

**KAREN  
GAY  
SILKWOOD**  
**1946-1974**



**TRAGIC  
NUCLEAR  
WHISTLE  
BLOWER**

A bright young woman, born in February 1946 in Longview, Texas, has dreams of becoming a scientist. At 18, she runs off to get married and has three children. When she discovers his affair, she gives custody of her children to him for a brighter future in Oklahoma. Her name was Karen Gay Silkwood.

In 1972, Silkwood became a metallography technician at the Kerr-McGee Cimarron plutonium plant near Crescent. She quickly became an activist in the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, walked a picket line in a losing strike, and became increasingly convinced the plant was unsafe. With the encouragement of her union, Silkwood began compiling a dossier of the plant's problems: workers' exposure to contamination, faulty respiratory equipment, and improper storage of samples. She also believed the lack of sufficient shower facilities increased the risk of contamination.

In 1974, Silkwood testified to the Atomic Energy Commission that she found evidence of spills, faulty fuel rods, and missing plutonium. She also alleged Kerr-McGee had falsified inspection records. Soon Silkwood was deemed a troublemaker. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, performing a routine self-check, she found plutonium contamination in her lungs. She believed she was deliberately exposed due to her whistleblowing efforts. While radiation levels at her apartment were high – including a bologna sandwich in her refrigerator – no radiation was detected in her car or her work locker.

On November 14<sup>th</sup>, with evidence documenting the plant's wrongdoing, Silkwood headed to Oklahoma City to meet a New York Times reporter and the union's health and safety expert. Later that evening, her wrecked car was found near Crescent, having supposedly hit a concrete culvert wall after swerving off the road. The documents she had with her were never found. Karen Silkwood was dead at 28.

Dents and paint scrapes on her rear bumper showed she was probably forced off the road. The front-end collision did not explain the rear-end damage to her vehicle. When her autopsy revealed traces of alcohol and prescription sedatives in her blood, police concluded she fell asleep at the wheel, and ruled her death an accident. The plant closed in 1975.

In 1979, her family sued for negligence. The family's lawyers were harassed, intimidated, and physically assaulted, but the jury awarded them \$10.5 million in punitive damages. The United States Supreme Court reversed the case, and it was headed for retrial when Kerr-McGee settled out of court for \$1.38 million, while admitting no wrongdoing.

In November 2014, OSBI agent Thomas Bunting was scheduled to be interviewed about Silkwood's surveillance, but inexplicitly dropped dead of a heart attack at his brother's home several days before. His wife refused an autopsy – and was later found dead in her running car in the garage. Her death was ruled a suicide.

Since 1974, Karen Silkwood's story has achieved worldwide fame – either as a martyr among nuclear safety activists, or a lunatic who exposed herself to plutonium. Did she drive off the road? Where are the papers she was carrying? We may never know.