board say, "From everything I'm looking at, we don't have any choice but to give this man a date." In April 2003, he stepped off a bus at the Greyhound station in downtown Washington, embracing his son and brother.

His father, who visited him "practically every Saturday" while he was imprisoned locally, died in 1992. Tribble's mother died in 1994, five years after she sent a snapshot inscribed, "To my baby son, with all my love, Mom." Sister Jewell, who had been like a surrogate mother, died of AIDS in 1996. Tribble missed their funerals.

'Everybody believed he was innocent'

To meet the Tribble brothers is to imag-

ine a life that might have been. James Jr. is a civilian Army worker and sings in the church men's choir in his Woodbridge neighborhood. His family tries to take a cruise every two years. Santae can't join them; under terms of his parole, he cannot hold a passport.

"Everybody believed he was innocent," James Tribble said. "Two detectives pulled me aside and told me that they knew Santae didn't do anything. They wanted Cleveland."

Both brothers called the Public Defender Service's pursuit of Tribble's case and the preservation of testable evidence a godsend.

In December 2009, Tribble was reading *The Washington Post* and shouted out loud, "This is me!" A District man named Donald Gates who was convicted of murder based on an FBI hair match had been exonerated by DNA. He called Gates's lawyer. In February 2011, Levick filed court papers seeking to have evidence in Tribble's case retested.

Nearly one year later, on Jan. 5, Mitotyping Technologies of State College, Pa., returned results. None of the 13 hairs recovered from the stocking — including the one that the FBI said matched Tribble's — shared Tribble's or Wright's genetic profile, conclusively ruling them out as sources, according to analyst Terry Melton.

It will be up to a judge to decide if Tribble deserves a retrial or a declaration of innocence.

Wright, a Safeway clerk, is also seeking to overturn his conviction after nearly 29 years in prison, saying neither he nor Tribble had "anything to do with either murder."

Stanley, the prosecutor, declined to comment.

In interviews, McCormick's children said that as terrible as their father's slaying

was, their late mother would have wanted to get the real killer. "That's how she was brought up, and that's how I was brought up," said John McCormick, 63, a retired roofer in Live Oak, Fla.

Phillips, who now goes by the name Bobby Bess, acknowledged that she remembered Tribble's case but declined to comment in an interview. Asked what he would say to Phillips or Willis, Tribble said: "I think they have their own demons to deal with. . . . I think they're all suffering in their own personal ways."

As for the police and prosecutors who put him behind bars, Tribble paused.

"Coming into this, I believed in the American justice system," Tribble said. "In my particular case, I felt over the years that they just wanted a conviction more than they wanted to actually capture the person who was responsible for the crime."

Tribble expressed no regret, even though refusing to accept a plea deal and maintaining his innocence cost him years more in prison.

"As stubborn as I was then, I think I'd still be just as stubborn now," he said.

Tribble now dreams of a "normal life" — a job and "a place where my [son and two grandchildren] could come to . . . and just be a family."

"I'm going to use this as the final chapter of this story, whether it turns out all the way in my favor or not," he said. "It's my chance to tell everyone for the last, final time that I was convicted of a crime I didn't commit."

It was what Tribble tried to tell police that night in August 1978.

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Staff researcher Jennifer Jenkins contributed to this report.