

A 1952 TRUE-CRIME REPORT

The Arizona Love Case

A confession. A missing head. A 22-year sentence.

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FILE 01 / 02

CASE FACTS

DATE

October 2, 1952

LOCATION

Bluefield, Mercer County
West Virginia

VICTIM

Sonny Marshall, 69
Ret. brakeman, Norfolk
& Western Railroad

ACCUSED

Arizona Harris Love
Housekeeper, age 49

DISPUTE

\$56 in unpaid wages

VERDICT

Guilty — 1st degree
(Jan. 26, 1953)

SENTENCE

Life imprisonment
at Pence Springs

RELEASED

Oct. 7, 1975 — after
22 years incarcerated

On the morning of October 3, 1952, a man hauling trash for fifty cents discovered a cabbage sack in a Bluefield alley. Inside was the upper torso of Sonny Marshall — a 69-year-old retired Norfolk & Western railroad brakeman who had quietly disappeared the night before.

His housekeeper of eight years, Arizona Love, was arrested within days. She gave a statement after nine hours of questioning. No psychological evaluation was ever conducted. Her court-appointed attorney admitted he was unprepared and asked for a continuance. It was denied.

On January 26, 1953, in a courtroom packed shoulder to shoulder, Arizona pleaded guilty to first-degree murder. The trial moved swiftly, almost mechanically — as if the outcome had been decided before the first witness ever took the stand. She was sentenced to life at the Women's Prison in Pence Springs.

She would serve twenty-two years before a court agreed to hear the case again. By then the prosecutor, the judge, and the detective who took her confession were all dead. Most of the case file had been destroyed in a basement reorganization.

WHAT THE RECORD SHOWS

*“A portion of the body was burned in the furnace.
But the head of Sonny Marshall was never found.”*

— STATE'S ACKNOWLEDGMENT, MERCER COUNTY CIRCUIT COURT, OCTOBER 1975

PART TWO · TIMELINE OF EVENTS

What happened, and when.

- FEB 3, 1903 Arizona Harris is born in McDowell County, West Virginia, the second of five children in a coal-mining family.
- c. 1944 Now known as Arizona Love, she is hired by Sonny Marshall — a 69-year-old retired Norfolk & Western brakeman — as his housekeeper. The arrangement lasts eight years.
- OCT 2, 1952
EVENING Marshall returns home with his railroad retirement check. Arizona asks for the \$56 in wages he owes. He climbs the stairs without answering, then comes back down with a revolver.
- OCT 2, 1952
THE STRUGGLE He raises the gun and pulls the trigger. It misfires. They lunge, fall down the basement stairs. Arizona swings a cast-iron poker three times. Silence.
- OCT 3, 1952
DAWN A man hauling trash for fifty cents picks up a cabbage sack from a vacant lot. Inside: a torso. The body is identified as Sonny Marshall.
- JAN 26, 1953 Arizona pleads guilty to first-degree murder after a nine-hour interrogation. Sentenced to life imprisonment at the Women's Prison in Pence Springs, Summers County.
- ONE MONTH LATER She is transferred to Lakin State Hospital — a facility designated for the “colored insane.” No psychological evaluation is ever conducted on her.
- OCT 7, 1975 Judge Jerome Katz rules her constitutional rights were violated. After 22 years, Arizona Love is released. She asks to remain at Lakin as a volunteer.
- OCT 18, 1980 Arizona Love dies and is buried in the Lakin State Hospital cemetery. No reporters come.

QUESTIONS THE TIMELINE WON'T ANSWER

- *Why was the head never found — and what did Bluefield whisper about a church pulpit?*
- *How does a 9-hour interrogation, no lawyer, and no evaluation become a life sentence?*
- *What did two women from Crystal, W.Va. do for the family the town abandoned?*

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