

A Death They Won't Let Die

By Marlene Cimons
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MERLE AND Bill Silkwood are convinced that their daughter, Karen Gay Silkwood, was murdered.

They also believe that if they don't raise hell about it themselves the case will be forgotten, and an injustice will remain uncorrected.

The Silkwoods are determined to have the investigation into their daughter's death reopened. "Why are we doing this?" says Mrs. Silkwood, crying. "The only reason is because Karen would want us to."

In this personal mission, the Silkwoods have the support of the National Organization for Women, the country's largest women's rights organization, which which declared last Thursday — the first anniversary of Karen Silkwood's death — Silkwood Memorial Day.

Now made plans to deliver petitions to the Capitol Hill offices of members of the Senate Government Operations Committee — the one committee that has shown some interest in the case — demanding a public congressional investigation of the nuclear industry and, more specifically, the circumstances of Karen Silkwood's death.

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Karen Silkwood, who was 28,



KAREN SILKWOOD

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was killed last November 13 in an automobile crash. Silkwood, a laboratory technician in an Oklahoma plutonium factory, died en route to a meeting with a New York Times reporter and an official of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. The session had been arranged to discuss safety conditions in the plant—the Cimarron facility of the Kerr-McGee Corp. near Crescent, Okla.—and her allegation that the plant had manufactured some faulty fuel rods and that inspection documents required for these rods had been falsified.

The Oklahoma Highway Patrol said she had fallen asleep at the wheel and pronounced her death an accident.

Her parents and the union do not agree and an the investigation re-opened.

"Karen was not a person who got drowsy at the wheel," Bill Silkwood said. "She liked to drive at night. She was an expert driver."

He paused to light a cigarette, the first of many.

"The whole thing has been a coverup," he said. "It's been a coverup from the moment she was killed."

He was not speaking solely

when her car left the roadway on the east side (crossing left, over the northbound lane), traveled approximately 270 feet, and collided with a concrete culvert wing wall. She died of massive injuries.

"Here's a deal where everybody's assuming this girl just fell asleep, and I believe there's enough evidence to indicate she didn't," Pipkin told The Los Angeles Times in a telephone conversation. "I believe that there's enough circumstantial evidence to indicate there may have been another car involved."

The one fact that lends credence to the report of the state highway patrol was that an autopsy performed on Karen Silkwood showed methaqualone, a tranquilizer, in her bloodstream, stomach and liver. This may or may not have caused sleep, but could very well have impaired her reactions.

The FBI conducted a preliminary investigation, and declared the case closed. "In our view, there was a lack of any evidence to indicate her death was anything but an accident," said a spokesperson for the FBI.

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THE EVENTS leading up to Silkwood's death contain some bizarre aspects.

Silkwood had been an active union member and, prior to her death, had been gathering documentation to support her allegations of safety violations and falsification of records within the Kerr-McGee Plant. The plant was one of two commercial plutonium factories in the country, Kerr-McGee was manufacturing plutonium fuel rods to be used in an experimental liquid metal, fast breeder reactor being constructed near Richland, Wash. Plutonium, a carcinogen, is one of the most lethal substances known. It retains its radioactivity for 250,000 years.

"When I told one of Karen's old high school teachers that she was working at Kerr-McGee, he got very upset," her mother said. "He said—'Merle, get her out of there. I wouldn't let her in there for a million dollars.' I said, 'It's ok, she wears coveralls and steel-toed shoes and special gloves. He said, 'No nuclear plant is safe. Get her out.' But she wouldn't leave. She had promised the union she would finish what she had started."

As it turned out, the protection was not enough. In circum-

stances never fully explained, Karen Silkwood became contaminated with plutonium on several occasions about a week before her death. So did her apartment. Some have suggested that people unhappy with her union activities were trying to frighten her. Others have speculated that she poisoned herself in an effort to discredit the company. A report from the Atomic Energy Commission says the personal contamination did not result from an accident or incident within the plant, but does not specifically say how it did occur.

"Why would she poison herself?" said her father. "She was very distraught about the contamination. And if she did, how did she get the plutonium out? That wouldn't say much for plant security, would it? I'm sure someone was just trying to scare her off. If they had wanted to kill her with plutonium, they could have done it."

He said that Karen and her roommate frequently left their apartment unlocked and that someone could easily have contaminated the apartment while they were gone. In any event, her parents said she was under considerable stress during the week the contamination was discovered. "She called me up and said she thought she was dying," Merle Silkwood said. "She was very upset."

Still, she continued to collect information. The Silkwoods and the union maintain that on the night of her death she carried with her a brown envelope containing documentation of her charges against the company. It was not among her personal effects when they were returned to a representative of her family. It has never been found.

Anthony Mazzocchi, Washington representative of the union, said the union has a sworn deposition from one of the last persons to see Silkwood alive stating that she did have the materials with her when she left for her meeting with New York Times reporter David Burnham and union official Steven Wodka.

from grief, or family loyalty, or misdirected anger. He believes he has proof. He bases his charge on the results of a private investigation conducted three days after his daughter's death by A. O. Pipkin Jr., of the Accident Reconstruction Lab of Dallas, who was hired by the union.

Pipkin, a former policeman who has investigated more than 2000 accidents and testified in more than 300 court trials, said he felt there was enough evidence to indicate that Silkwood's car was struck from behind by another vehicle.

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THESE ARE the main facts: At approximately 7:30 p.m. that evening on Oklahoma State Highway 74, just south of Crescent, Silkwood was driving a 1973 Honda south on the highway

"We cannot release that person's name," Mazzocchi said. "This person, however, has told us that she was tapping the table with the folder and she said, 'I have everything I need in here.'"

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AFTER SILKWOOD'S death, the AEC investigated the health hazard charges against Kerr-McGee made by the union. Of 39 items examined, 20 of them were substantiated or partially substantiated. They also supported union charges that some X-ray negatives of fuel rods had been falsified.

"But the violations weren't as terrible as all the headlines made out to be," said William Anders, chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. (The NRC, along with the Energy Research and Development Administration, replaced the AEC last year.)

Mazzocchi, however, last January, after the AEC findings were issued, said he was not happy with them, because of past recorded instances of accidental plutonium exposure for 73 individuals in 17 separate incidents. "In light of the great potential for cancer caused by plutonium and the relatively short period of time that the plant has been in existence, this record of overexposure is horrendous," he said in a published account.

In another incident, uranium pellets and fragments were discovered on the grounds outside the Kerr-McGee plant. The NRC, in a memorandum, said they may have been planted there by somebody to embarrass the company. (The FBI is still investigating the diversion of radioactive materials, in addition to union charges of harrassment of several employees who supported Silkwood.)

On April 11, ERDA issued a summary statement concluding that the fuel rods manufactured by Kerr-McGee met the established quality control requirements, according to an overall report compiled by the U. S. comptroller general's office.

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KITTY TUCKER, of the National Organization for Women, said that NOW's entrance into the Silkwood case was part of its commitment to help all of its sisters who confront the establishment.

"Some may have doubts that this is a feminist issue," Tucker said. "However, just like a woman cannot get elected to Congress on a platform on only women's issues — but must think and act in the interests of women, men and children — no woman can attain a leadership position in her union without addressing the needs of all union workers. We must support our sisters when they act in our interest by acting in the interest of the entire society."

The Silkwoods say it is possible that the crash may have begun as another "scare tactic" that just got out of hand. They don't know. All they know is that their daughter is dead.