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## A Valentine's Day Murder in Oklahoma

- By ABC News

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Everyone says Susan Hamilton was the love of her husband's life.

John Hamilton, a prominent doctor in Oklahoma City, showered his wife with gifts, starting with a Porsche he gave her the day they married. The couple had exotic vacations and a beautiful house, and after 14 years of marriage, friends and family say they were inseparable, and very much in love.

"I think John was so astounded that he had her ... that he had such a wonderful, perfect — almost perfect — wife, in his opinion," said Shary Coffey, Susan's best friend.

Then came Valentine's Day 2001. John Hamilton, 53, ordered an expensive arrangement of red orchids for his wife, but he never got the chance to give them to her.

Instead, he says, he came home between surgeries that morning to pick up his datebook and was horrified to find his wife lying on the bathroom floor in a pool of blood. She had been strangled with two of his ties, and her head had been smashed so badly that parts of her brain were exposed.

Hamilton, an obstetrician-gynecologist, started performing CPR and called 911. When rescue workers arrived they found him hysterical and covered in his wife's blood. He told them he had been frantically trying to save her life.

The distraught doctor managed to give police an account of his movements that morning. He said he performed a surgery around 7 a.m., then came home to exchange Valentine's cards with his wife. Around 8:50 a.m., he said, he was beeped because he was late for another procedure. After the second surgery, he returned home to pick up his datebook, and found his wife, he said. The doctor was then ushered away, as police wondered who might have committed such a brutal attack.

Card Arouses Suspicion

An important clue came in the card Susan had written to her husband, which had a handwritten note reading: "I bought my cards two weeks ago, so I guess maybe they don't seem as appropriate now. But I do love you. Have a good day. Susan."

The note made police question whether the Hamiltons' marriage was as happy as it had seemed, and they began to regard Hamilton as a suspect. There was no sign of forced entry in the house and nothing was missing, making it unlikely Susan Hamilton, who was 55, was killed by a burglar.

The Hamiltons did have enemies. In addition to delivering babies, John Hamilton performed abortions at his clinic, and Susan worked there too. Antiabortion protesters had picketed the clinic and, friends said, even their home.

The doctor had been targeted by a militant antiabortion group, the Army of God, whose members have expressed support for the 1998 sniper killing of an abortion provider in New York State. The group had faxed Hamilton a "wanted" poster the same week as the murder, and the doctor told Primetime he and his wife had both received threatening phone calls the week she was killed.

"I always took threats like that seriously," he said. "You have to with what has happened in this country."

#### Friends Say Wife Was Considering Divorce

But suspicion began to point closer to home. Neighbors told police that in the weeks before the killing the Hamiltons had been having marital problems. Investigators uncovered evidence that Susan had found records of dozens of calls from her husband's cellphone to a topless dancer, and prosecutors say Susan told friends she was thinking about asking John for a divorce.

Believing that Susan Hamilton's threat of divorce was enough to make the doctor snap, prosecutors developed a theory that the couple had argued that morning after exchanging the cards and the doctor killed his wife.

"He was just obsessed with her," District Attorney Wes Lane later told Primetime. "When he saw that this incredible woman was looking like she was leaving him, he lost it."

Hamilton denies that he was having an affair or that his wife wanted a divorce. He told Primetime he made the calls to the stripper because she was "in real need of attention."

He said he "absolutely" did not kill his wife, and that he is not the type of person to fly off the handle. "I don't just snap," he said.

#### Prosecutors Allege Murder Between Surgeries

At trial, Lane told the jury that Dr. Hamilton started to clean up the scene, but was interrupted by the page from his clinic. Knowing that they were about to put his patient under anesthesia,

Hamilton returned to the clinic, performed the surgery, and then came back home to finish cleaning up, Lane said.

Lane backed up his theory with physical evidence. Susan Hamilton's blood and skin were found on the steering wheel of the doctor's car, and a prosecution expert testified that his left shoe was spattered in a way that could only have happened while his wife was alive.

Hamilton took the stand to testify in his own defense. He told the jury he loved his wife and tried to save her. He said the blood got on the steering wheel when he stopped doing CPR for a moment to move his car before the emergency vehicles arrived.

His defense team argued that there was no direct evidence that Hamilton was the murderer, noting that no murder weapon was ever found. They said the police had focused on Hamilton too quickly, and not paid enough attention to the threats from antiabortion activists.

### A Surprise From a Defense Expert

The defense also hired a respected crime scene investigator, Tom Bevel, as an expert witness. Bevel, an expert on blood spatter pattern analysis, testified that the blood found on the doctor was consistent with his account of trying to save his wife.

However, before the trial Bevel had also found some blood spatters in Hamilton's right sleeve that the prosecution expert had overlooked. Bevel believed the blood pattern was consistent with what would have happened if Hamilton struck his wife. He did not think it could have come from giving CPR. He told Primetime the spatters were "almost a neon sign pointing towards the wearer of this shirt being associated with the beating."

At the trial Lane asked Bevel if there was anything the prosecution had missed that was pertinent. Bevel, under oath to tell the truth, told the court about the spatter in the sleeve and said it was consistent with Hamilton beating his wife over the head with a blunt instrument.

"You could have heard a pin drop," remembers Lane. "Moments like that in the courtroom just don't happen like that. They do on Perry Mason, but they don't in the real world."

"I think that in and of itself caused the conviction," said Clark Brewster, an attorney who is preparing Hamilton's appeal.

It took the jury less than two hours to convict Hamilton of first-degree murder, and he was later sentenced to life in prison.

Bevel said he had no choice but to tell the court what he knew, even if it hurt the client who had hired him. "Ultimately, you take an oath to tell the truth and that overrides any allegiance I may have to any client," he said.