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JOUR 587-001

Prof. Lumsden

12 May 2015

### **Media Coverage of the Pioneer Hotel Fire and the Trial and Release of Louis Taylor**

Tragedy struck Tucson, Arizona, on December 20, 1970 when the legendary Pioneer Hotel caught fire, killing 29 and injuring more than 40. Guests and residents of the 11-story building were celebrating an early Christmas when a fire swept through the lower two floors and spread to the top of the tallest building in the city.<sup>1</sup> The hotel, which was built in 1929, had inadequate fire safety mechanisms, including a lack of fire escapes and sprinkler systems and outdated fire extinguishers and smoke alarms.<sup>2</sup> Firefighters were also unable to reach higher floors because their ladders were too short.<sup>3</sup> As a result, pretty much everyone above the 8th floor was trapped.<sup>4</sup> Many people attempted to escape by tying sheets together and climbing down, while others threw their mattresses out the windows and jumped on them — some successfully, others not.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the night, 28 people had died (the 29th died months later), most from burns or carbon monoxide poisoning, including Harold Steinfeld, one of the builders of the hotel who lived in the penthouse, and a number of Mexican dignitaries, who were visiting Tucson from Sonora, Mexico.<sup>6</sup> More

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire* (Tucson, Arizona: Arizona Daily Star, 2013), Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>3</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>4</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>5</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>6</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

than 40 years later, the Pioneer Hotel fire still ranks as the deadliest land event in Arizona state history.<sup>7</sup>

Louis Taylor, a 16-year-old African-American with a prior criminal record, was arrested and charged with the crime despite assisting the firefighters with leading victims to safety.<sup>8</sup> The night of the fire, he was brought into the police station for questioning and was arrested because he could not answer why he was present at the hotel.<sup>9</sup> He was not offered an attorney until the morning after and was questioned by at least eight different people.<sup>10</sup> The lead fire investigator told the city council after his initial investigation that the fire was arson and the person responsible was, “probably a Negro, and he’s probably 18.”<sup>11</sup> Despite minimal evidence, Taylor was convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to 28 consecutive life terms in prison (he was not charged in the death of the 29th victim because she died months later).<sup>12</sup> After an investigation by *60 Minutes* and the Arizona Justice Project in the early 2000s, the county revisited the case and determined that there was not enough evidence to convict Taylor of a crime.<sup>13</sup> In April 2013, the state allowed Taylor, who has maintained his innocence throughout his life, to plead no contest and be released from prison.<sup>14</sup> Since Taylor agreed to plead no contest, he does not have the right to seek compensation from the state of Arizona for the 42 years he wrongfully spent in

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<sup>7</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>8</sup> Steven E. Barkan and George J. Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice* (Burlington, Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2014), 287-288.

<sup>9</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

<sup>10</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

<sup>11</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

<sup>12</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

<sup>13</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

<sup>14</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

prison.<sup>15</sup> Pima County prosecutor Rick Unklesbay also publicly stated that his office still believes Taylor is guilty.<sup>16</sup> The Pioneer Hotel fire remains one of the more famous and infamous events in Arizona history, which is confirmed by media coverage of the incident and the trial and release of Louis Taylor. This essay will point out some of the more unique moments in reporting of the occurrences.

In November 1928, Tucsonan Albert Steinfeld and his son, Harold, held a press conference to announce their plans to build a luxurious hotel in downtown Tucson at the corner of North Stone Avenue and East Pennington Street.<sup>17</sup> According to a story in the *Arizona Daily Star* on November 6, 1928, the structure would cost \$1 million, be 11 stories tall and have 200 rooms and the largest ballroom in the country.<sup>18</sup> The excitement of those involved with the project was evident in the story, which wrote around quotes from the Steinfelds and architect Roy Place. Harold Steinfeld likened the future Pioneer Hotel to the legendary Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles, calling the project a response to the “pressing necessity of additional hotel accommodations for Tucson — accommodations of high class.”<sup>19</sup> Place also told the *Arizona Daily Star*, “The structure will be absolutely fireproof.”<sup>20</sup> While the hotel stood as a resting and meeting spot for the World’s elite for more than 30 years, that was ultimately not the case.

When the fire ripped through the Pioneer Hotel on December 20, 1970, the event garnered national media coverage. Two of the biggest newspapers in the country — the

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<sup>15</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

<sup>16</sup> Barkan and Byrak, *Myths and Realities of Crime and Justice*, 287-288.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Cosulich, “Steinfeld Announced \$1,000,000 Hotel.” *Arizona Daily Star*. November 6, 1928.

<sup>18</sup> Cosulich, “Steinfeld Announced \$1,000,000 Hotel.”

<sup>19</sup> Cosulich, “Steinfeld Announced \$1,000,000 Hotel.”

<sup>20</sup> Cosulich, “Steinfeld Announced \$1,000,000 Hotel.”

*Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* — ran wire stories of the tragedy on the front page of their December 21, 1970 editions. Both newspapers, which seemingly had the same information available, presented the stories differently. For example, in the *Chicago Tribune* story, the lede was, “Flames ravaged the Pioneer Hotel early today, killing and injuring dozens of persons, including some who jumped from the upper stories.”<sup>21</sup> In the *Los Angeles Times*, the story started with, “Fire swept through the upper eight floors of a hotel crowded with hundreds of holiday celebrants early Sunday, killing 28 persons who a fire official said might have been saved by adequate sprinkler and alarm systems.”<sup>22</sup> While the *Chicago Tribune* doesn’t highlight the inadequate fire systems toward the top of the story, it addresses the issue later with a quote from battalion fire chief Robert Slagel, who said, “It is my opinion...that if there had been adequate sprinkler systems and an alarm system, no one would have lost his life.”<sup>23</sup> Also, the *Chicago Tribune* chose to put a local spin on the story, by mentioning in the third paragraph that three people killed in the fire had ties to Chicago.<sup>24</sup> There was an obituary for two of the three victims, Joseph and Eda Rebbe, in the paper two days later, and it did mention that they were killed in the Pioneer Hotel fire.<sup>25</sup> The *Los Angeles Times*, which presumably had a later production time because of its offices on the West Coast, also seemed to make the editorial decision to not include any information about a man being held or the cause of the fire.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the *Chicago Tribune* had a subhead titled “Report: Man is Held,” which included information

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<sup>21</sup> “Tucson Hotel Blaze Kills 28, Injures 44.” *Chicago Tribune*, December 21, 1970, 1.

<sup>22</sup> “28 Die as Fire Rips Through Upper Floors of Tucson Hotel.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1970, 1.

<sup>23</sup> “Tucson Hotel Blaze Kills 28, Injures 44,” 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Tucson Hotel Blaze Kills 28, Injures 44,” 1.

<sup>25</sup> “Death Notices.” *Chicago Tribune*, December 23, 1970, 18.

<sup>26</sup> “28 Die as Fire Rips Through Upper Floors of Tucson Hotel,” 1.

about how the police were potentially investigating one person's potential involvement in the crime.<sup>27</sup> The story also mentioned "one hotel resident reported smelling acetone, a flammable liquid, in the building shortly before the fire."<sup>28</sup> Both papers did a good job of presenting all of the information that was available at the time and writing the stories in a way that showed the magnitude of the event without adding opinion.

Two of the other United States "Big 5" daily newspapers — *New York Times* and *Washington Post* — also covered the story in some capacity. The *Washington Post* did not run an actual news story about the Pioneer Hotel fire, but did have an obituary for Paul d'Hedouville, a prominent Washington D.C.-based lawyer who was one of the fire's casualties.<sup>29</sup> The obituary mentions the Pioneer Hotel and Tucson in the first two paragraphs, but not in the remainder of the story.<sup>30</sup> His obituary is given its own section and was run with a picture, while other obituaries are lumped into briefs, which suggests his prominence and the fact that his death is more notable.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the *New York Times* did not print a story about the fire until January 14, 1971, which was the day that Louis Taylor was charged with arson and 28 counts of murder.<sup>32</sup> The brief is a wire story from *Reuters* and is only two paragraphs long, but refers to Taylor as a "youth" and "boy" a total of four times and calls a request to transfer the case to an adult court "unusual."<sup>33</sup> The language of the story insinuates that Taylor's potential incrimination is unique because of his age.

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<sup>27</sup> "Tucson Hotel Blaze Kills 28, Injures 44," 1.

<sup>28</sup> "Tucson Hotel Blaze Kills 28, Injures 44," 1.

<sup>29</sup> "Paul d'Hedouville Dies in Ariz. Fire." *Washington Post*, December 23, 1970, B8.

<sup>30</sup> "Paul d'Hedouville Dies in Ariz. Fire," B8.

<sup>31</sup> "Paul d'Hedouville Dies in Ariz. Fire," B8.

<sup>32</sup> "Youth, 16, Charged In Fire Fatal To 28." *New York Times*, January 14, 1971, 19.

<sup>33</sup> "Youth, 16, Charged In Fire Fatal To 28," 19.

Meanwhile in Arizona, news about the Pioneer Hotel fire dominated the newspapers during the course of the next year and a half. In the immediate days following fire, reporting focused on answering two questions about the fire: (1) Why were so many people killed, and (2) How was the fire started? In terms of why so many people were killed, the focus of the stories almost immediately centered on the inadequate fire safety mechanisms in the hotel. As a result, a lot of the stories suggested that the tragedy could have been easily avoided by renovating the outdated hotel. On December 21, 1970, the *Arizona Daily Star* ran a story reporting that the Pioneer Hotel only met minimum fire safety requirements.<sup>34</sup> The hotel did not have a sprinkler or automatic fire warning systems, which Robert Slagel said could have saved a number of lives because it would have resulted in early fire detection.<sup>35</sup> The story also quoted Richard Darling, head of the California-based Pioneer International Hotel Corp., the company that owned the hotel, who echoed Slagel's statement by saying, "This was a sad tragedy for Tucson, but I feel that people could have been saved."<sup>36</sup> By quoting these prominent sources, the story makes it clear that the tragedy could have been minimized easily. On the same day, the *Tucson Daily Citizen* ran an editorial piece offering condolences to the families of the victims and thanking police and fire officials for their efforts.<sup>37</sup> However, the story uses the article as a way to advocate for the tragedy to not happen again because it could have been avoided: "In the days of detailed investigation ahead, these inadequacies cannot be overlooked. Do other high-rise buildings have adequate, fire prevention and detection systems? Is the fire

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Panitch, "Hotel Met Minimum Safety Standards." *Arizona Daily Star*, December 21, 1970, (PAGE).

<sup>35</sup> Panitch, "Hotel Met Minimum Safety Standards."

<sup>36</sup> Panitch, "Hotel Met Minimum Safety Standards."

<sup>37</sup> "Hotel Fire Brings Grief To 2 Nations." *Tucson Daily Citizen*, December 21, 1970, 28.

department equipped to fight fires in present and proposed high-rise buildings?”<sup>38</sup> They also refer to the fire as a “holocaust” that has scarred Tucson “in a way which will not be forgotten.”<sup>39</sup> The story is written in a very condescending tone and is an example of advocacy journalism, which refers to stories that intentionally and transparently adopt a non-objective viewpoint, usually for some social or political purpose. A week after the fire, on December 27, 1970, the *Arizona Republic* ran a news analysis about how the tragedy “had been feared by the city fire department.”<sup>40</sup> According to the article, “Blazes of this type had been the subject of many repetitive fire drills. In fact, the fire department used the hotel as a classroom to teach rookie firemen how to fight fires in a high-rise building.”<sup>41</sup> The article answers the question of what firefighters could have done differently (nothing) and how to avoid disasters like the Pioneer Hotel fire in the future. The reporter wrote, “Fire chief L. F. Peterson is now asking for a million dollars worth of new equipment, including snorkel lifts that if available could have evacuated up to the 11th floor of the Pioneer.”<sup>42</sup> While the three aforementioned stories are written in a tone that suggests hindsight bias, they make it clear that the tragedy could have been avoided with a few minor upgrades to the hotel.

Stories in the immediate days after the fire also began to answer the question of how the fire was started. After initial fire investigation determined that the blaze was likely arson, Louis Taylor was almost immediately linked to the crime. Within two days of the fire, his name began showing up in newspapers around the country. Arizona newspapers,

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<sup>38</sup> “Hotel Fire Brings Grief To 2 Nations,” 28.

<sup>39</sup> “Hotel Fire Brings Grief To 2 Nations,” 28.

<sup>40</sup> Bob Thomas, “Tucson firemen feared Pioneer type tragedy.” *Arizona Republic*, December 27, 1970, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas, “Tucson firemen feared Pioneer type tragedy,” 20.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas, “Tucson firemen feared Pioneer type tragedy,” 20.

probably because the moment was filled with tense emotions, at first publicly shamed Taylor. When he was arrested on December 21, 1970, the *Tucson Daily Citizen* wrote an article detailing his past crimes, which included strong-armed robbery, burglary, truancy, grand theft (auto) and curfew violations.<sup>43</sup> The story's lede used a lot of editorial vocabulary: "Louis C. Taylor, the gangling 16-year-old charged in connection with the blaze that claimed 28 lives at the Pioneer International Hotel, was described today by one juvenile official as a sullen and incorrigible youth."<sup>44</sup> The author also described Taylor in the story as a "grade school dropout," said the "Juvenile Court and Boys Industrial School officials know Louis Taylor well," and called him, "never a good student," with all of these statements coming without attribution.<sup>45</sup> While this information helped potentially explain Taylor's actions, the word choice was very editorial and, as a result, presumably incriminates Taylor. More importantly, the author buries information that "authorities said the accusations probably would be changed to trespassing and curfew violation," in the story.<sup>46</sup> In comparison, the *Arizona Republic* was less editorial in their story of Taylor's arrest, but did also insinuate he committed the crime. The author wrote, "Twice ... Taylor told police that he had seen other youths start the fire. Once he said the blaze was started by a long-haired Mexican youth. Then, he said two Negro boys with Afro haircuts ignited the blaze. It was not known if he told investigators how or where the fire was started."<sup>47</sup> While the information in the story is attributed, the overall tone of the piece makes it seem

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<sup>43</sup> Nicki Donahue, "Arson Suspect Described As Sullen, 'Incorrigible.'" *Tucson Daily Citizen*, December 21, 1970, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Donahue, "Arson Suspect Described As Sullen, 'Incorrigible,'" 5.

<sup>45</sup> Donahue, "Arson Suspect Described As Sullen, 'Incorrigible,'" 5.

<sup>46</sup> Donahue, "Arson Suspect Described As Sullen, 'Incorrigible,'" 5.

<sup>47</sup> Bob Thomas, "Youth quizzed in Tucson hotel fire." *Arizona Republic*, December 22, 1970, 1.



like Taylor more than likely committed the crime. These two stories were just a couple examples of how the press incriminated Louis Taylor before he was even sent to trial.

However, as emotions cooled down, so did the coverage of Louis Taylor. The *Arizona Daily Star* did not name Taylor until his arrest on January 14, 1971, which was less than a week after fire officials formally declared the fire arson. The story attributes the assertion of arson to the Tucson Fire Department and Cyrillis W. Holmes, an independent fire investigator from California, who reached their conclusion by stating there were multiple points of acceleration for the fire.<sup>48</sup> However, the reporter does a good job of taking the information to investigators who were not at the scene and could potentially offer a second opinion about the discovery.<sup>49</sup> One fire said that with Holmes' method, "it would be just about impossible to determine point or points of origin," because "The evidence would have been destroyed."<sup>50</sup> Another fire investigator, who asked to remain anonymous, said, "How in the name of hell is a forest fire investigator qualified to investigate a structural fire?"<sup>51</sup> The tone of the sources makes the reader question the validity of the statements made by the fire investigators. As a result, this was the first story to potentially suggest that there were problems with the case and that Taylor could be innocent of the crimes.

The other local newspapers began to change their tone as time progressed. For example, the *Tucson Daily Citizen* ran a story about accusations of Taylor having sociopathic tendencies when a hearing was being held to determine whether he would be tried as a juvenile or an adult. According to the story, Paul Charters, the director of the

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<sup>48</sup> George McEvoy, "Juvenile Accused In Pioneer Blaze." *Arizona Daily Star*, January 14, 1971, (PAGE).

<sup>49</sup> McEvoy, "Juvenile Accused in Pioneer Blaze."

<sup>50</sup> McEvoy, "Juvenile Accused in Pioneer Blaze."

<sup>51</sup> McEvoy, "Juvenile Accused in Pioneer Blaze."

Pima County Juvenile Center, said, "Taylor, 'since age 11 has been using phony epileptic seizures as a device to manipulate personnel a correction facilities; When 11, he started by eating a bar of soap which would cause him to foam at the mouth. When the pressure got too great, he would throw this fake seizure, which had all the doctors fooled for years.'"<sup>52</sup> While the story doesn't do any editorializing, which was common in the newspaper's previous stories, the information presented is again offered in a way that could potentially incriminate Taylor. However, on March 14, 1972, which was when the trial was nearing its end, the newspaper changed its course and began suggesting that Taylor might be innocent. According to the story, one of the prime witnesses, arson investigator Marshall Smyth, "had said earlier he believed the fire was touched off by an accelerant thrown or placed on the carpeting in the north end of the fourth floor hallway. Today, he said that there could have been a number of ways the accelerant was ignited."<sup>53</sup> While the story attributes all of the information, the writing makes it clear that Smyth contradicted his previous statements and suggests that Taylor could be not guilty of his crimes. When Taylor was found guilty a little over a week later on March 22, 1972, the *Tucson Daily Citizen* again made the suggestion that Taylor could potentially be innocent. In the second paragraph of the story, the author wrote, "The judge said after the verdict, 'The evidence supports a conviction, but I would not have convicted him myself.'"<sup>54</sup> The placement of this information toward the top of the story designates it as being extremely important. Also, the author does a bit of editorializing by mentioning that prosecutor Horton Weiss planned

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<sup>52</sup> "Louis C. Taylor Said 'Sociopathic;' Adult Trial Asked." *Tucson Daily Citizen*, January 28, 1971, 4.

<sup>53</sup> "Taylor witness concedes fire cause possibilities." *Tucson Daily Citizen*, March 14, 1972, 16.

<sup>54</sup> "Life sentence will be set for Taylor." *Tucson Daily Citizen*, March 22, 1972, 1.

to run for the Pima County Superior Court bench the following fall, despite this information not being relevant to the story.<sup>55</sup> It ran along with a quote from Weiss, who said the verdict “restores my faith in the jury system. I think the case was fairly tried.”<sup>56</sup> A story in the *Arizona Republic* on March 21, 1972, about how the jury was getting ready to decide Taylor’s fate also suggested that he could potentially be innocent. According to the story, defense attorney Howard Kashman, “told the jury that the three state theories of how Taylor started the fire were (1) Bruce Wallmark's testimony that Taylor told him the fire was started with a lighted book of paper matches dropped on carpet, (2) Jackson's testimony of Taylor's admission to him, and (3) the opinion of Cyrillis Holmes, a California fire expert, that the fire started simultaneously in three separate floor areas.”<sup>57</sup> In the next sentence, the author writes that the first potential reason for Taylor’s conviction was proven false through testimony, but does not attribute the information to Kashman.<sup>58</sup> (It’s also interesting to note that the second and third theories about how Taylor started the fire were also being questioned at the time and were later proven false.) By making it clear that there were flaws in the main arguments in the trial, the newspaper presupposes that Taylor could potentially be innocent. The practice of defending Taylor as the trial progressed was a far cry from initial stories that presumed he was guilty.

The news of Taylor’s conviction was also covered at newspapers around the country. However, aside from the aforementioned initial reports of the fire, the trial was not written about much in the “Big 5” daily newspapers. Both the *Washington Post* and *Los*

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<sup>55</sup> “Life sentence will be set for Taylor,” 1.

<sup>56</sup> “Life sentence will be set for Taylor,” 1.

<sup>57</sup> Howard Armstrong, “Jury debates youth’s fate in Pioneer Hotel deaths.” *Arizona Republic*, March 22, 1972, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Armstrong, “Jury debates youth’s fate in Pioneer Hotel deaths,” 1.

*Angeles Times* included briefs of Taylor's conviction and sentencing in their nation sections. On March 22, 1972, the *Washington Post* ran a four-paragraph story with the headline, "Life for 28 deaths."<sup>59</sup> The story included mainly details of the conviction, but does mention that the jury was made up of eight men and four women.<sup>60</sup> However, it ostensibly refrains from mentioning the races of the jury and Louis Taylor. If the story was going to mention demographics of the jury, they should have included race along with gender. Meanwhile in the *Los Angeles Times*, the newspaper only devotes one paragraph to the story.<sup>61</sup> The brief writes that Taylor was given life imprisonment, but also mentions, "The public defender said he would appeal."<sup>62</sup> The story was only eight lines long, which was less than write-ups of the verdict in the *Kingston (Jamaica) Gleaner* on March 29, 1972, and the *Pacific Stars and Stripes (Japan)* on March 31, 1972. The story in the *Kingston Gleaner* was a Reuters wire story that was 25 lines long, and included information about how Taylor covered his face after the verdict and said, "I'm not guilty."<sup>63</sup> In the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 16 lines were devoted to an Associated Press story, which used the same information about Taylor crying in court.<sup>64</sup> It's really interesting to see how such little coverage was given to the trial in the country's biggest newspapers despite its infamy.

Another aspect of Louis Taylor's conviction that was covered in the media was the racial aspect of his arrest and trial. While there were a couple mentions of this facet in both the local newspapers and the national African-American press, this issue was generally under-covered. The *Arizona Republic* was the first and only of the local newspapers to point

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<sup>59</sup> "Around the Nation." *Washington Post*, March 22, 1972, A5.

<sup>60</sup> "Around the Nation," A5.

<sup>61</sup> "The Nation." *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 1972, B2.

<sup>62</sup> "The Nation," B2.

<sup>63</sup> "17 year-old guilty of murder," *Kingston Gleaner*, March 29, 1972, 13.

<sup>64</sup> "Convict Youth in 28 death," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, March 24, 1972, 4.

out that the jury was made up entirely of white members. According to the story, “A jury of six men and six women — predominantly craftsmen and housewives, all white and all over 21 — was selected late yesterday to try 17-year-old Louis Taylor for murder.”<sup>65</sup> However, they do not mention that Taylor is black until more than half way down the page, and refer to him as a “Negro.”<sup>66</sup> While the story does a good job of pointing out a potentially criminal problem with the jury, it is still concerning that this is the only mention of the all-white jury in the three biggest Arizona newspapers that covered the story during the trial — the *Arizona Republic*, *Arizona Daily Star* and *Tucson Daily Citizen*. It’s also interesting to note that the racial aspect of the story is still not regularly mentioned in either of the active papers more than 30 years later (The *Tucson Citizen*, as it later became known, ceased print operations in 2009 and all operations in 2014.) This lack of local reporting was overcome in the national African-American press. The *Chicago Daily Defender* ran a news feature on August 5, 1972, that acknowledges racial components of the trial. According to the story, which was written while Taylor was awaiting his appeal, “Lacking other suspects, needing to appease the calls for justice of an angry populace — and holding a 17-year-old black youth whose background already pointed to what was considered a confirmed delinquent — the police arrested Taylor.”<sup>67</sup> The story also does not mention that he was already found guilty of the crimes. As a result, the writing presupposes that Taylor was potentially framed for the crime because of his race and the city’s tense emotions because of the tragedy. The rest of the story focuses on attempts to rehabilitate Taylor, who they say has “psychological

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<sup>65</sup> Howard Armstrong, “White jury to hear trial in hotel fire.” *Arizona Republic*, February 9, 1972, 4D.

<sup>66</sup> Armstrong, “White jury to hear trial in hotel fire,” 4D.

<sup>67</sup> “Young black awaits trial; charged in 28 murders.” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 5, 1972, 5.

issues” because of his rough background, and turn him into a contributing member of society.<sup>68</sup> The author writes, “He is personable and articulate, a handsome blending of the black and Mexican ancestry typical of much of the area in and near Tucson. In these qualities, he has an edge over some of the others, for whom social adjustment is an even more formidable goal.”<sup>69</sup> The language used in the story humanizes Taylor making this the first story that really attempts to paint Taylor as an immature kid who is attempting to better his life. It’s interesting how this is the only story that paints Taylor in a generally positive light until his release more than 40 years later.

While coverage slowed down after Taylor’s sentencing, the late 1970s and early 1980s were particularly eventful. Witness Robert Jackson, who testified that Taylor told him that he set the fire, initially signed an affidavit saying that he lied on the stand citing fears that he was going to get in trouble for “snitching.”<sup>70</sup> But he later retracted his statements and said he did not lie under oath.<sup>71</sup> Taylor’s initial appeal was denied and the Arizona Supreme Court also denied a request for a new trial.<sup>72</sup> An appeals court eventually overturned Taylor’s convictions in 1982, but then the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated them the following year.<sup>73</sup> By this point, Taylor had exhausted his ability to appeal, so the next 20 years were pretty eventful.

In the early 2000s, *60 Minutes* and the Arizona Justice Project began looking into Louis Taylor’s trial and found new evidence that showed that there were flaws in the

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<sup>68</sup> “Young black awaits trial; charged in 28 murders.” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 5, 1972, 5.

<sup>69</sup> “Young black awaits trial; charged in 28 murders,” 5.

<sup>70</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>71</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>72</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

<sup>73</sup> Eubank, *Pioneer Hotel Fire*.

investigation. According to the documents, authorities failed to question Donald Anthony, a young man described as a “pyromaniac,” who was later found guilty of committing of eight arsons in the area around the Pioneer Hotel.<sup>74</sup> Anthony, who was questioned for another in the area five days earlier, wasn’t questioned because he fled town before fire inspectors sought him.<sup>75</sup> While he admitted to committing arson in the area, he denied committing the Pioneer Hotel fire, according to *60 Minutes*.<sup>76</sup> Former Tucson detective David Smith called Anthony a vanity fire setter: “They are always on the scene. ... Oftentimes, they are the ones who report the fire.”<sup>77</sup> *60 Minutes* also discovered that some witnesses said there was a suspicious person at the fire who was so disruptive of firefighters that he was physically removed from the scene, but police never investigated this fact: “The witness wrote a letter objecting to the fact this person wasn’t investigated and sent it to the Tucson City attorney, who forwarded it to the Fire Department with a note undermining its significance.”<sup>78</sup> *60 Minutes* continued to use the information found in the Arizona Justice Project’s investigation and interviewed Taylor about problems with the trial. Taylor said he was at the fire that night to get free food and drinks at a Christmas party and his presence turned him into a convenient scapegoat: “I guess they just had me, so [the authorities said to themselves] we’ll try to get a conviction. So they did.”<sup>79</sup> The story also mentioned that

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<sup>74</sup> “Pioneer Hotel fire miscellany,” 2002, Arizona Justice Project, courtesy of Arizona Libraries, Law Special Collections.

<sup>75</sup> “Pioneer Hotel fire miscellany,” courtesy of Arizona Libraries, Law Special Collections.

<sup>76</sup> Mary-Jayne McKay, “Did Teen Set Fatal Fire?” *60 Minutes*, March 1, 2002. Accessed May 9, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/did-teen-set-fatal-fire/>.

<sup>77</sup> McKay, “Did Teen Set Fatal Fire?”

<sup>78</sup> McKay, “Did Teen Set Fatal Fire?”

<sup>79</sup> McKay, “Did Teen Set Fatal Fire?”

Taylor refused to apply for parole because he would have to express remorse for a crime he says he did not commit.<sup>80</sup>

After the *60 Minutes* report, local reports also began questioning the validity of Taylor's conviction. On October 8, 2006, the *Arizona Daily Star* reported that one of the primary fire investigators, Marshall Smyth, was now having doubts about whether or not the fire was arson.<sup>81</sup> According to the story, Smyth said, "I came to this opinion some time ago that neither one of us had any business identifying that fire as arson."<sup>82</sup> This statement came after an independent fire investigation team, who went around the country revisiting fire scenes and making judgments about how they started, determined that they felt the fire was not started by arson.<sup>83</sup> *60 Minutes* returned to Tucson in 2013, and ran another segment about the fire on March 29, 2013. They updated their previous reporting with new deposition conducted by Arizona Justice Project lawyer Edward Novak of fire investigator Cyrillis Holmes. According to the transcript, "Just five months ago, Novak conducted a sworn court deposition of Holmes and got him to reveal some startling new information. For the first time, Holmes said that he did a quick-walk through of the hotel 10 days after the blaze, then told the city council that he'd already reached some preliminary conclusions about the type of person who set the place on fire. [Cy Holmes (Deposition): I had indicated that I felt that the culprit was probably black and that he was probably 18.]"<sup>84</sup> At this point,

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<sup>80</sup> McKay, "Did Teen Set Fatal Fire?"

<sup>81</sup> Enric Volante, "Expert now has doubts arson caused hotel deaths." *Arizona Daily Star*, October 8, 2006, 1.

<sup>82</sup> Volante, "Expert now has doubts arson caused hotel deaths."

<sup>83</sup> Volante, "Expert now has doubts arson caused hotel deaths."

<sup>84</sup> "Arizona's Pioneer Hotel fire re-examined." *60 Minutes*, March 31, 2013. Accessed April 23, 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/arizonas-pioneer-hotel-fire-re-examined/>



it became clearly apparent that Taylor's conviction had a racial angle and there were serious problems with his trial.

Taylor was released from prison three days after the *60 Minutes* segment ran. He was allowed to plead "no contest" to charges on April 1, 2013, because of the decade-long work done by the Innocence Project, Arizona Justice Project and *60 Minutes*. When Taylor was released, the *Arizona Daily Star* wrote an article about his freedom on April 3, 2013.<sup>85</sup> While the tone of the article was general newsy, the story included a quote from deputy Pima County attorney Rick Unklesbay, who said "We felt that the conviction was righteous, that it would be unfair for Mr. Taylor to simply walk away without that conviction, that it was important to have that conviction for the victims who survived and for the community to know that yes, the right person was convicted."<sup>86</sup> While the story acknowledges the fact that he is still not proven innocent, the story humanizes Taylor by later saying, "Taylor's first stop after leaving prison was for lunch at In-n-Out Burger."<sup>87</sup> The *Arizona Daily Star* ran another article on April 4, 2013 about Taylor's first press conference since his freedom, which again was written in a positive tone. According to the story, "Taylor's deal was brokered in part because evidence came to light that showed now-deceased county prosecutor Horton C. Weiss and his investigator withheld evidence, had inappropriate communications with jurors and spoke to the judge without defense attorneys present, Justice Project attorneys said. Advances in forensic fire science also played a part in his

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<sup>85</sup> Veronica M. Cruz and Kimberly Matas, "Taylor embraces freedom 42 years after Pioneer fire." *Arizona Daily Star*, April 3, 2013, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Cruz and Matas, "Taylor embraces freedom 42 years after Pioneer fire."

<sup>87</sup> Cruz and Matas, "Taylor embraces freedom 42 years after Pioneer fire."

release.”<sup>88</sup> It’s interesting why the newspaper picked to acknowledge this facet of the trial now, and present it in a tone that makes it out to be common knowledge. If the general public understood this, it should have been acknowledged in earlier reporting. A couple days later on April 7, 2013, another story was written about Taylor about his struggles to adjust to society. According to the story, “Trying to converse with him for longer than two minutes Wednesday was a challenge as he constantly looked around the conference room at the office of one of his attorneys, before he jumped up and announcing he was going outside for a smoke. On a downtown Tucson sidewalk Wednesday afternoon, the diversions multiplied as pedestrians walked past, a fire engine roared by and well-wishers ask to pose for photos.”<sup>89</sup> The story presents Taylor with another human quality – naivety. In another form of humanization, the story includes the following at the end: “The Arizona Justice Project is also accepting donations on behalf of Louis Cuen Taylor, who was released recently after 42 years behind bars. Anyone wanting to help should make check payable to Taylor and mail them to: (address redacted).”<sup>90</sup> It’s really weird to see how much the paper was advocating for Taylor despite decades long gaps of reporting the facts of the trial.

A little more than two years since his release, Louis Taylor is still struggling with his freedom. After his first year of sovereignty, the *Arizona Daily Star* reported that Taylor had been moving around between hotels and apartments in Tucson and Phoenix, even spending some time living on the streets, and was struggling to hold a permanent job.<sup>91</sup> Taylor was

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<sup>88</sup> Kimberly Matas, “Emotive Taylor says LaWall should wipe his slate clean.” *Arizona Daily Star*, April 4, 2013, 1.

<sup>89</sup> Kimberly Matas, “For newly released Taylor, life is now one big sensory distraction.” *Arizona Daily Star*, April 7, 2013, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Matas, “For newly released Taylor, life is now one big sensory distraction.”

<sup>91</sup> Patrick McNamara, “After year of freedom, Taylor struggles to adjust.” *Arizona Daily Star*, November 28, 2014, 1.

given money to help ease him into civilian life, but blew through it and lost some of it when he was jumped on the street.<sup>92</sup> Taylor admitted he was having trouble holding a job because of a lack of vocational skills and his criminal record, which was not wiped clean because he was never exonerated of his crimes.<sup>93</sup> According to Taylor, “Tucson and Phoenix are so unforgiving. ... All I want to do is coexist in society just like everybody else.”<sup>94</sup> On February 4, 2015, Taylor announced that he was filing a discrimination suit against the city of Tucson and Pima County, accusing them of both conspiracy and discrimination.<sup>95</sup> According to the *Arizona Daily Star*, “Taylor’s complaint makes seven charges under federal law citing deprivation of rights. It accuses both the city and county of having policies permitting racial discrimination at the time of Taylor’s trial, failing to train police and other employees, prosecutorial misconduct and conspiracy to violate Taylor’s constitutional rights.”<sup>96</sup>

There are two tragedies that happened on the night on the Pioneer Hotel fire: the fire itself and the treatment of Louis Taylor. And the media is partially to blame with how they covered Taylor’s arrest, conviction and release. Despite evidence that suggested the trial was unfair and imbalanced and lacked the evidence to convict the teen, the media, which should have the role of watchdog, left many of these facets untouched. While they’ve made up for wrongdoings in recent years, it’s always important to let the key facts do the reporting, an idea that was missing from national and local newspapers. The 1970s

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<sup>92</sup> McNamara, “After year of freedom, Taylor struggles to adjust.”

<sup>93</sup> McNamara, “After year of freedom, Taylor struggles to adjust.”

<sup>94</sup> McNamara, “After year of freedom, Taylor struggles to adjust.”

<sup>95</sup> Patrick McNamara, “Discrimination suit filed over 1970 Pioneer fire trial.” *Arizona Daily Star*, February 4, 2015, 1.

<sup>96</sup> McNamara, “Discrimination suit filed over 1970 Pioneer fire trial.”

were a different era, but it's no excuse for possibly assisting in the imprisonment of a free man for more than 40 years.

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