

ENVIRONMENT

The Silkwood Mystery

At 7:30 in the evening of Nov. 13, a white Honda automobile swerved off Oklahoma state highway 74 and crashed into a concrete culvert wall, killing Karen G. Silkwood, 28, its sole occupant. Silkwood's death had a far greater impact than most highway fatalities. It brought to light a bizarre mystery that has touched off a series of investigations. It also resulted last week in a special Atomic Energy Commission report about Silkwood and her contamination by one of the most dangerous substances known to man—plutonium.

Karen Silkwood was a \$4-an-hour

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PLUTONIUM WORKER KAREN SILKWOOD
Was she murdered?

technician at Kerr-McGee Corp.'s Cimarron River plutonium plant about 30 miles north of Oklahoma City. The facility makes plutonium pellet fuel rods for the breeder reactor, a second-generation nuclear power plant now being developed. Silkwood was one of the most active members of local 5-283 of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. She was deeply concerned about how plutonium was handled. And with good reason. Inhalation or swallowing of a few specks of the radioactive element can result in cancer. Exposure to slightly greater quantities can cause radiation sickness and death. Furthermore, an amount of plutonium about the size of a softball is enough to make an atom bomb.

Though Kerr-McGee installed safeguards to protect its employees from the hazards of plutonium, Silkwood was critical of the plant's health and safety procedures. Last September, in testimony before the AEC, she complained about unsafe working conditions. In early No-

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vember, she became living proof of those dangers. On two consecutive days, as Silkwood was leaving work, sensitive plant monitors detected that she was slightly contaminated by radioactivity. She was promptly scrubbed clean. Later, she brought in urine and fecal samples; they proved to be radioactive. On a third day, the monitors clicked when she entered the plant; a subsequent investigation showed that her apartment had become contaminated too.

All the while, Silkwood continued to report to the union on safety problems in the plant, claiming definite instances of company sloppiness. At the time of her death, in fact, she was on her way to a meeting with a union official and a New York Times reporter to document her charges.

Murder or Accident. Union officials were suspicious about her fatal car crash; they called in an independent accident investigator, A.O. Pipkin of Dallas. After inspecting the skid marks and finding a telltale dent in one of the Honda's rear fenders, he concluded that a second car had forced Silkwood's auto off the road—thus implying that Silkwood might have been murdered. But the Oklahoma state highway patrol cited an autopsy showing that her blood contained traces of alcohol and methaqualone, which a doctor had prescribed as a sedative. To the police, it seemed evident that she had dozed off at the wheel. The FBI is pursuing the matter further.

Meantime, the AEC launched its own probe of working conditions at the plant. The commission's records showed that since Kerr-McGee started its plutonium operations in 1970, 17 safety lapses—in which 73 employees were contaminated—had been reported. The union produced a list of 39 additional allegations of sloppiness in plutonium handling. Then in mid-December, two new cases involving five persons were reported to the AEC; Kerr-McGee quickly denounced them as "contrived." Yet the incidents were serious enough to force the company to shut the plant for more than two weeks.

Last week the AEC completed its investigation. It found that only three of the 39 union allegations represented violations of the commission's standards, though another 17 had "substance or partial substance." The report pleased Kerr-McGee, but the union was "not satisfied." Environmental groups also pointed out that the AEC needed the fuel rods and thus had a clear interest in keeping Kerr-McGee's plant in operation.

The most startling finding by the AEC was that Silkwood's contamination "probably did not result from an accident or incident within the plant." There were plutonium traces on her skin though no accidental release had occurred in the plant. In addition, tests showed that Silkwood had "ingested" plutonium. Furthermore, two urine samples were proved to have been con-

taminated after they had been excreted; this showed that the samples had been doctored by someone. The evidence thus suggests that Silkwood had purposely contaminated herself and had probably smuggled a minute amount of plutonium home from the plant. Why? Perhaps to embarrass the company and thus strengthen the union's bargaining position at negotiations late last November. Or perhaps Silkwood was emotionally unbalanced.

It seems clear that Kerr-McGee has not been as diligent as necessary in protecting its workers from plutonium. The union has nonetheless been overzealous in its allegations of carelessness by the company. And both the AEC and its private contractors need to exercise increased vigilance in guarding the plutonium against theft or misuse by unstable or conspiratorial employees. As for the cause of Silkwood's death, that remains as mysterious as ever.