

“The Evidence Speaks” Season 01 Episode 04 – *SIN CITY* – Transcript

00:00:00 CENSULLO

Cold case units and law enforcement agencies are relatively new, all things considered. The National Institutes of Justice issued its first solicitation for its cold case grant program in 2004. That's not to say that there wasn't an attempt to solve cold cases prior to the turn of the century, but there were limits. Rock Harmon is a consultant to law enforcement agencies on cold cases and forensic DNA typing, but he's probably more well known as one of the prosecutors in the OJ Simpson case.

00:00:34 HARMON

When I first started working on cold cases in the very late 90s, um, it seemed like 30 years was an outside limit when you start thinking about how old people were at that point in time and how old will they be now. You would have a hard time proving a case because everybody would be dead or in convalescent homes.

00:01:00 CENSULLO

You'll hear a lot more from Rock in a later episode, but these days, investigative genetic genealogy and familial DNA searches make it possible to identify suspects even when witnesses are long gone. For that matter, the techniques can be used to identify witnesses. Of course, with cases as old as the sexual assault and murder of Peggy Beck's, the expectation I assume is that the suspect is either locked up for other crimes or more likely, dead. But what do you do when your suspect isn't either of those? That's the problem faced by investigators working the Peggy Beck case. After a headline grabbing victory announcing there was probable cause to arrest James Raymond Taylor for sexual assault and murder, the cold case unit is once again stuck because the now 81-year-old Taylor isn't dead or in an old folk's home, or if he is, he is using someone else's name.

00:02:03 ALBERTI

We have spent several months searching for James Taylor with no luck. We have no idea where he's at and used all the means necessary databases, interviews to find James Taylor and we've been unable to locate him.

00:02:20 CENSULLO

In that 2020 press conference announcing that an arrest warrant had been issued, then Jefferson County Detective Elias Alberti mentioned that Taylor had an arrest warrant. However, when asked, the detective declined to elaborate on what Taylor had been arrested for.

00:02:37 ALBERTI

He, I can tell you that he does have a criminal history, but I can't go into detail about due to that arrest warrant being active and open, but he does have a criminal history. I just can't go into detail about what it is.

00:02:46 CENSULLO

Here's where my reporter brain went with that. Allegedly committing rape and murder in the middle of a Girl Scout camp seems like the work of a pretty dangerous dude. If Taylor had been arrested for DUI's or petty theft, I'm pretty sure Detective Alberti would have said so, but he didn't. However, he did say Taylor was last reported to be in Las Vegas, so I put two and two together and made a public records request in the Las Vegas area to see if that's where Taylor had an arrest record. And what do you know? I was pretty shocked at what I found. There are two arrests on file, and they provide insight into who Jimmy Taylor really is, or was, and what he's presumed to have gotten away with. The contents of the arrest reports even took career prosecutor Mitch Morrissey, who was only involved in assisting with the DNA evidence in this case, by surprise.

00:03:50 MORRISSEY

There's nobody digging like you're digging into, you know, other things that he did, other ways we could tie him to other cases. You know, there's no one doing that.

00:04:01 CENSULLO

I'm Meredith Censullo. Oh, and this is The Evidence Speaks, part Four: Sin City.

By 1966, Jimmy Taylor, his wife Sharon, and their three-year-old son Blake were living in California. According to court records, Jimmy and Sharon filed for divorce in San Bernardino in September of '66, after five years of marriage, on the grounds of mental cruelty. In '66, mental cruelty, and adultery, were the only options for divorce in California. Despite the separation and later divorce, the couple had another child together a few months later. Son Kirk was born in April of '67. By 1969, the Taylors were in Las Vegas. Jim and Sharon remarried there in July of that year. The couple and their sons moved into a newly built home in the Terra Linda subdivision located in Paradise, a community on the south end of Las Vegas. A third son, Rod, was born in February 1970. Jimmy was self-employed, his company Expert Color TV and Professional Electronics, listed an address near the intersection of Boulder Highway and Flamingo Road, about 2-1/2 miles from the family home. The Taylors second marriage didn't last long. They divorced again on February 17th of 1972. That date is a little important, so listen again. February 17th, 1972. Sharon and the kids moved out but remained in the Las Vegas area, as best as I can tell. They moved back to California sometime in the late 70s. When cold case investigators tracked down Sharon and her sons more than 40 years later, Sharon said she hadn't heard from Jimmy since their divorce. She told investigators she thought Jimmy had a girlfriend and possibly moved to northern Nevada. His sons told detectives they hardly knew their father, although he might have shown up to one of their Little League games in the mid-70s. Sharon also told detectives she'd heard he'd been arrested in February of 1972, but she wasn't sure why he'd been arrested. It was a pretty big deal, though.

00:06:33 MORRISSEY

That's a really serious offense.

00:06:40 CENSULLO

Las Vegas was vastly different in 1972 than it is today. Then, the Las Vegas metro area was home to roughly 270,000 people. The sparkle of the old Las Vegas was starting to fade a little bit. I-515, which winds through the east side of the metro area, as part of the Vegas Spaghetti Bowl tangle of major

traffic corridors, hadn't been completed. Neighborhoods were slowly starting to spread toward the desert, east of Boulder Highway, which at the time was the major route between the city of Henderson and Las Vegas. One of the newest neighborhoods under development was Winterwood Park. Today it's a sprawling development, but in '72 it hadn't extended beyond the Winterwood golf course, which took up a swath of land between Charleston Blvd to the north and Sahara Ave to the South. South of Sahara was Valley Vegas Blvd, which was a dead-end road leading to the city dump. Charleston Blvd was also a dead end and still is, coming to a halt at the desert. A dirt road partially connected Charleston and Valley Vegas, traveling past some gravel pits on the desert's edge. Further east lay the abandoned Frenchman mine and Frenchman Mountain.

It was around 8:00 PM, Saturday, February 26, 1972. Sharon and Jimmy's divorce had been finalized 9 days earlier, and she and the kids moved out of the family home, leaving Jimmy behind. Not far from where the Taylor home was located, three teenage girls were deciding how to spend their Saturday night. They decided to visit a friend who lived closer to the Vegas Strip. Their plan was to hitchhike from their Paradise Valley neighborhood. They figured they'd walk a couple of blocks toward Boulder Highway and thumb a ride from there. The girls ages 14, 14, and 15, didn't have to wait long. A white Dodge van with an air conditioning unit on top slowed and the driver asked where they were heading. Fremont Street, they'd replied. That's where I'm going also, get in, said the man, white, stocky, in his 30s or 40s with dark hair and dark rimmed glasses. The girls climbed in next to the man, the three of them squished into the bench seat alongside the driver. You have a cigarette, one of the girls asked. The man obliged, handing each of the teens a Pall Malls, no filter from the pack in his shirt pocket. They'd driven three miles or so before the man changed their plans. I forgot, I have to drop a television off, the man said. I'll do that first and then take you where you want to go. He turned off Boulder Highway, heading east on Charleston Blvd, away from the city. As he got further out of the city, the girls became nervous. As the man stopped at an intersection, one of the girls said to the driver, let us out here, we have some friends we can go see. The driver replied, no, that's OK, stay in. Something wasn't right and the girls knew it. They once again asked where they were going but this time, the man didn't answer, he merely pointed ahead. The van approached the last major intersection on the city's edge. We should jump. whispered, the girl closest to the door to her friend beside her. The man either heard her or anticipated the girl's reaction. The van slowed at the intersection but didn't stop. The girl nearest the door jumped out anyway. Her friend tried to follow, but the man's hand clamped down on her. Stay in here, he growled. But the girl broke free of his grip and jumped, rolling across the pavement. That left one teenager alone in the van. The driver grabbed onto her, telling her if she tried to jump now, she'd kill herself. The man reached across the girl and yanked the door closed. Then he stepped on the gas. Come over here by me he said to the girl, who screamed and begged to be let out. He told her to calm down and continued driving east toward the desert. He reached the dead end on Charleston Blvd and turned south Down the dirt road toward Valley Vegas Drive. The van bumped its way over the rough road, forcing the driver to slow down. The teenager took the opportunity. She flung open the passenger door and jumped. She looked over her shoulder. The van continued down the dirt road. She ran and ran until she reached Winterwood and knocked on the door of a stranger, begging them to call her parents. Patrol unit 4A10 saw the white van speeding eastbound on Charleston Blvd, but while they took note of it, they were on another call. Soon, an alert went out asking all officers to attempt to locate a white van with an AC unit on top. Last seen heading east toward the desert. Easy enough, the officers thought. They'd seen it once already, but another patrol unit located at first. It was around 11:00 o'clock. They pulled the white van over near a high school closer to downtown Vegas. Detectives arrived. The man in the van had dark hair

and dark rimmed glasses, covering his green eyes. You smoke, asked detectives. Yes, he said pulling a pack of Pall Malls out of the shirt pocket with a tattooed arm. Where you been tonight? He couldn't say. Detectives checked the van. No TV. The man handed over his license and a business card. James Raymond Taylor, Expert Color TV Services and Professional Electronics.

00:13:45 MORRISSEY

Two of them jumped out and then the third one was stuck with him and then she jumped out too. Boy, I'll tell you that's, that's full-blown kidnap in my view.

00:13:55 CENSULLO

It was to the Las Vegas PD too. Taylor was charged with three felony counts of kidnapping. There's no record that Taylor went to court on the charges. If he had, a guilty verdict would have meant years in state prison.

00:14:12 MORRISSEY

My bet is that these girls did not want to go through with the prosecution. They got out of the van, they got away. He got arrested and he skated, probably.

00:14:24 CENSULLO

Jim Taylor continued to operate his TV repair business and live in the family home. He also continued to prey on young women. On Saturday, November 9, 1974, a 16-year-old girl was walking along a Las Vegas Street when the driver of a white van pulled over and offered her a ride. She agreed and climbed in sliding in next to the driver. But the driver didn't head in the direction she'd been going. immediately worried, the teenager asked the driver to let her out. He refused. She tried to open the passenger door, but the driver grabbed her and rammed her head down against the engine compartment of the van. He held her there as he drove into the desert, where he raped her. When the abuse was over, the man drove her closer to the city, dropping her off near Boulder Highway. The traumatized girl walked to her brother's home and called for help. Despite what she'd been through, the young woman had memorized the license plate of the van. The name on the vehicle registration? James Taylor. Officers were dispatched to Taylor's home. The van wasn't there, but another vehicle was, and it was registered to Professional Electronics. The officers headed there next and found the van. They knocked on the business, no answer. But they heard something. It was the crackle of a police monitor. It was tuned to the channel that the officers responding to the rape call were on. Officers kicked in the door, but no one was there. The only sound was the squawk of the police radio. Back to Taylor's home they went and again no answer. The officers paused and listened. Was he monitoring their radios from here, they wondered? No, but they heard something. A loud noise. They knocked again. More noise. They knocked a third time. The noise was moving. It sounded as if it was above them. They called for backup and helicopter surveillance. They knocked once more and kicked in the door. No one appeared to be there. But there were items strewn across the floor outside of a hallway closet. They opened the closet door and realized someone was trying to hide or escape through the ceiling crawlspace. They demanded him to come out. There was no movement and no reply. Come out or we'll have to use gas, they yelled. Still nothing. They deployed the gas but there was silence, not even a cough. They called for a K9 officer and K9 Casey was sent into the ceiling, locating Jimmy Taylor crouched near the air conditioning ducts. He was booked into Clark County Jail and charged with felony rape. According to property records, the

Taylor home was sold in late June of 1976. That was a few weeks before Jim Taylor was to go on trial for the 1974 rape. But the trial date, set for July 13th, was continued until November. Taylor was scheduled to appear for a pretrial hearing on October 29th but was a no-show. That's when his court appointed attorney told the court he hadn't seen his client since July. A bench warrant for Taylor's arrest was issued, but it was too late. He was gone, and an incredibly dangerous man slipped through the cracks. When Taylor disappeared, he was 36 years old and as far as investigators know, he cut off all contact with his family.

00:19:02 MORRISSEY

It was more important to him to jump bond and to flee, to never be seen again, than it was to nurture or care for or financially support these children that he was responsible for. It was about him, you know, when he's fleeing, he isn't fleeing for any other reason than to get away from this, get away with this, and he left all his responsibilities on the table and just fled from them.

00:19:39 CENSULLO

Taylor does have a sister who's lived in the Phoenix, Arizona area for decades. Their father may have lived there for a time, so it's possible Jimmy visited there prior to disappearing. I don't know if investigators spoke to the sister. I can imagine they did, but she's not mentioned in the Jefferson County arrest warrant. But I do know that Taylor crossed the border into Mexico before the bench warrant was issued, so sometime between mid-July, when his attorney last saw him, and late October when he was supposed to appear in court. That tip came from one of Taylor's sons, who thinks his father came to see him at a Little League game sometime before he disappeared.

00:20:25 MORRISSEY

They were the ones that said they hadn't seen him since the mid-70. That he had left, he was in trouble, had jumped bond, and was gone, and they believed that he had gone to Mexico. So, I had people look into that and was able to confirm that somebody with his name and date of birth went into Mexico about the time that he jumped bond, but before the warrant was issued for him, so he had no problems using his name and identification to go into Mexico because he knew they weren't looking for him yet.

00:21:12 CENSULLO

If that's true, did he start a new life there? There's no indication that Taylor spoke Spanish. We know he didn't have family there.

00:21:22 MORRISSEY

But the one thing I would say, that if he continued the behavior that he did in Mexico and got captured there, his odds of coming back to the United States were probably not good, based on what I know about Mexican jails, from people that we got out of Mexico and jails for killing police officers, that kind of thing going back that far would have been a very unpleasant place to be.

00:21:50 CENSULLO

It seems returning to the states would have been a more plausible and desirable option. Taylor did have a skill that could have been utilized wherever he fled to, but we know if he returned to the states he came as someone else. There's no record of Taylor returning to the U.S. with the same identification he

left with. The establishment of a new identity is one of the possibilities brought up by Jefferson County Sheriff Jeff Schrader in 2020.

00:22:22 SCHRADER

How can people help us find him? Certainly, we don't know whether James Taylor is dead or alive, or if there was a change in identity.

00:22:30 CENSULLO

Is it really possible that Jimmy Taylor has been living a completely different life for more than 40 years, assuming he's alive? Yes.

00:22:41 AUBIN

It was very easy to get away with crimes back then, very simplified, you'd have to be pretty bad at what you're doing to get caught back then.

00:22:51 CENSULLO

Marc Aubin is a Tampa, Florida-based attorney, licensed private investigator, and skip tracer. Skip tracing is, quite simply, tracing an individual who has skipped town using tidbits of information gleaned through databases, drivers, licenses, and all of those little breadcrumbs we leave behind in our day to day lives. But in 1976, it didn't take much to disappear.

00:23:18 AUBIN

I mean, seriously, there was, I know I was in high school in the 70s, so I know it was a handwritten report card. There were no computers, there's no cell phones. That was not 20 years before cell phones came around. So, it was very easy to disappear. Essentially you grow a mustache, and you move to a different state and it's easy enough to obtain a, you know, a false driver's license. Back then, they didn't even have pictures on drivers' licenses. A Social Security number was very simple to acquire as well back. It's still not that hard to acquire.

00:23:53 CENSULLO

That's assuming Jimmy Taylor had a Nevada driver's license. He should have. The law in Nevada at the time required new residents to get a state license, and Nevada was among the states that required new licenses to have photos. Not all states had that requirement. In fact, photo drivers' licenses wouldn't be fully adopted in the U.S. until the 1980s. To Mark's other point, he said a Social Security number would have been pretty easy to obtain in the mid-70s.

00:24:25 AUBIN

A lot of times those types of people they'll go into the obituaries, and they'll find an infant that died at birth or something like that, or a small child that was killed, and they'll take their, they'll set up a Social Security number in that name, and then they'll just use that name. And again, because of the absence of any kind of technical breadcrumbs that you can track and no photos, photos were very rare back then on any kind of documents, passports, drivers, licenses, anything. So, it was much simpler to do that.

00:24:58 CENSULLO

Only one photo of Jimmy Taylor has been released by cold case investigators and that photo is old and grainy, extracted from an old photo album. I dug up another photo, that yearbook picture taken during Taylor's freshman year of high school in 1954. Taylor's mugshots from '72 and '74 can't be found, despite an in-depth search by the Las Vegas and Clark County records departments. So, with few photos in circulation, the ease of getting a new identity and an in-demand skill like electronics repairman, plus the ability to run your own small business, it wouldn't have been too much trouble for a man like James Taylor to start anew.

00:25:45 AUBIN

And those types of people who commit these crimes, they're like the guy next door. You never know you. You think that they're the friendliest guy and the nicest guy. Like I said a lot of them do Little League coaching and a lot of them are just the friendliest neighbors and they have block parties and things like this. And the last people you'd expect have that dark side. It's very, very difficult to find. He could go on and not be discovered forever.

00:26:12 CENSULLO

If all of those things are true, and if James Raymond Taylor is alive, is there any chance he'll be located without a tip from someone who might know something about his life after 1976?

00:26:26 AUBIN

These kinds of cases, it's not like it slipped through the cracks, it's just that's the nature of the beast. Sometimes in certain circumstances, if you've got nothing to go on, you don't even have a starting point for an investigation, so you just have to unfortunately wait for the passage of time. You know with people like this, the bad guys, they get very adept at staying off grid and flying under the radar, they do it for a living and by necessity. So, it's very, very hard to track them unless they make a mistake down the road or someone else, an old friend, an old relative, someone notices them or finds them 10, 20, 30 years down the road. You never know. That's how these cases are broken.

00:27:08 CENSULLO

And that's what investigators trying to resolve Peggy Beck's murder are hoping for. One recollection, one interaction that may seem insignificant might make a difference.

00:27:21 SCHRADER

Along the way, there may have been conversation that he had had with somebody. If somebody knows of that conversation or him or any changes, we certainly would like to know about that. Nothing would give us a greater pleasure than to actually put the handcuffs on James Taylor so that he could be held accountable in a in a court of law. And obviously when we get information like this, it is a lead, it is not the entirety of the investigation, the DNA evidence. It has to be put in the context of everything that has gone on in terms of the early investigation back in 1963. And then also what follows, what the investigative team does with that.

00:28:04 CENSULLO

So, we know Taylor is involved in at least three attacks on young women, including two rapes and the strangulation murder of Peggy Beck. What don't we know?

00:28:16 MORRISSEY

The one thing we don't know is did he kill anybody out there like we know he did here in Colorado, so you know, the MO is different. I mean, obviously he's looking for that moment when he's got control over a victim, and they've really got no way out. But we were lucky in Vegas because the three you know, they were able to get out, they were able to get away from him.

00:28:47 CENSULLO

I did some digging into cold cases from the time period that I know Taylor lived in Vegas, roughly 1969 until 1976. There are several cases, but I found four victims that seem to fit Taylor's MO. All four victims were teenage girls. Each girl had last been reported to be walking or biking somewhere. All of the victims were found in the desert surrounding the Las Vegas metro area. I contacted cold case investigators with the Las Vegas Metro Police Department about those cases and was surprised when they got back in touch with me. They weren't aware of James Raymond Taylor, but were interested in learning more about him. Here are the cases: Susan Ray Parone was 14 when she went missing on June 13, 1971. She planned to walk from her West Las Vegas home to the local swimming pool at Lorenzi Park, just west of downtown. Her skeletal remains were found in April of 1973, in the desert west of the city, off Lone Mountain Road. Her cause of death is listed as blunt trauma to her head. Investigators tell me they have not been able to recover any DNA in this case. 10 days after Susan went missing, 13-year-old Jodi Marie Miller disappeared. She'd last been seen by a friend on June 23 of '71. Four and a half months later, her remains were discovered wrapped in a blanket, lying in a shallow grave in the desert near Lone Mountain Road and Jones Blvd in North Las Vegas. There is also no DNA available right now to investigators. 15-year-old Jerry Ann Ralston went missing May 21, 1975. She was walking to buy cigarettes at the Maverick service station on Boulder Highway in Henderson, Nevada, south of Vegas. Her body was found the next day in a pond off Pabco Rd, east of Las Vegas. She'd been sexually assaulted and strangled. Investigators believe her body had been left in the pond to conceal it. There is DNA in this case, but there haven't been any hits in CODIS. Keep in mind, CODIS hits on offender profiles, not evidence profiles. James Taylor's offender profile is not in CODIS. The evidence profile from the Beck case is. Vicki Lynn Breckey was also 15. She left home on May 17, 1978, to walk to a friend's house but never arrived. Her body was discovered the next day in the desert off Lake Mead Blvd, east of Las Vegas. She died of strangulation. There is DNA in this case, but again, no hits in CODIS. Now, this is nearly two years after Taylor jumped bond and entered Mexico. But we don't know if he ever returned to Vegas, so it's a stretch, but worth a mention. **If you have any information about Susan, Jody, Jerry, or Vicki, please contact me.**

Next time on The Evidence Speaks, more cold cases. And this time, the prime suspect isn't James Raymond Taylor, yet there's a connection to the Taylor family.

00:32:26 REPORTER

Someone is killing the women whose lives are spent on that street. Prostitutes, drug users. When 20-year-old Melissa Sandoval's body was discovered in May, dumped in a rural area, the string of unsolved murders of women in San Diego County reached 25.

00:32:42 DUFFIN

The Evidence Speaks is a production of FIU's Global Forensic and Justice Center. Meredith Censullo is responsible for the research, writing, and editing. Our subject matter experts are Kevin Lothridge, director of the GFJC, and Mitch Morrissey from United Data Connect. We'd like to thank Marc Aubin from Top Gun Investigations and Aubin Law Firm for his contributions to this episode. If you have any tips about James Raymond Taylor, please contact the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office. If you have any information regarding Susan, Jody, Jerry, or Vicki, please contact the Las Vegas Metro Police Department Cold Case Unit.