

= Stella Nickell =

Stella Nickell (born August 7 , 1943) is an American woman who was sentenced to 90 years in prison for product tampering after she poisoned Excedrin capsules with lethal cyanide , resulting in the deaths of her husband , Bruce , and Susan Snow . Her May 1988 conviction and prison sentence were the first under federal product tampering laws instituted after the Chicago Tylenol murders .

= = Early life = =

Stella Nickell was born Stella Maudine Stephenson in Colton , Oregon , to Alva Georgia " Jo " (née Duncan ; later changed her name to Cora Lee) and George Stephenson , and grew up poor . By age sixteen , she was pregnant with her daughter Cynthia . Nickell then moved to Southern California , married , and had another daughter . She began to have various legal troubles , including a conviction for fraud in 1968 , a charge the following year of beating Cynthia with a curtain rod , and a conviction for forgery in 1971 . She served six months in jail for the fraud charge , and was ordered into counseling after the abuse charge .

Stella met Bruce Nickell in 1974 . Nickell was a heavy equipment operator with a drinking habit , which suited Stella 's lifestyle , and the two were married in 1976 . In the course of their ten @-@ year marriage , Bruce Nickell entered rehab and gave up drinking . Reportedly , Stella resented this . Her bar visits were curtailed by Bruce 's sobriety , and Stella cultivated a home aquarium as a new hobby .

= = Deaths = =

On June 5 , 1986 , the couple was living in Auburn , Washington when Bruce Nickell , 52 , came home from work with a headache . According to Stella , Nickell took four Extra @-@ Strength Excedrin capsules from a bottle in their home for his headache and collapsed minutes later . Nickell died shortly thereafter at Harborview Medical Center , where treatment had failed to revive him . His death was initially ruled to be by natural causes , with attending physicians citing emphysema .

A second death , less than a week later , forced authorities to reconsider the cause of Nickell 's death . On June 11 , Susan Snow , a 40 @-@ year @-@ old Auburn bank manager , took two Extra @-@ Strength Excedrin capsules for an early @-@ morning headache . Snow 's husband , Paul Webking , took two capsules from the same bottle for his arthritis and left the house for work . At 6 : 30 am , the Snows ' fifteen @-@ year @-@ old daughter found Susan Snow collapsed on the floor of her bathroom , unresponsive and with a faint pulse . Paramedics were called and transported Snow to Harborview Medical Center , but she died later the same day without regaining consciousness .

= = Investigation = =

= = = Initial investigation = = =

During an autopsy on Susan Snow , Assistant Medical Examiner Janet Miller detected the scent of bitter almonds , an odor distinctive to cyanide . Tests verified that Snow had died of acute cyanide poisoning . Investigators examined the contents of the Snow @-@ Webking household and discovered the source of the cyanide : the bottle of Extra @-@ Strength Excedrin capsules that both Snow and Webking had used the morning of Snow 's death . Three capsules out of those that remained in the 60 @-@ capsule bottle were found to be laced with cyanide in toxic quantities .

A murder by cyanide was sensational news in Washington . When another tainted bottle from the same lot was found in a grocery store in nearby Kent , Washington , the manufacturers of Excedrin , Bristol @-@ Myers , responded to the discovery with a heavily @-@ publicized recall of all Extra

@-@ Strength Excedrin products in the Seattle , Washington area , and a group of drug companies came together to offer a \$ 300 @,@ 000 reward for the capture of the person responsible .

In response to the publicity , Stella Nickell came forward on June 19 . She told police that her husband had recently died suddenly , after taking pills from a 40 @-@ capsule bottle of Extra @-@ Strength Excedrin with the same lot number as the one that had killed Susan Snow . Tests by the FDA confirmed the presence of cyanide in Bruce Nickell 's remains and in two Excedrin bottles Stella Nickell had turned over to police .

Initial suspicions were directed at the manufacturers of the Excedrin capsules . Both Paul Webking and Stella Nickell filed wrongful death lawsuits against Bristol @-@ Myers , and the FDA inspected the Morrisville , North Carolina plant where Extra @-@ Strength Excedrin lot 5H102 had been packaged , but found no traces of cyanide to explain its presence in the Washington bottles . On June 18 , Bristol @-@ Myers recalled all Excedrin capsules in the United States , pulling them from store shelves and warning consumers to not use any they may already have bought ; two days later the company announced a recall of all of their non @-@ prescription capsule products . On June 24 , a cyanide @-@ contaminated bottle of Extra @-@ Strength Anacin @-@ 3 was found at the same store where Susan Snow had bought her contaminated Excedrin . On June 27 , Washington State put into an effect a 90 @-@ day ban on the sale of non @-@ prescription medication in capsules .

Examination of the contaminated bottles by the FBI Crime Lab found that , in addition to containing cyanide powder , the poisoned capsules also contained flecks of an unknown green substance . Further tests showed that the substance was an algacide used in home aquariums , sold under the brand name Algae Destroyer .

= = = Focusing the investigation = = =

With contamination of the Excedrin at the source having been ruled out , investigators began to focus their investigation on the end @-@ users of the product . The FBI began an investigation into possible product tampering having been the source of the poison . At the time , Excedrin was packaged in plastic bottles with the mouth of the bottle sealed with foil and the lid secured to the bottle with plastic wrap .

Both Paul Webking and Stella Nickell were asked to take polygraph examinations . Webking did so , though he complained in subsequent press about his treatment by the FBI . Nickell declined to take a polygraph exam through the lawyer representing her in the wrongful @-@ death suit she had filed , who told reporters that she was too " shaken up " to be subjected to the examination .

Investigators ' suspicions began to turn to Stella Nickell when they discovered that she claimed that the two contaminated Excedrin bottles that she had turned over to police had been purchased at different times and different locations . A total of five bottles had been found to be contaminated in the entire country , and it was regarded as suspicious that Nickell would happen to have acquired two of them purely by chance .

With investigatory focus turned to Stella Nickell , detectives uncovered more circumstantial evidence pointing to her as the culprit . Nickell had taken out a total of about \$ 76 @,@ 000 in insurance coverage on her husband 's life , with an additional payout of \$ 100 @,@ 000 if his death was accidental . She was also known to have , even before Susan Snow 's death , repeatedly disputed doctors ' ruling that her husband had died of natural causes . Further FBI investigation showed that Bruce Nickell 's purported signatures on at least two of the insurance policies in his name had been forged .

Investigators were also able to verify that Nickell had purchased Algae Destroyer from a local fish store ; it was speculated that the algacide had become mixed with the cyanide when Nickell used the same container to crush both substances without washing it in between uses .

Nickell finally consented to a polygraph examination in November 1986 . She failed it and investigators narrowed their focus to her even further ; however , concrete evidence proving that Nickell had ever purchased or used cyanide was lacking , and despite their relative certainty that Stella Nickell had orchestrated the poisonings as either an elaborate cover @-@ up for an insurance @-@ motivated murder of her husband , or as a desperate attempt to force her husband 's death to

be ruled an accident , to increase her insurance payout , they were unable to build a strong enough case to support an arrest .

= = = Breaking the case = = =

In January 1987 , Stella Nickell 's adult daughter , Cynthia Hamilton , approached police with information : Nickell had spoken to her daughter repeatedly about wanting her husband dead . He was a bore , Nickell said , who after having gotten sober , preferred to stay home and watch television rather than go out to bars . Nickell , Hamilton claimed , had even told her that she had tried to poison Bruce previously with foxglove . When that failed , she had begun library research into other methods and hit upon cyanide . Cynthia also claimed that Nickell had spoken to her about what the two of them could do with the insurance money if Bruce Nickell were dead .

Records from the Auburn Public Library , when subpoenaed , showed that Nickell had checked out numerous books about poisons , including Human Poisonings from Native and Cultivated Plants and Deadly Harvest . The former was marked as overdue in library records , indicating that Nickell had borrowed but never returned it . The FBI identified Nickell 's fingerprints on cyanide @-@ related pages of a number of the works she had checked out from the library in this period .

By the summer of 1987 , even Nickell 's attorneys acknowledged that she was the prime suspect in the case .

= = Arrest and trial = =

On December 9 , 1987 , Stella Nickell was indicted by a federal grand jury on five counts of product tampering , including two which resulted in the deaths of Susan Snow and Bruce Nickell , and arrested the same day . She went on trial in April , 1988 and was found guilty of all charges on May 9 , after five days of jury deliberation .

Despite Nickell 's legal team 's claims of jury @-@ tampering and judicial misconduct having occurred , a motion for a mistrial was denied and Nickell was sentenced to two ninety @-@ year terms for the charges relating to the deaths of Snow and Bruce Nickell , and three ten @-@ year terms for the other product tampering charges . All sentences were to run concurrently , and the judge ordered Nickell to pay a small fine and forfeit her remaining assets to the families of her victims .

Nickell will be eligible for parole in 2018 , when she will be 75 years old .

= = Appeals and subsequent petitions = =

Nickell continued to maintain her innocence after her trial . An appeal based on jury @-@ tampering and judicial misconduct issues was rejected by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in August 1989 . A second appeal , beginning in 2001 with the assistance of Innocence Project and private detectives Al Farr and Paul Ciolino , requested a new trial on the basis of new evidence having been discovered that the FBI may have withheld documents from the defense . The appeal was denied , though Nickell and her team continue to assert her innocence . She claims that her daughter Cynthia lied about Nickell 's involvement in the case in order to reap the \$ 300 @,@ 000 of reward money being offered . Cynthia Hamilton eventually collected \$ 250 @,@ 000 of that money . Nickell also alleges that the testimony of various smaller cogs in the case , such as the store owner who testified about her having purchased Algae Destroyer , was influenced by promises of payment .

= = FDA regulations = =

After the 1982 Tylenol murders , FDA regulations went into effect which made it a federal - rather than just a state or local - crime to tamper with consumer products . Local and state authorities are not , however , prevented from also filing charges in such cases . Under this law , Nickell 's crime

was prosecutable as a federal product tampering case as well as a state murder case , and she was convicted not of murder , but of product tampering that caused death . The possibility of state charges for the actual murders of Susan Snow and Bruce Nickell continues to exist .

= = In media = =

A 2000 made @-@ for @-@ TV film was to be made about the Stella Nickell case , but it was cancelled shortly before production began based on strong objections from advertisers , including Johnson & Johnson , owner of the Tylenol brand of painkillers , which had featured in the Chicago Tylenol murders , a prior product @-@ tampering case . The film was to have aired on USA Network , directed by Jeff Reiner and starring Katey Sagal .

Seattle author Gregg Olsen wrote about the Nickell case in his book , Bitter Almonds : The True Story of Mothers , Daughters and the Seattle Cyanide Murders . The case was also featured on episodes of HBO Autopsy , Forensic Files , The New Detectives , and Snapped , as well as two episodes of Deadly Women .

Nickell 's murders are discussed in the Jodi Picoult novel House Rules .