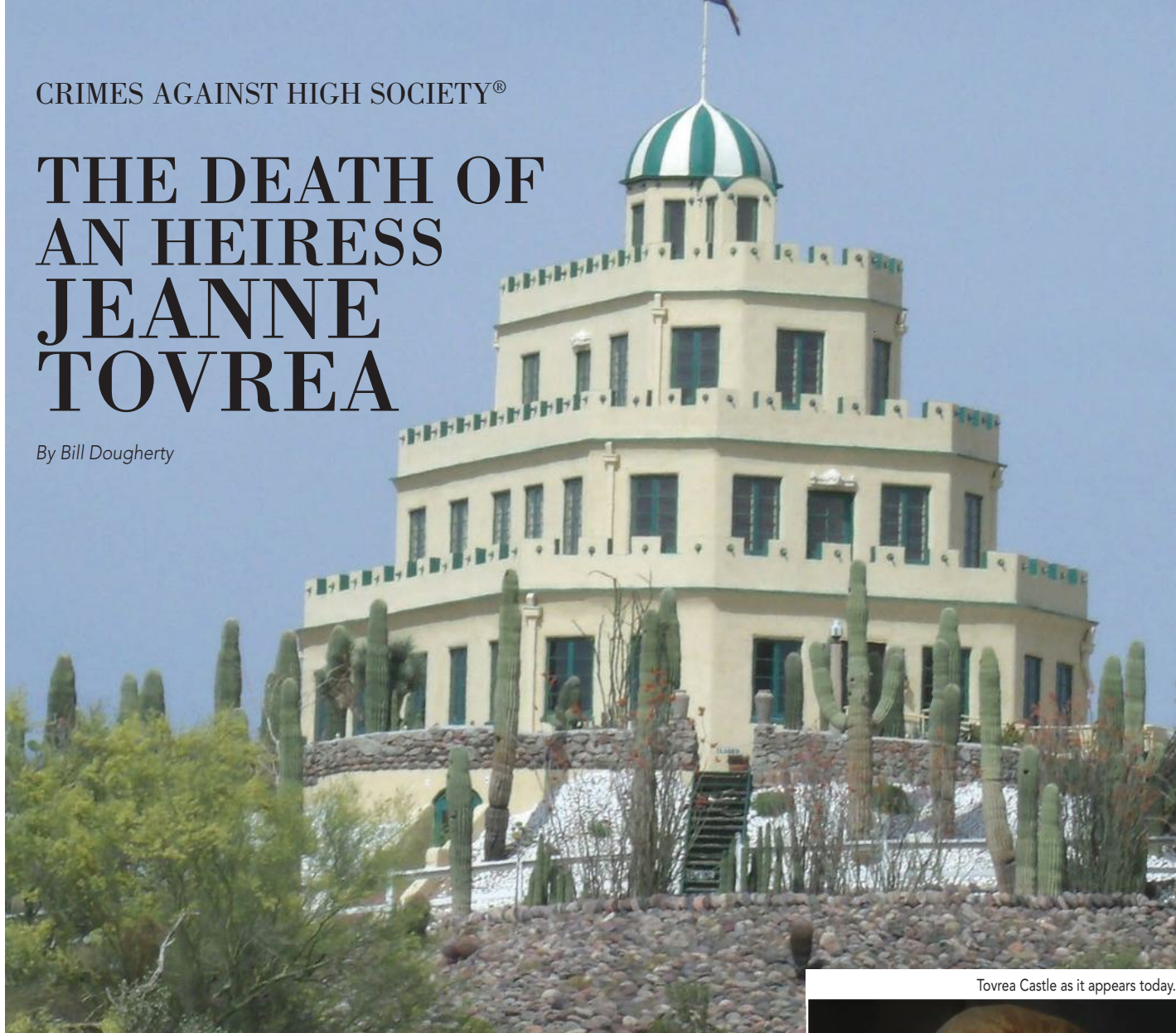


THE DEATH OF AN HEIRESS JEANNE TOVREA

By Bill Dougherty



Tovrea Castle as it appears today.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

By 1961 Jeanne Gutner was down on her luck, a drifter with a young daughter in tow. After several unsuccessful marriages and a cancer scare, she was bound and determined to change her life. She moved to Phoenix from her native Arkansas, landed a nighttime gig as a cocktail waitress at the Safari Inn and studied real estate by day. By the time 1970 rolled around, she had met with success. She purchased a small home and a Cadillac to drive prospective clients around. In less than 10 years, she had become one of the most successful women in the then male-dominated world of residential real estate. In 1971, while socializing with friends at the Cattlemen's Club, she met Ed Tovrea Sr. The two could not have been from more different worlds. Ed had grown up in the lap of luxury. His family was one of the predominate names in Arizona. They owned vast amounts of real estate, a castle, art, feed and grain lots and oil reserves. Jeanne on the other hand, came from nothing and had spent most of her adult life moving from state to state. Both had been previously married several times. But their instant attraction to one another gave way to immediate dating and by the end of 1971 they were openly discussing marriage.

COUPLE NUMBER ONE

Jeanne and Ed Tovrea married in Hawaii in 1972. Their friends were over the moon at the couple's nuptials. Many finally believed that each had found their soul mate, that was everyone but Ed's three children from his first marriage. Cricket, Prissy and Happy (Edward Jr.) Tovrea, distrusted their stepmother from the moment they met her in 1971. This was something Jeanne



Jeanne Tovrea in Newport Beach, Summer 1987



Jeannie Tovrea dances at the Barrow Ball, 1987

didn't take lightly. After all, she was a woman who had never had enemies. Her Southern charm and infectious personality had warmed the hearts of everyone she encountered, even her sharpest critics. But Ed's children never warmed to her.

By the mid-1970s, the Tovreas were literally the toast of the town! They were a beautiful couple that had dozens of acquaintances, hosted the best parties and traveled the world with friends. Jeanne had become one of the most respected and adored hostesses in Phoenix. She lent her name to everything she could. Her days began at sunrise with cigarettes before coffee and a charity schedule that would take her late into the night. In 1979, she was profiled in *Arizona Living Magazine* (now defunct) as one of the hardest working and charitable women in the Valley. She had finally come full circle!

DISSAPPEARING ACT

In late 1979, Ed Tovrea's health began to decline. The World War II hero had battled heavy drinking for decades and smoked in excess of three packs of cigarettes a day. Soon Jeanne realized that the days of non-stop charity work and cocktail parties needed to come to an end. She resigned from everything with which she was affiliated to dedicate her time to a man who had given her so much. One socialite referred to this time in Jeanne's life as "the disappearing act." Jeanne Tovrea literally disappeared for more than three years. Ed Tovrea died in 1983 with Jeanne and his son Happy by his side.



Ed and Jeannie Tovera at the Cattleman's Club, 1972



Jeannie and Ed Tovera at Lake Powell, 1973

LETTERS HOME

Following the death of Ed Tovrea, Jeanne told friends that she was so glad she had not let her real estate license expire; since she knew she would soon be returning to the working world. She told close friends that the last 13 years had been like living a fairy tale but now the ride was over, and it was time to move on. What happened next would become the biggest subject of gossip on the cocktail party and charity ball circuit ever! Prior to Ed's death, he wrote two letters on yellow legal pads to his three children and to his wife. In the two letters he wrote to his children, he said that all had been given every opportunity afforded to them. He asked why none of them had gone to college, started families or held down long-term jobs. He closed by saying they were more interested in working on their tans than in the family business. He told them he loved them and wished them luck. He left each child \$200,000 a piece. When Jeanne opened her yellow letter, she almost passed out! Ed Tovrea said at times he had been far too stingy with his wife; forcing her to clip coupons, shop on sale and drive used cars. He went on to say that he could never have wished for a better and more loving wife and that the care she had shown him in the twilight of his life was simply unbelievable! He bequeathed his entire estate of \$7 million in cash plus vast real estate holdings in Arizona and New Mexico, oil reserves, fine art and an income-generating feed and grain lot to her. He concluded the letter by saying he adored Jeanne and hoped she would spend the money freely!

SPENDING FREELY

The trust Ed Tovrea set up for his wife allowed her to spend as much as she wanted in her lifetime, after that it would pass to his three children. It was an air-tight trust as the children would quickly

learn and it possessed a “hammer-clause.” Should any of the three challenge the will, they would automatically be disinherited. Jeanne wasted no time spending freely. She purchased a Mercedes and a Jaguar that she planned to keep at her new prestigious Balboa Bay Club condo in Newport Beach. She took out a \$2,700,000 life insurance for her daughter Deborah Luster and drove headfirst back into the charity world. By then she was seen feeding the homeless in inner-city soup kitchens during the holidays, opening her lavish Lincoln Hills home to any charity that asked and once again working round the clock to make the community that had given her so much, a better place.

WHEN A STRANGER CALLS

In early 1987, Jeanne started to receive telephone calls from a man who identified himself as Gordon Phillips. He said he was doing a story for *Time-Life* on Ed Tovrea and The Great Escape he had masterminded in a POW camp during World War II. Jeanne suggested that Ed’s first wife Priscilla might be a better source, since Jeanne was his third wife. Yet Mr. Phillips was relentless and called dozens of times. Reluctantly Jeanne and her daughter Deborah finally agreed to meet him in the lobby of the Balboa Bay Club in the spring of that same year. However, Gordon Phillips was not the least bit interested in talking about Ed Tovrea but rather asked personal questions of the two ladies. When Jeanne returned to Phoenix, she called *Time-Life* and found out Mr. Phillips did not exist. Though he continued to leave



James Harrod on Death Row, 1994

countless messages on her telephone tape recorder, Jeanne never saw him again. At this point she told friends she was very scared. She also said she believed he was following her through the streets of Phoenix.

NEW AND IMPROVED

By late 1987, Jeanne had put the whole Gordon Phillips matter behind her. She had a few nips and tucks blonded her trademark red mane. She had capped off the year by chairing the Barrow Ball, which was one of the most prestigious balls in town. She reconnected with a former Rodeo star from her past. Then she began dividing her time between Phoenix and Las Vegas where her new beau was living. By early 1988, she planned a lavish party at her home with the possibility of announcing her engagement.

APRIL FOOLS

On the night of April 1, 1988, Phoenix police responded to the burglar alarm at the home of Jeanne Tovrea at 12:47 am. Along with a very prominent socialite and friend who happened to be her next-door neighbor, the body of Jeanne Tovrea aged 58 was identified. She had been shot in her sleep at point blank range five times. Her murder exploded on television and in print. Everyone in the social world had a theory, yet none proved conclusive. More than a thousand mourners attended her funeral service. The case went dead.

THE POWER OF THE MEDIA

It was not until 1992 while watching an episode of Dominick Dunn’s show *Power*,



James Harrod and Happy Tovrea, 1986

Privilege and Justice, that a man claiming to be the ex-brother-in-law of James Harrod, a two-bit conman, recognized his voice. Gordon Phillips had obviously been his alias. Deborah Luster had turned over the message recording tapes to the police after her mother’s death and they decided to air them on the program. Several months later, Mr. Harrod’s ex-wife also told police that her former husband confessed to her that he had been involved in a high-profile murder of a wealthy Phoenix socialite in early 1988. James Harrod was arrested, and his DNA matched the finger and palm prints taken at the crime scene in 1988. Although there were countless phone records between Mr. Harrod and Happy Tovrea, nothing ever came of the connection. They had been business partners in several get-rich-quick schemes that never amounted to anything. James Harrod was sentenced to the death penalty for first degree murder. He remained silent and refused to speak of the murder.

WHAT FALLS AWAY

In the end, the murder of Jeanne Tovrea was finally solved; yet so many questions remain more than three decades later. The Tovrea children all moved out of state before or following the murder. In 2011, Happy Tovrea died of heart failure. There was nothing related to his passing in any newspaper or periodical. James Harrod died in prison in 2019 while awaiting execution. Today Jeanne Tovrea would be 88 years old and would have probably ended up chairing just about everything under the hot desert sun. She was a good person and loved by so many. It’s sad that she didn’t get to have a much longer life. After all, she had done so much to make the community a far better place for those less fortunate.



Jeanne Tovrea, January 1988