

Karen Silkwood

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Karen Silkwood (February 19, 1946 – November 13, 1974) was an American labor union activist and chemical technician at the Kerr-McGee plant near Crescent, Oklahoma, United States.

Silkwood's job was making plutonium pellets for nuclear reactor fuel rods, and she died under mysterious circumstances after investigating claims of irregularities and wrongdoing at the Kerr-McGee plant.



Union activities

After being hired at Kerr-McGee, Silkwood joined the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers Union local and took part in a strike at the plant. After the strike ended, she was elected to the union's bargaining committee and assigned to investigate health and safety issues. She discovered what she believed to be numerous violations of health regulations, including exposure of workers to contamination, faulty respiratory equipment and improper storage of samples. She also believed the lack of sufficient shower facilities could increase the risk of employee contamination.

In the summer of 1974, Silkwood testified to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) about these issues, alleging that safety standards had slipped because of a production speedup which resulted in employees being given tasks for which they were poorly trained. She also alleged that Kerr-McGee employees handled the fuel rods improperly and that the company falsified inspection records.

On November 5, 1974, Silkwood performed a routine self-check and found almost 40 times the legal limit for plutonium contamination. She was decontaminated at the plant and sent home with a testing kit to collect urine and feces for further analysis. Oddly, though there was plutonium on the exterior surfaces (the ones she touched) of the gloves she had been using, the gloves did not have any holes. This suggests the contamination did not come from inside the glovebox, but from some other source.

The next morning, as she headed to a union negotiation meeting, she again tested positive for plutonium. This was surprising because she had only performed paperwork duties that morning. She was given a more aggressive decontamination.

The following day, [November 7, 1974](#), as she entered the plant, she was found to be dangerously contaminated - even expelling contaminated air from her lungs. A [health physics](#) team accompanied her back to her home and found plutonium traces on several surfaces — especially in the bathroom and the refrigerator. The house was later stripped and decontaminated. Silkwood, her partner and housemate were sent to [Los Alamos National Laboratory](#) for in-depth testing to determine the extent of the contamination in their bodies.

Debate has centered over how Silkwood became contaminated over this 3-day period. Silkwood herself asserted that she was the victim of a malicious campaign, and that the testing jars she had been given were laced with plutonium. The contamination in the bathroom would have occurred when she spilled her urine sample on the morning of November 7. It would also concur with the fact that samples she took at home had *extremely* high levels of contamination, whilst samples taken in 'fresh' jars at the plant and Los Alamos showed much lower contamination[1].

Kerr-McGee's management asserted that she had contaminated herself in order to paint the company in a negative light. According to Richard Raske's book *The Killing of Karen Silkwood*, security at the plant was so extremely lax that workers could easily smuggle out finished plutonium pellets. Indeed, on one occasion a worker gave his son a pellet to take to a [show and tell](#) session at school. Silkwood had previously been noted for inquiring as to the health effects of eating a pellet (an understandably unusual request). Furthermore, upon decontaminating her home, Kerr-McGee employees found several pieces of lab equipment, such as beakers and test tubes.

Nonetheless, Richard Raske's book also asserts that the precise type of plutonium found in her body (soluble) came from a production area to which Silkwood had not had access for 4 months. The pellets had since been stored in the vault of the facility.

Going public

Silkwood said she had assembled a stack of documentation for her claims. She now decided to go public with this evidence, and made contact with a [New York Times](#) journalist prepared to print the story. On [November 13, 1974](#) she left a union meeting at the Hub Cafe in Crescent. Another attendee of that meeting later testified that she did have a binder and a packet of documents at the cafe.[2] Silkwood got into her car and headed alone for [Oklahoma City](#), about 30 miles away, to meet with *New York Times* reporter [David Burnham](#) and Steve Wodka, an official of her union's national office. She never arrived.

Silkwood's death

Later that evening, Silkwood's body was found in her car, which had run off the road and struck a [culvert](#). The car contained no documents. She was pronounced dead at the scene from a "classic, one-car sleeping-driver accident". The trooper at the scene remembers that he found one or two tablets of the [sedative methaqualone](#) in the car, and he remembers finding [marijuana](#). The police report indicated that she fell asleep at the wheel. The coroner found 0.35 milligrams of methaqualone ([Quaalude](#)) per 100 milliliters of blood at the time of her death - an amount almost twice the recommended dosage for inducing drowsiness.^[3] There was no firm evidence of foul play, and no glass or other debris was found, ruling out the [hit-and-run](#) theory.

Nevertheless, some still suspect Silkwood was murdered to silence her allegations about her workplace. Such speculation about foul play has never been substantiated. But some independent investigators at the time inferred that her vehicle had been hit from behind and forced off the road. The steering wheel was bent in a manner that showed she was prepared for the shock of the accident. The only way she would know to prepare is if she were awake and alert.^{[[citation needed](#)]}

Silkwood's organs were analyzed as part of the Los Alamos Tissue Analysis Program by request of the Atomic Energy Commission and the State Medical Examiner. Much of the radiation was in her lungs. This suggests the plutonium was inhaled. When her tissues were further examined, the second highest deposits were found in her gastrointestinal organs.

Public suspicions led to a federal investigation into plant security and safety, and a [National Public Radio](#) report about 44 to 66 pounds of misplaced plutonium. Silkwood's story emphasized the hazards of [nuclear energy](#) and raised questions about corporate accountability and responsibility. Kerr-McGee closed its nuclear fuel plants in 1975. The grounds of the Cimarron plant were still being decontaminated 25 years later.

Estate of Karen Silkwood vs. Kerr-McGee

Her father and children filed a lawsuit against Kerr-McGee on the behalf of Ms. Silkwood's estate. The trial was held in 1979. [Gerry Spence](#) was the chief attorney for the estate and William Paul was the chief attorney for Kerr-McGee. The estate presented evidence that the autopsy proved Ms. Silkwood was contaminated with plutonium. To prove the contamination was sustained at the plant, evidence was given by a series of witnesses who were former employees of the facility.

The main witness for the defense was Dr. George Voelz, a top-level scientist at Los Alamos. Dr. Voelz stated that he believed the contamination was within legal standards. Mr. Spence

ultimately probed enough to get Dr. Voelz to admit he was unsure of the level of contamination needed to cause cancer. The defense later proposed that Ms. Silkwood was a troublemaker who may have poisoned herself. Following the summation arguments, Judge Frank Theis told the jury of the longest civil trial in [Oklahoma](#) history, "If you find that the damage to the person or property of Karen Silkwood resulted from the operation of this plant, Kerr-McGee is liable."

The jury rendered its verdict of US \$505,000 in damages and US \$10,000,000 in [punitive damages](#). On [appeal](#), the judgment was reduced to US \$5,000. In 1984, the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) restored the original verdict. See *Silkwood v. Kerr-McGee Corp.*, 464 U.S. 283 (1984).[4] The suit was headed for retrial when Kerr-McGee settled out of court for \$1.38 million, admitting no liability.

Trivia

[Gil Scott-Heron's 1977](#) song "[We Almost Lost Detroit](#)" makes mention of Silkwood: *What would Karen Silkwood say / If she was still alive? / That when it comes to people's safety / Money wins out every time.*

The [1983 film *Silkwood*](#) is an account of Silkwood's life and the story. [Meryl Streep](#) played the title role.

In 1984, [Wendy O. Williams](#) (of the [Plasmatics](#)), recorded a song named "*Opus in Cm7*" for her solo album "WOW" which had the following lyrics: "*Where did you go Karen Silkwood?*" What was the price on your head?/ Why do our heroes all vanish? Why are our heroes all dead?/ In the dark of night I hear the vultures scream. And I just can't seem to wake up from the dream./ How many armies must yet perish? How many young people die?/ Why are we breathing dioxin while it rains acid rain from the sky?" The song is an obvious tribute to the late Karen Silkwood.

In 1986, over 300 women claiming to be Karen Silkwood were arrested and released without charge after entering [Pine Gap](#).

In the 1995 film *Home for the Holidays*, Robert Downey Jr. referenced Silkwood when telling Anne Bancroft to clean up. "Do a Silkwood shower for us...".

In the 2007 series finale of *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, Danny referenced Silkwood when asking about sterilization so that he could speak with Jordan and have her sign guardianship papers for her daughter.

In an episode of *Seinfeld*, [The Shower Head](#), [Kramer](#) and [Newman](#) attempt to buy a powerful shower head and ask for one like Silkwood.

External links

Karen Silkwood Remembered

[The Karen Silkwood Story \(PBS account based on the Los Alamos report\)](#)

[The Karen Silkwood Story: What We Know at Los Alamos](#)

(first published in Los Alamos Science, Volume XXIII, 23 Nov 1995)

[The Karen Silkwood Story: An Unexpected Twist At The End...](#)

[Was Karen Silkwood Murdered?](#)

[Karen Silkwood -- Campaigner \(two similar BBC sources\) \[5\] and \[6\]](#)

Karen Silkwood



Karen worked at the [Kerr-McGee Plutonium Plant](#), in Cimarron, Oklahoma. While at work, she was exposed to plutonium, and basically became saturated with the shit. A little upset with this revelation, she decided to blow the whistle on her employers. She had told a reporter from the New York Times that her Kerr-McGee was poisoning its workers and acting irresponsibly in the manufacture of radioactive plutonium rods. She said she had proof, and was on her way. She never made it.

On November 13, 1974, the snitch left the Hub Café in nearby Crescent, Oklahoma sometime between 7:15 and 7:30pm. Silkwood was driving a 1973 white Honda Civic and travelling south on [the narrow Route 74](#) towards Oklahoma City.

At 8:05, the Oklahoma State Highway Patrol was notified of a single car accident 7 miles south of Crescent, [in a ditch](#). The Trooper who investigated the accident reported that Silkwood's death was a result of a classic, one-car sleeping-driver accident. BUT! They also found suspicious dents in the back of her car, leading some to speculate whether she'd been run off the road or not, though it was never proven.

Blood tests performed on her body showed that she had 0.35 milligrams of methaqualone (Quaalude) per 100 milliliters of blood at the time of her death. That

amount is almost twice the recommended dosage for inducing drowsiness. About 50 milligrams of undissolved methaqualone remained in her stomach. Oh yeah, and radiation.

After a bazillion autopsy tests, her body was released and she was buried in Danville Cemetery, Kilgore, Texas. With a tight lid, no doubt. She was 28. **[Click the image to view Karen's grave.](#)**

Her estate filed a civil suit against Kerr-McGee for alleged inadequate health and safety program that led to Silkwood's exposure. In 1979, the first trial ended with the jury awarding the estate \$10.5million for personal injury and punitive damages. The Federal Court of Appeals reversed this, and they were awarded only \$5000 for personal property she lost during the cleanup of her apartment. And they even used Bon-Ami. In 1986, twelve years after her death, the suit was headed for retrial when it was finally settled out of court for \$1.3 million. \$810,000 went to legal expenses.

The Kerr-McGee nuclear fuel plant closed in 1975, but the company continues to thrive in Oklahoma.

I apologize for the bad pictures. I was in Oklahoma a few years back, and took what I could. If I knew then... I'd have more *good* photos. - Scott