

## Arson

### Episode 7: The Catastrophic Damage

The terror the arsonist perpetuated for decades finally came to an end thanks to the hard work of the ATF task force. In letters to our producer, the serial arsonist admits to fetishes and desires that caused him to light fires.

Kara: Entry #101 of the ATF FOIA

I'm going to read this

Between 1984 and 1986, Sweatt set fire to a row house located at either 61,63,65, or 67 Quincy Place NW DC. Sweatt informed that he poured gasoline under the front of the house and placed a towel by the door and lit it on fire. Sweatt additionally provided that he observed a man walking from the bus stop and followed him to his house. Sweatt was driving (redacted) and parked on First St. and walked towards the man. Without being detected, Sweatt watched the man enter his residence and then set fire to the house. Sweatt recalls driving past the fire many times and remembers seeing occupants jump out windows of the house and heard a man calling for help in the basement. Sweatt recalls reading newspaper clippings about the fire which revealed that Roy "Peacock" and his wife died in the fire. This fire occurred in the winter time in the early morning hours. Sweatt requested that his attorney's investigators research this fire but to date was unsuccessful in finding any documents. (it is noted that a preliminary investigation conducted by MPDC reveals that a homicide did occur at this location as a result of the fire.)

This is Arson, I'm Kara McGuirk-Allison. This entry of the ATF Sweatt case file describes the fire that killed Bessie Mae Dunan and Roy Picott. It was

January 11, 1985. I spoke with their son Rodney who survived the fire along with his siblings.

Rodney Picott:

My sisters, they suffered burns. Martha Fay maybe not so much, maybe 30 to 40, I'm guessing, seeing her since. Cheryl might be along that 50%. That's tough for a girl and here we are, the two boys, we're downstairs.

<<Kara>>:

Right. They were teenagers, too, I'm assuming.

Rodney Picott :

Yeah, but we're talking like 19.

<<Kara>> :

So in the official fire report, an investigator assigned a cause and I'm going to quote this. This is from that article. He said, "The fire started as a result of a carelessly dropped cigarette in the bedding of a second floor bedroom." What'd you think about that?

Rodney Picott:

I thought he was misrepresenting what happened. He didn't know what he was talking about. It was a bogus finding. That's 100%, I knew that, and shotty work. Having little or no interest in this family. People want to close cases. The civil service want to close cases. That was like pouring salt in the wound, insult to injury. It really, really was, to do that. The ruling was made in the next, not even the next day. It was that same day's print of the Washington Post. He hadn't even given it... it was almost like a cursory investigation. Ah, we spoke to a couple people, this is what we think it is. They were given that interview by me, and they just decided this is where they're going to go with it, because they don't want to put time into it. Even a half hearted investigation would have turned up something more than that, but that's what they ruled it as. I looked at it the ... report this morning.

<<Kara>> :

Oh. Wow, you still have it.

Rodney Picott:

I called Mariah and said, "Mariah..." Maybe it was the next day or you know, chill for a little bit or something. I was like I don't know if I want to. I thought about it. I'm reading this and I'm like, what a scumbag move, what he did. But that's listen, the guy lived to collect his pension and I'm sure his family is fully intact, but that's what he wrote. He was never held account for it.

Rodney Picott:

No, I just... well, the next day. Really, you feel like a real betrayal, just a let down. These guys are the professionals. You trust, hey, I'm talking to a professional. He knows what he's doing.

<<Kara>> :

Did anybody in your family smoke?

Rodney Picott :

Bessie Mae Duncan stopped smoking, and my father was a cigar smoker. As you know, cigarette smoke is a smoke... that's something when you're out socializing having a cocktail or something and a cigar. You don't break open a pack of cigars and start smoking them like a chain smoker.

Kara:

Reporter Dave Jamieson, was with the Washington City Paper at the time and had the fire beat. He's the one who pieced together that the fire on Quincy was a result of the arsonist and not from a flicked cigarette as the family had been told. Rodney had a copy of the report when we spoke:

Rodney Picott:

Yeah, I actually... it's dated the 11th.

<<Kara>>:

Same day.

Rodney Picott:

It's Captain Richard Clark. Richard L. Clark. in his report. I don't know, maybe Dave gave this to me. He writes... he certainly takes himself and the

fire department off the hook, because there were no smoke detectors found, and he writes carelessly dropped cigarette in the bedding of the second floor bedroom. Yeah, you have the report. The paper said improperly discarded smoking material. Interesting. Wow.

<<Kara>> :

Just to show how lazy that is, we now know the fire was started at the front door.

Kara: Reporter Dave Jamieson.

Dave Jamieson:

I was, yeah. I came to town in the summer of 2003. Um, I was, uh, you know, kind of trying to break into journalism. I had moved from New Jersey, which is where I'm from, where I'd been working as a fact checker and got an internship at Washington city paper in that summer of 2003, which is when a lot of these fires were going on and sort of coincidentally, um, my editor, Erik Wemple um, is that the Washington post now he had decided that we should write a lot about fire at the paper and it sort of, the idea was, was, well, one fires have their, their inherent narrative, right. Things happen in them. Uh, there there's, I think inherently interesting and they tell a story and he thought it was also just, uh, uh, a good oblique way to write about, um, poverty too, because fires tend to happen in poor neighborhoods.

Uh, so he thought it was an interesting way to get in there. And so, um, what I did and, and some other interns at the time, uh, did as well, um, and to take a look at the fires that happened that week. Um, and I would, I would hop in my car and drive around and try to talk to people about what had happened. And there was, I, there usually be some kind of fire a day two to go check out and, uh, I would try to find the most interesting one I could and, and, and, and write about it, interview the people who were there. And, um, some of these, it would turn out to be fires that, that Tom had set. And so, uh, later after his sentencing, of course, I, I was just fascinated with his case and I saw like everybody else, but they were, we knew by then that they were publicly that this guy had said hundreds, you know, the authorities had, had, had disclosed that, but they didn't say anything about his motive.

Kara: Dave began a correspondence with Sweatt...it all started with writing him a letter.

<<Kara>>:

Absolutely. So do you remember what you said in that first letter and how fast he responded?

Dave Jamieson:

Yeah. I was just a straightforward letter that kind of similar to the ones I would always write to people in that situation. It was just like, you know, I followed your case. I'm interested in your side of the story. Um, maybe, maybe we can, we can discuss it a bit. It was something pretty simple and straightforward. And I think, uh, you know, I made clear that I, that I reported on his fires. And so I think that that probably helped with him in terms of being open to some kind of, uh, communication with me, just knowing that we had a mutual interest here, which was, which was fires. Right. Um, so he, he, yeah, he wrote back very quickly said that, uh, that he appreciated the letter and, and maybe this could be the beginning of something and it definitely was.

The story came out about a year and a half after we first touched base. I think, um, my letter started getting returned to me probably a few months before the story ran. They put him on restricted correspondence. Um, so you know, we, we traded letters for several months, maybe even a year.

<<Kara>>:

And do you know why they put him on the restricted correspondence?

Dave Jamieson:

I don't, I don't know.

Kara: Dave wrote an award winning article in the Washington City paper called "Letters from an Arsonist." He chronicled many of the fires and shared Sweatt's inside knowledge, motivations, and urges.

Dave Jamieson:

Yeah. That is a, that that, you know, could take hours to unpack, you know, um, first, you know, just from the perspective of a guy you, you, you meet at, at work or out on the street is I would say he's a nice guy, nice soft spoken guy who everybody I spoke to about him always said he was, he was extremely friendly, caring and hardworking, worked very hard at his job. Uh, but underneath all of that, he had lots of, um, anxieties and a sense of failure and, and kind of sense of not belonging. And a lot of that, as he told me, when I went back to childhood, he never really felt, it felt like he fit in. I think maybe part of that was, uh, you know, being gay and what sounds like a pretty religious family growing up. Um, but he also just, he had had what he knew were, were not totally common fantasies about, about, um, sexual fantasies, about shoes and uniforms and things like that.

And so, um, you know, he had, he harbored a lot of, of, of sexual fantasies that he kind of, um, that had a violent outlet for him. And he was living this double life where he was this sort of nice guy who was showed up every day at KFC and did his job really well and was proud of the work, even though he felt like it didn't make other people proud in his life. Um, but there was this, this other guy who could kind of never reconciled his violent urges and, and, and these fantasies he has. And so, you know, I think he was, he was pretty, pretty tormented by all of that.

<<Kara>>:

Do you think he was, might not be the right terminology, but do you think he was in some way relieved when he was finally caught?

Dave Jamieson:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, he told me he was, he was relieved. This had gone on for, for two decades and I think he was, he was exhausted by it by all of it. Right. Um, he, uh, he had a sense of relief as, as he drove around with the investigators going over all of the, the fires that he'd set, I think he was just tired. He was tired and, and, you know, on some level he was, he was, he was happy to get caught. He didn't put up a fight with them for very long as I, as I'm sure, you know, they can tell you. Um, and, and he, you know, enjoyed, I think he enjoys the connection with some investigator, to operate in, in his world. And we're interested in his mind.

Kara: One of the fires Sweatt discussed with Dave was the Quincy Place fire.

Dave Jamieson:

It involved a death and he called it the Roy peacock fire. I knew that this fire could be a big deal in his case, because obviously there was a fatality and it happened years and years earlier. So it wasn't something that people were talking about. But I, I, as soon as he said that, that, that somebody died as a result of this fire, I knew that I, I had to figure out what this fire was. And, um, it was difficult because he, he didn't provide the, the correct name, Roy peacock. There was no record of any fire, uh, involving, uh, Roy peacock. Um, I was trying to get investigators to tell me about this fire.

They, they couldn't do it. And as I recall, it was part of a plea. They were not at liberty to discuss the fire light like this. Um, and so, uh, you know, I was kind of left to my own and, and, and having to do basically searches through, through old, old news clips, trying to figure out, um, what this fire was. And, and it took a while, and I'm sure, you know, probably being Quincy, Quincy streets, that's turning out to be correct. That's probably what led me to an old, old Washington post story, uh, about this fire. And it involved a guy named Roy, Roy, Roy Picott. Um, and I realized that, that, you know, Tom had probably done a phonetic spelling. Um, surely he had read that post story. And as I, as I, as I learned, he, he, you know, followed the aftermath of this story closely. And so, um, you know, once I realized that, uh, Tom had essentially confessed to setting this fire, I was basically wondering if the family even knew, knew that that, that it had been him.

<<Kara>>:

Because the family had been originally told, um, that, and forget and correct me if I'm wrong here, they, that it was suspected that the, that Roy, the father had flicked a lit cigarette on the second floor. Right.

Dave Jamieson:

That's right. Yeah. They and I, I did obtain the,, that's all I recall from the fire department. I did get a copy of the, the case file from the fire. And it was, it was 10 Don, um, you know, basically careless smoking, uh, which I'm sure many, many, many fires were, were attributed to back then. Uh, probably whether or not that was the actual cause.

I decided to go to the family and I, I think it took some tracking down the, to probably some Nexis work to figure out the people who had lived in that house and where they were. Um, and, you know, I tracked down, I guess it would be, Rodney and, Cheryl we're in New York, , here at near Nyack, New York or around there. And, you know, I did, I was able to get Rodney on the phone. Um, and I did realize that, you know, it wasn't the same, the same family from the Quincy place, fire. And, you know, I told them that, you know, I've learned a lot about what happened there. Could I meet with you, you know, to explain it. And then we decided to get together, up to up in Nyack.

<<Kara>>:

So where did you meet?

Dave Jamieson:

We met at a mall up there shopping mall that was there, you know, where they wanted to meet

<<Kara>>:

And had they both been physically affected by the fire where they burned?

Dave Jamieson:

Uh, Cheryl was, I don't know about Rodney, but Cheryl, I could see it on Cheryl. I could still see this, the burns on her arm.

<<Kara>>:

So you drive up to New York, you're meeting them. I'm assuming like a food court in a mall someplace public. Right. And what do you, what do you do? Do you like bring out the letter from Sweatt? How do you break this news to the family?

Dave Jamieson:

Yah it was very difficult. And so, you know, we sat down and I just kind of explained my, communications with Tom and told him I had a letter that I, I believe it was a confession to, to the, to the fire, um, that, that changed

their lives. And so I gave him a copy of it and let him read it. And, you know, they, I remember Rodney made a couple phone calls to square up details of relatives. And, and by the end of that, yeah, they were, they were convinced that this was, that, Tom was talking about their fire.

Oh, another thing, you know, you may want to look into and I just bothered the hell out of me. They didn't reclassify that goddamn fire until like two years ago, the Picott fire, they didn't, I wrote my, you know, I put the story out there with all of this and, and DC, I mean, NPD, to not until like literally two years ago, I think that other guy wrote the book. It was only after that, that they reclassified it as a homicide. So, you know, that bothered me that it took him so long to do that.

<<Kara>>

Here's the weird thing, right, in 2018, just three years ago, DC fire finally classifies your home fire as homicides.

Rodney Picott :

Do you have that?

<<Kara>> :

Yes.

Rodney Picott:

Can you...

Kara:

I will send that to you.

Rodney Picott:

... send me an email, please? They did? In 2018?

<<Kara>>:

Let me... do I have it here?

Rodney Picott :

Not now, but just...

<<Kara>> :

I can quote. I can read it to you from the Washington Post. Peter Newsham was the fire... yeah, so in 2018. The fires have been officially... that fire has been officially declared as homicides.

Rodney Picott :

That's 33 years later?

<<Kara>> :

How does that make you feel?

Rodney Picott :

Listen, there's closure. I feel a sense of relief, but it's a long time coming. Again, but it's always about the sense of betrayal, though. You lose people you love. You lose property. Then the very same people you expect to thoroughly investigate it and come up with answers, and if they find there was criminality, they would go and arrest the guy. Shit canned. It's a turn off. It can skew your view of the real hard working guys, the guys who really... where I live, they'll go and they want to find if there's something, if there's criminality afoot.

But apparently there... maybe it's just a DC thing, I'm thinking. I shouldn't go this way and think that they're just these fire investigators all over, but that one was tough to hear. Now there's that vindication they say. They say now you can say wait, my parents weren't careless and caused their own demise. Their actions didn't contribute to their own demise. That's basically essentially what they were saying. Oh, careless, too bad. Oh well. Right into that file.

I'm happy to hear that. I'd like to see it in writing.

<<Kara>>:

I'll send you the... actually, hold on one second. It's literally right next to me. Hold on. This is a printed copy, but this is from the Washington Post. I don't know if you can read, it's dated March 5, 2018. Fire deaths in DC ruled accidental three decades ago reclassified as homicides.

Rodney Picott :

How ironic, March 5th. The date of death.

<<Kara>> :

Oh my gosh, you're right.

Kara:

Entry number 100 in the ATF report.....

“Between 1984 and 1986 Sweatt informed investigators that he had set fire to an apartment building at 200 P St NW DC. Sweatt informed that he poured gasoline in front of a door in the hallway of the lower level floor. He further informed that there were a pair of work boots by the door and that the fire occurred between 1-2am. Additionally, Sweatt was driving (Redacted) at the time of the fire and left the scene and returned shortly thereafter, parked the car and went into the crowd to observe the fire. Sweatt recalls seeing one man brought out on a stretcher with his knees bent in his underwear and believed that he was deceased. Sweatt also believes that a baby was burned in the fire and one additional person also received injuries. Sweatt recalls the fire occurring in the Winter time.”

We found the article mentioning this fire in the Washington Post, dated December 24, 1984.

It reads “northwest fire injures 4...four persons including a 5 month old infant were seriously injured yesterday in a fire in a small northwest washington apartment building DC fire officials reported. They said the blaze broke out shortly after 5am in the building at 200 P St NW and was apparently caused by careless smoking. Damage was estimated at 8 thousand dollars. The three adults Jerry Glenn Sr 53, Jerry Glenn Jr 19 and Elizather Hussey 62 were listed in serious condition last night at the Washington Hospital Center. The infant, whose name was not released was in serious condition at Children’s Hospital officials said.”

This fire was set 19 days before the Quincy place fire that took the lives of Rodney’s Picott’s father and step mother and badly injured his siblings.

We did not find an obituary for the Glenns or Ms. Hussey from 1984. We attempted to locate them but were unable to find them so far. Investigators are unsure if the family was ever told their fire was started by Thomas Sweatt, and not careless smoking.

On September 12, 2005 Thomas Sweatt was sentenced in US District Court, Greenbelt MD. There are 11 counts that require concurrent sentences. He was also charged with first degree murder while armed for Mama Lou Jones...and Second degree murder while armed for Annie Brown. He was sentenced to LIFE plus 135 years and 10 months and is currently serving his sentence in a medium security prison in Virginia. Repeated requests to the Federal Bureau of Prisons to allow an interview have been denied citing COVID outbreaks at the prison.

Sweatt and I exchanged a few emails until COVID restrictions took away his computer allowance. A few hand written letters from Sweatt were mailed to my PO Box. And most recently we returned to email as I updated him on the progress of this podcast and my hope to still speak with him.

The notes were always brief.

9/11/2020

“Hi Kara, just a note to say thanks for your letter and I look forward to hearing from you real soon. Have a nice evening, Tom.”

He asked me for money to pay for the computer usage. They are charged per minute. I sent him \$50. He said “I have other contacts and they are very supportive with sending funds. It's just the way it is and I look forward to starting this wonderful experience with you and my old friends...four exclamation marks and the word SMILE.

The next day he wrote again

“Just a thought that crossed my mind. It was fifteen years ago today that I set in that Greenbelt courthouse listening to that judge said those strong words. Mr. Sweatt you will never be able to harm anybody again. And the look of the ATF team. A moment frozen in time.”

I have five hand written letters from Sweatt. They talk about the “dark days” of COVID. He told me more about his motives. “It was the adrenaline of watching it burn, smell the smoke and the person or who the owner was. Sex and fires for me were a pair. And most times the sex drove me to set a fire. If I drove past a house and there were boots like combat boots on the porch, that would give me the urge to come back that night or early morning. Because I knew there was a man lived in that house. It it's a hot rod SUV that has big spurdy rims and treated windows parked on the drive way, it's a reason to come back and burn it-to record and add it to my list of fires.”

He continues...” you will find through the course of our communication that just like “fire” I have this fascination for the military. Always have and always will. Even in this prison. More are ex servicemen who are C.O. It's comfort to be around them to see them walk, talk and still have the soldier, marine characteristics about em. This is just a list of some military who came to my apartment for an interview. (he then lists three years 1998, 2003 and 2004 and three names and ranks of men. Then he asks me:

“It would be nice if you have the time to look these men up and find out where they are after so many years. Just a thought if you don't mind. Then he says “OK enough of this foolishness! Smiley face.”

Kara: Gosh.

After about a year of not corresponding. I emailed him to let him know the podcast was happening and that I was finishing up my interviews and seeing Frank Molino the following weekend. Sweatt asked me for Frank's address. He also asked me to send more money.

I replied that I had already sent him \$50 to which he said:

“Kara, I’m famous and I don’t glorify what I did but you need to be reminded that if you wish to have any dealings with this arsonist you must, and I repeat you must spend bread or don’t email me anymore, do I make myself clear?? I have something you’re seeking and it’s not free!!! Goodbye”

Kara:

Two years after starting this podcast, I found out that my next door neighbor, whose backyard literally connects to mine, who keeps a meticulous garden and has family karaoke nights, was a fire investigator for Prince George’s county

Victor Stagnarro:

I was in charge of fire prevention and investigation. I was the fire marshal and I was overseeing both the prevention and investigative side of the fire department.

Kara:

Victor Stagnarro walked over on a warm fall day to talk to me on my back deck.

He had a first hand view of what it was like to work in the communities that were attacked by Sweatt.

Victor Stagnarro:

They were on edge, yeah. There was a lot of concern. We put out a lot of information on keeping your porch lights on and having motion lights just to maybe steer people away from your particular front porch. That really applied a lot of pressure on the taskforce and all of us to really try to resolve this as quickly as we could. Obviously from an investigative standpoint, it wasn't simple, but it was strenuous. There was a lot of stress on a lot of us and the community, rightfully so.

Kara: I asked Victor what he thought of the task force members.

Victor Stagnarro:

They're good people, they're highly vetted. By the time they get to investigations, that's an elite group within the fire service. I almost hate to say that because you don't want to get their heads too big, but it is. There's a science to it. It requires a lot of skill, a lot of dedication to it. There was a fire investigator, he's passed away now. He was from Boston. He had a great Boston accent. And he used to say, "To do this job you got to have heart. You got to have heart." And it's so true. I mean, your heart has to be into it. Really, your heart has to be in it if you're going to be a fire investigator, because it required what those folks dedicated themselves to. Once there was an arsonist to be caught, you just had to be tireless and put a lot of effort into it. And it's a family ordeal, it's a family event. It takes the entire family to support a fire investigator.

Kara:

I worked on Arson for over two years...just a little longer than the task force spent hunting down Thomas Sweatt. COVID threw a wrench into production, but everyone was incredibly gracious offering their time, and stories...doing interviews over the computer or wearing masks. We made it happen. I lived and worked in DC at the time of the investigation and really thought I *knew* the story. But I didn't know that half of it.

For me, it all started one fall day with my own ride along led by Tom Daley.

Tom Daley :What else ma'am?Anything else you wanna see...

<<Kara>> Not that I can think of. This was very amazing. And thorough. I appreciate it so much.

Tom Daley: You're welcome. Happy to help.

<<Kara>> Now it's my job to like, translate what I'm seeing into audio.

Tom Daley: Make sense of the senseless?

<<Kara>> Yes. But it also helps me realize. Again, trying to tell your story. Like what level of involvement. There's a reason that these roads are imprinted on your brain.

Tom Daley: Yah. You know we were flying blind. Doing this, we could do it. Finding out what his name was? Didn't have it. Did not have the ability to find that out. We could do what you and I are doing right now, every day and that's what we did. But the other part of the puzzle it wasn't there. Yah, it's very difficult.

<<Kara>> Do you love what you do?

Tom Daley: I don't do it any more.

<<Kara>> Did?

Tom Daley: Loved it. Truly loved it. Does it sound like I did?

<<Kara>> Yah

Tom Daley: Yah. Yah it wasn't a job. I mean there were days it was a job, but it was never a job. It was enormously exciting, it was a wonderful career I worked with wonderful people. And I did love it. It was just so goddamn interesting to me. You know? It was so interesting.

Well, what I liked about it....everyone is like what did you like it so much? And I said it was life....it was just real life shit. You know some of it was murder and mayeh, and drugs and guns and all that stuff but it was real life stuff. I mean it was live action, there was nothing theoretical...(laughing) there was nothing theoretical about it. It was cool. I just liked it. And you have to have a passion for it. I thought I did.

~Fin~  
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<<Final Credits>>

Arson is brought to you by the International Association of Arson Investigators in cooperation with the bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

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This has been Arson, I'm Kara McGuirk-Allison.