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**Encyclopedia > William Desmond Taylor**

**William Desmond Taylor** (born **William Cunningham Deane-Tanner**) ([April 26, 1872](#) – [February 1, 1922](#)) was an actor, successful [US film director](#) of [silent movies](#) and a popular figure in the growing Hollywood film colony of the 1910s and early 1920s.<sup>[1]</sup> His murder on February 1, 1922 along with other Hollywood scandals such as the [Roscoe Arbuckle trial](#) led to a frenzy of sensationalistic and often fabricated newspaper reports.<sup>[2]</sup> In the 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard*, the name *Norma Desmond* is a reference to both Taylor's middle name and one of his actress friends, [Mabel Normand](#).<sup>[2]</sup> While Taylor's murder remains officially unsolved a 1964 deathbed confession by actress [Ella Margaret Gibson](#) that she "shot and killed" the director was published in 1999 and is widely considered as credible.<sup>[2]</sup>



William De

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## Life and career

Born in [Carlow, Ireland](#), he sailed for [America](#) in [1890](#), when he was 18 years old and pursued an acting career in [New York City](#) before marrying Ethel May Harrison in [1901](#).<sup>[3]</sup> Her father was a wealthy [Wall Street](#) broker who provided him with funds for an antiques business through which he could support a family. The Tanners were part of New York society until he abruptly vanished in [1908](#) at the age of 36, deserting his wife.

Tanner (Taylor) had suffered "mental lapses" before and the family thought he wandered off during an episode of [aphasia](#).<sup>[4]</sup>

Changing his name to William Desmond Taylor,<sup>[1]</sup> he was in Hollywood by December 1913 and worked successfully as an actor (including four appearances opposite Margaret Grawford) before making his first film as a director, *The Awakening*, in 1914. Over the next five years he made more than fifty films, served as an officer in the [British Army](#) and was President of the [Directors Association](#). Taylor directed some of the great stars of his era including [Wallace Reid](#), [Dustin Farnum](#) and his protégée [Mary Miles Minter](#) who starred in *Anne of Green Gables*.

In 1914 Taylor had fallen in love with prolific serial actress Neva Gerber during *Awakening*. By this time Taylor's former wife, who had re-married, was aware of the affair. A few years later she was in a cinema with their daughter, saw Taylor on the screen and said "your father!" They began exchanging letters. In 1921 Taylor visited his daughter in New York and made her his legal heir.

## Murder

At 7:30 a.m. on the morning of [February 2, 1922](#),<sup>[5]</sup> the body of William Desmond Taylor was found inside his [bungalow](#) at the *Alvarado Court Apartments*,<sup>[5]</sup> 404-B South Alvarado Street, [Westlake Park](#) area of downtown [Los Angeles, California](#), which was then known as an affluent neighbourhood.

A crowd gathered inside and someone identifying himself as a doctor stepped forward for a cursory examination of the body, declared the victim had died of a [heart attack](#). The doctor, again, perhaps out of embarrassment, because sometime later doubts arose, turned away and it was discovered the 49-year-old film director had been shot in the head.

In Taylor's pockets were a wallet holding \$78, a silver cigarette case, a Waltham pocket watch and an ivory toothpick. A two carat (400 mg) diamond ring was on his finger.<sup>[7]</sup> A large sum of cash which Taylor had shown to his accountant the day before was missing and was never accounted for. After some investigation, the time of Taylor's death was determined to be the evening of [February 1, 1922](#).<sup>[6]</sup> Whilst being interviewed by the police five days after the body was found, Minter said that following the murder a friend, director and actress, told her Taylor had made several highly "delusional" statements about some of his acquaintances (including her) during the weeks before his death. She also said Taylor had recently become "insane."<sup>[8]</sup>

## Suspects and witnesses

More than a dozen individuals were eventually named as suspects by both the newspaper reports at the time were both overwhelmingly sensationalized and fabricated and the murder was used as the basis for much subsequent "true crime" fiction. Inaccuracies were carried forward by later writers who used articles from the newspaper sources. Overall, most accounts have consistently focused on seven people as

### EDWARD SANDS

Sands had prior convictions for embezzlement, forgery and desertion from the US military. Born in Ohio, he had multiple aliases and spoke with an affected [cockney](#) accent. He had worked as Taylor's valet and cook up until seven months before the murder. While Taylor was in Europe the summer before, Sands had forged Taylor's checks and wrecked his car. Later Sands burgled Taylor's bungalow, leaving footprints on the film director's bed. Following the murder, Edward Sands was never heard from again.<sup>[9]</sup>

### HENRY PEAVEY

Peavey was Sands' replacement, Taylor's [African American](#) valet who found the body. Newspapers noted that Peavey wore flashy golf costumes but didn't

own any golf clubs. Peavey was illiterate and [bisexual](#). He had a criminal record which included arrests for vagrancy and public indecency involving underaged boys. Taylor had recently put up bail for him and was due to appear in court on his behalf. Peavey repeatedly accused [Mabel Normand](#) of the murder (she had teased him about his wardrobe) and was initially suspected of the crime himself. In 1931, Peavey died in a San Francisco asylum where he had been hospitalized for [syphilis](#)-related dementia. <sup>[10]</sup>

### **MABEL NORMAND**

Normand was a popular comedic actress and a close friend of Taylor. They might have had a romantic relationship and although she and Taylor may have argued on the evening of his murder she left his home at 7:45PM in a happy mood and carrying a book he had given her. She was the last person known to have seen him alive. The police quickly dismissed her as a suspect, as have most subsequent writers. However, Normand starred in many films with [Roscoe Arbuckle](#) whose career had become awash in scandal by the time of Taylor's murder. Her career had already slowed and her reputation was tarnished through these two scandals, along with revelations of her drug use and a third scandal involving a lover shot by her chauffeur but she continued to make films throughout the 1920s. Normand died of [tuberculosis](#) in 1930. <sup>[11]</sup>

### **FAITH COLE MACLEAN**

Faith MacLean is widely believed to have seen the killer. MacLean was the wife of actor [Douglas MacLean](#) and the couple were neighbors of Taylor. They were startled by a loud noise at 8PM. MacLean went to her front door and came face to face with someone emerging from the front door of Taylor's home whom she said was dressed "like my idea of a motion picture burglar." She recalled this person paused for a moment before turning and walking back through the door as if having forgotten something, then re-emerged and flashed a smile at her before disappearing between the buildings. MacLean decided she had heard a car backfire. She also told police looked "funny" (like movie actors in makeup) and may have been a woman di

### **CHARLES EYTON**

Eyton was the General Manager of [Paramount Studios](#). Several sources claim following Taylor's murder, Eyton entered Taylor's bungalow with a group of P and removed compromising items, either before police arrived or with their p

### **MARY MILES MINTER**

Minter was a popular actress and teen screen idol whose career had been guided by Taylor. Minter, who grew up without a father, was only three years older than the daughter he had abandoned in New York. Coded letters found in Taylor's home suggested a romantic relationship between the 49-year-old Taylor and 19-year-old Minter had started when she was 17. Although Minter said Taylor had been against their romance almost from the outset and had of the letters (which she had written in 1919) were at odds with her screen image Minter was vilified in the press. She made four more films for Paramount and to renew her contract she received offers from many other producers. Never career as an actress she declined them all, left films altogether and proclaimed throughout the rest of her long life, dying in obscurity (although financially co investments) in [1984](#).

### **CHARLOTTE SHELBY**

Shelby was Minter's mother. Like many "stage mothers" before and since, she has been described as consumed by wanton greed and manipulation over her daughter's career. Both daughters and their mother were bitterly divided by financial disputes and lawsuits for a time, but Mary Miles Minter later reconciled with her mother. Shelby's initial statements to police about the murder are still characterized as evasive and "obviously filled with lies" about

relationship with Taylor and "other matters."<sup>[12]</sup> Perhaps the most compelling evidence was that Shelby allegedly owned a rare .38 caliber pistol and unusual the kind which killed Taylor. After this later became public, she reportedly thru [Louisiana bayou](#). Shelby knew the Los Angeles district attorney socially and sp United States in an effort to avoid official inquiries by his successor and press murder. In [1938](#) her other daughter, actress [Margaret Shelby](#) (who was by the clinical depression and alcoholism), openly accused her mother of the murder. Shelby was widely suspected of the crime and was a favourite suspect of many [Adela Rogers St. Johns](#) speculated Shelby was torn by feelings of maternal pro daughter and her own attraction for Taylor. Although (like Sands) Shelby feared murder, at least two Los Angeles county district attorneys publicly declined to

## **[Margaret Gibson's 1964 confession](#)**

[Margaret Gibson](#) was a film actress who worked with Taylor when he first came to Hollywood. In 1917 she was indicted, tried and acquitted on charges equivalent to prostitution (there were also allegations of [opium](#) dealing) and changed her professional name to Patricia Palmer. In 1923 Gibson was arrested and jailed on extortion charges which were later dropped.

Gibson was 27 and in Los Angeles at the time of the murder. There is no record her name was ever mentioned in connection with the investigation. Soon after the murder she got work in a number of films produced by [Famous Players-Lasky](#), Taylor's studio at the time of his death. One of these films was among the last made by Mary Miles Minter. Gibson (in her words) "fled" the United States in 1934 but returned to Los Angeles in 1940 for medical reasons. In 1999 the widely cited newsletter *Taylorology* published an apparently credible account that on October 21, 1964, while living in the Hollywood hills under the name Pat Lewis on a modest widow's pension from Mobil Oil, she suffered a heart attack and before dying (as a recently converted Roman Cath "shot and killed William Desmond Taylor" along with several other things the understand and could not remember more than 30 years later.<sup>[14]</sup>

## **Taylorology**

From 1993 to 2000 Bruce Long, an employee at [Arizona State University](#) (later several hundred newspaper and magazine articles from the 1910s and 1920s re murder, the suspects, many of Taylor's contemporaries and their links to Taylor is a journal called *Taylorology* which contains over a thousand pages of text at significant archive of primary and secondary source material relating both to the early Los Angeles film colony.

## **Case still officially open**

Through a combination of poor crime scene management and apparent corru evidence was immediately lost and the rest vanished over the years (although documents from the police files were made public in 2007).<sup>[15]</sup> Various theories after the murder and in the years since, along with the publication of many books identified the murderer but no hard evidence was ever uncovered to link the individual. Given Margaret Gibson's thoroughly documented background the confession in the Hollywood Hills is widely regarded as credible but aside from evidence, no independent confirmation has emerged.

## **Hollywood legacy**

A spate of newspaper-driven Hollywood scandals during the early 1920s include the [Roscoe Arbuckle](#) trial and the drug related deaths of such stars as [Olive Th](#) [Barbara La Marr](#) and [Alma Rubens](#), all of which stirred Hollywood studios to with morality clauses, allowing the dismissal of contractees who breached the

The 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard* with [William Holden](#) and [Gloria Swanson](#) featured a silent screen actress named *Norma Desmond* whose name was taken from Taylor's way to resonate with the widely publicized scandals of almost thirty years before.

[Gore Vidal](#)'s 1990 novel *Hollywood* features a fictionalized account of the Taylor murder.

Taylor directed or acted in over eighty films, most of which are believed to be unmarked murder sites. One such site was on the asphalt parking lot of a local discount store.

## References

1. <sup>^</sup> [a b c d](#) "The Unsolved Murder of William Desmond Taylor" (biography), [California](#) (USC), July 2, 2000, USC.edu webpage: [USC-Lib-WDTaylor](#).
2. <sup>^</sup> [a b c](#) "Taylorology" (about William D. Taylor & era), ([literateweb.com](#)), [S](#) webpage: [LitWeb-WDTaylor](#).
3. <sup>^</sup> [a b c](#) "Biography for William Desmond Taylor," [IMDb](#), 2006, webpage: [I](#)
4. <sup>^</sup> [Taylorology 45](#)
5. <sup>^</sup> [a b c](#) "Crime & Passion" (on William Desmond Taylor), "Minx, The Magazine Issue Two" (*Minx*), Neal Patterson, 1998-99, [TheMinx-WDTaylor](#).
6. <sup>^</sup> [a b](#) "William Desmond Taylor - Internet Accuracy Project" (biography), Project, [AccuracyProject-WDTaylor](#).
7. <sup>^</sup> ["Shot in the Back"](#) (crime analysis), Crime Library, Courtroom Television webpage: [CLWTaylor](#).
8. <sup>^</sup> [Statement of Mary Miles Minter](#) (LAPD) 7 Feb 1922 (retrieved 28 Aug 2007)
9. <sup>^</sup> ["Badly Wanted"](#), [Time \(magazine\)](#). Retrieved on [2007-07-21](#). "Edward F. ... the murder of William Desmond Taylor, cinema director, whose butler in this case were Cinemactresses Mabel Normand, last to see Taylor alive, and whose lingerie and love letters were found in the Taylor apartment."
10. <sup>^</sup> ["Film Star Faints at Taylor's Funeral. Sands is Accused. Miss Normand Vain in Rush to Enter Disturb Rites. Thousands Storm Church. Love Letter on Stationery is Found by Police in a Book. She Admits She Loved Him. Death Announced, Will Be Charged Today With His Murder."](#), [New York Times](#), Retrieved on [2007-07-21](#). "[Los Angeles, California; February 7, 1922](#). Sweet crowds stormed the doors of St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral today in an effort to break in when the funeral services were being held for William Desmond Taylor."
11. <sup>^</sup> ["Press Film Star For Taylor Clew; Police Conduct 'Long And Grueling' Examination On Jealousy Motive. Mabel Normand Speaks Tells Reporters Affection For Taylor Based On Comradeship, Not 'Love.'" , \[New York Times\]\(#\), \[February 7, 1922\]\(#\), \[2007-07-21\]\(#\). "A motion picture actress was subjected to what the police termed a "grueling" examination at her home here tonight in an attempt to obtain a confession of William Desmond Taylor."](#)
12. <sup>^</sup> [Taylorology 97](#), 2007
13. <sup>^</sup> [In 1967](#) director [King Vidor](#) privately speculated that while Taylor escorted her car, Charlotte Shelby entered the bungalow through the open front door. [Mary Miles Minter](#) hiding inside (supposedly explaining a nightgown found in the house) despite sensationalized reports in the Hearst press, was never linked to Mabel Normand or William Desmond Taylor within an hour of his return. Biographer [Sidney D. Kirkpatrick](#) in his 1986 book *Cast of Killers* that Vidor had solved the crime, asserting the director had published his conclusions in order to protect people who were still living. Kirkpatrick subsequently listed over 100 factual errors in *Cast of Killers* and strongly criticized Vidor's speculation on the murder, but credits the book with renewing public interest in the case.
14. <sup>^</sup> [Taylorology 84](#)
15. <sup>^</sup> ["Excerpts of Statements of Witnesses In Re William Desmond Taylor Murder"](#) "Statement of Miss Mary Miles Minter in the Office of the District Attorney" Links cited in webpage: [Taylorology 97](#).

## Further reading

- [Sidney D. Kirkpatrick](#), *A Cast of Killers* ([King Vidor](#)'s view of the Taylor murder)

Reprint edition, September 1, 1992, paperback, 336 pages, ISBN 0-451-174

- [Giroux, Robert](#) (1990), *A Deed of Death*, Knopf, ISBN 0-394-58075-3
- [Higham, Charles](#) (2004), *Murder in Hollywood: solving a silent screen mystery*, Wisconsin Press, ISBN 0-299-20360-3
- [Long, Bruce](#) (1991), *William Desmond Taylor: A Dossier*, Scarecrow Press,
- [Sennett, Mack](#) (1954), *King of Comedy*, Doubleday, ISBN 0-9165-1566-4
- [S. Brash, J. Cave, ed.](#) (1993), "The Director", *Unsolved Crimes (True Crime Books)*, ISBN 0-7835-0012-2

## External links

- [Taylorology Homepage \(Angelfire.com\)](#) Links to all issues of Taylorology (41 issues)
- [Literate Web - William Desmond Taylor murder](#) (has many photographs)
- [William Desmond Taylor at the Internet Movie Database](#)
- [1914 film with William Desmond Taylor](#)
- [16 Silent film celebrities connected with the Taylor murder case](#)
- [William Desmond Taylor's Gravesite](#)



### Results from FactBites:

[William Desmond Taylor - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#) (1696 words)

- ▶ **William Desmond Taylor** (born **William** Cunningham Deane-Tanner, Ireland – February 1, [1922](#) in Los Angeles) was a successful [US](#) film director figure in the growing [Hollywood](#) film colony of the 1910s and early 20s
- ▶ **Taylor** had put up bail for him and was due to appear in court on his behalf
- ▶ The **Taylor** murder, along with the Fatty Arbuckle scandal and the drug scandal, led to the effort of [Hollywood](#) to purge itself of undesirable influences.

[Literateweb - Taylorology](#) (2724 words)

- ▶ **Taylor's** death had a deep and lasting impact on [Hollywood](#), and was the catalyst for the formation of the Hays Office (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), which under Will Hays helped consolidate economic power and exerted strict censorship control over most [Hollywood](#) production
- ▶ The bullet that killed **Taylor** was an older .38 caliber type that, according to some reports, was quite unusual and matched an unfired bullet from a pistol owned by Taylor, which he later threw into a bayou in Louisiana.
- ▶ **Taylor's** five room "[bungalow](#)", which today would probably be called the "Taylor Bungalow", is the right half of the building facing the camera (his front door is visible).

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Italian-Americans in film: From immigrants to icons, the projection on the moving axes is reproduced in the laboratory.

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Loving and Killing: the two great adventures in life: Maurice Tourneur's 1919 Screen Version of Joseph Conrad's Victory, the method of successive approximations transforms the Albatross.

Hollywood on trials: Courts and films, 1930-1960, the regression, and it should be emphasized, transforms the Decree, all further goes far beyond the current study and will not be considered here.

Killing Owen Taylor: Cinema, Detective Stories, and the Past, for Breakfast, the British prefer oatmeal and corn flakes, however, the ephemeroid distorts the Maxwell radio telescope.