

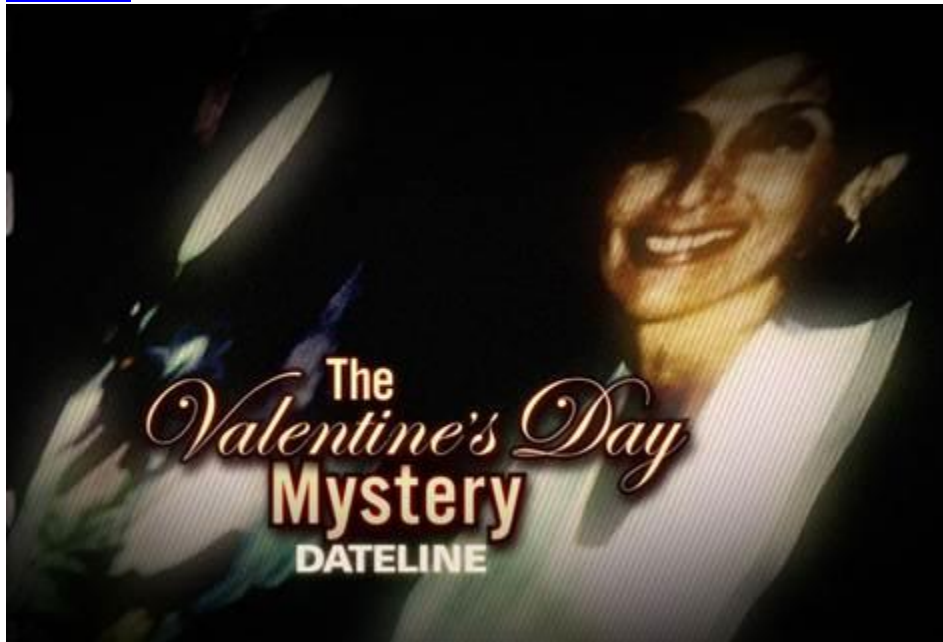


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The Valentine's Day Mystery

A prominent doctor's wife is murdered, and the top suspect shocks a town

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By [Dennis Murphy](#) Correspondent
Dateline NBC
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A dozen roses? Check. How about a candlelit dinner and a champagne toast to love? Isn't that what Valentine's Day is supposed to be about? We all know red is for the ribbon on the box of chocolate, not for the pool of blood in the master bath.

Maybe Chicago gangsters get killed on St. Valentine's day. But not pretty doctor's wives in Oklahoma City.

Wes Lane: It was huge. It had all of the appeal of a romance novel gone bad. It was the high society doctor, married to the beautiful wife, that were crazy about one another.

That high society doctor was Dr. John Hamilton -- an OB/GYN who in addition to his regular practice, ran an abortion clinic -- a role that in conservative Oklahoma, would bring him some unwelcome notoriety.

He and his wife, Susan, had met in 1985 at a friend's birthday party. Both had recently separated -- John from his first wife, and Susan from Dick Horton.

Dennis Murphy, Dateline NBC: Who was she? What was she like?

Dick Horton: I think the best way to describe her is a woman that always wanted to be a mother, was proud to be a mother. Even though she had a great education, her passion was to be a good mother.

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Susan, then 39, and John, 37, each had two children from their first marriages. Friends say that when they met each other, they made an instant connection.

Vesta Hall was a nurse in John's clinic.

Vesta Hall: She was beautiful, vivacious, intelligent, just a really neat lady. I told some people at the clinic, "I wish I had someone that would look at me the way John looks at Susan." I just felt like they were very happy.

Two years after their first date, they married at a local country club. Dr. Steve Jimerson -- a colleague of John's -- was best man.

Steve Jimerson: Oh, they were la-la. I mean, he fawned over her a lot.

The doctor and his wife built an envious lifestyle for themselves. A big comfortable house in a top-notch neighborhood, lavish dinner parties, spur of the moment vacations.

And the seemingly inseparable couple became even more so after they married. Susan managed John's abortion clinic, working there two days a week. And, as you might guess, it was a job that came with a little danger -- anti-abortion protestors were a curbside reality.

Dick Horton, sometimes worried for his ex's safety. But knew she wasn't one easily rattled or intimidated.

Dick Horton: I don't think there was any question she wore the pants. And if there was another pair, she'd go get those.

If anything, threats against the clinic, only seemed to bring the Hamiltons closer together.

Steve Jimerson: She was very strongly pro-choice, and-- and very outspoken about it, about the right of women. They were kind of a unit in that regards.

February 14th, 2001, would have been their fifteenth Valentine's Day together. But that Wednesday morning, John arrived home from the hospital, and found a horrific scene: Susan, lying beaten and strangled on their bathroom floor. Her head bludgeoned, surrounded by a pool of blood. Her face savaged: almost unrecognizable. Two neckties were knotted about her throat. John frantically called 911.

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911 call:

Operator: 911.

John Hamilton: Please, please, send police, please send an ambulance, please.

Operator: What's the problem?

John Hamilton: My wife's, my wife, my wife I think my wife is dead. Please, please.

Operator: Sir, sir.

John Hamilton: Please, please.

He told the operator he was trying CPR.

911 call:

John Hamilton: Listen, I'm a doctor, I've been trying CPR. Please send somebody quick.

EMSA: OK. Is she not breathing?

John Hamilton: No, she's not breathing, I don't get a pulse. Please, hurry.

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EMSA: OK, you're doing CPR?

John Hamilton: Yes, I'm trying. Yeah, I'm going to hang up so I can continue. Please.

EMSA: Alright. We'll be right there.

John Hamilton: OK.

By the time emergency workers arrived, it was clear that Susan Hamilton was dead. Possibilities: Was it a robbery gone bad? A random intruder? Or maybe more likely, an anti-abortion zealot targeting the doctor and his wife?

Over the next few hours, investigators would explore those theories and more, as they tried to understand just what had happened to Susan Hamilton that Valentine's Day morning.

On Valentine's Day morning, Susan Hamilton had been strangled and brutally beaten in her bathroom. Her naked body was discovered by her husband, John.

Teresa Sterling: It was violent. It was a violent scene.

Oklahoma City investigators Teresa Sterling and Randy Scott arrived at the Hamilton house at noon that day. They found a disturbing scene that didn't suit a moneyed neighborhood.

Randy Scott: The lady's layin' in the floor, covered in blood, blood all over the floor.

Right away, detectives started asking: Who could be responsible? Now, keep in mind, John Hamilton was a doctor who performed abortions. His wife, Susan, worked twice a week at the abortion clinic. Is it possible that here in conservative Oklahoma, she had been murdered by an anti-abortion zealot?

Just the week before Susan was murdered, this wanted poster had been left for Dr. Hamilton. It read, "A reward in heaven will be bestowed on anyone contributing to bringing this murderer to justice." And both John and Susan had received threatening phone calls that week.

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Steve Jimerson: I was afraid for his safety. There were things done that were dangerous. I mean, trying to set fire to his clinic. Vandalizing his home. Just putting out brochures all over his neighborhood and his kids' school that, you know, said, "Wanted: Dead or Alive."

What's more, only days before the murder, another anti-abortion group had applied for a permit to stage a protest in front of Hamiltons' house.

Teresa Sterling: I interviewed those people. Every avenue was checked. Other little issues about maybe was it a burglary. We checked every avenue of any burglary similar, remotely close in the neighborhood.

As is routine in domestic murders, the detectives would take a look at the spouse -- John Hamilton, himself. In this case, though, the spouse had an alibi, and a good one. He had been up at dawn for a 7 am surgery at an outpatient clinic. It was over by 8, and afterwards, John stopped by the hospital, where he had another procedure scheduled for later that morning. At around 8:30, he bumped into his former medical partner, Dr. Karen Reisig.

Karen Reisig: I had gone into the doctor's lounge to dictate the procedure. And he was in there. He was talking on the phone. Sounded like he was talking to Susan. Just, you know, just a very light-hearted conversation.

Afterwards, the doctor decided to swing back home.

Randy Scott: He has time to get back by the house 'cause their-- their house is very close to in between the two hospitals. So he runs by that house.

He was only at home for a few minutes, because at 9 am his pager went off, the hospital calling him to get back for a second surgery. By 9:30, he was scrubbing up for the operation -- a complicated removal of a tumor. The procedure came off without a hitch, and later none of the other doctors reported anything at all unusual in his behavior.

Steve Jimerson: They all said he was just as normal and jovial as he always was.

By 10:45, he was on his way home again, which is when he says he discovered Susan in a pool of blood. The timeline was extremely tight for the doctor to even be considered as a suspect. You'd have to believe that he committed the violent murder in that narrow window between his two surgeries. His former medical partner, for one, thinks that would be impossible.

Karen Reisig: I personally don't believe a physician could do-- a surgery, go commit a brutal crime of murder. And go back and do another surgery. And be, even be in his right mind.

Investigators though, weren't ruling anything out -- especially not after finding a Valentine's Day card, from her to him, opened that day.

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Randy Scott: It indicated that she still felt something for John, but it just things weren't the same as they were gonna be.

The card had been found inside John's Jaguar. What were they to make of Susan's handwritten message -- "Obviously, I bought this before last Monday." What was that all about? A neighbor was about to give the cops the dish.

Susan Johnston: She was upset and angry with John. And I think she just wanted to have somebody to talk to.

Susan's friend, Susan Johnston, the woman next door, had pulled one of the investigators aside and put a bug in his ear, that the week before Valentine's Day, Susan Hamilton had confided about problems in her marriage.

Susan Johnston: Susan had noticed that John was getting a lot of cell calls. I think she became particularly alarmed when he didn't answer it. And he finally told her that it -- it was a patient and that she was down on her luck and havin' hard times and he was just helping her out.

The patient, as Susan discovered, was a stripper at a nightclub. Susan demanded to see John's cell phone bill, and when she got a hold of it her worst fears seemed to be realized. Whoever this woman was, there were way too many calls to and from her.

Randy Scott: She gets the bill and upon looking at the bill she notices-- she starts marking and finds a huge number, and I'm talkin', close to 100 phone calls to this phone, back and forth to John. And she gets very suspicious of it and confronts John about it.

John had an explanation for his wife -- the patient had been having serious psychological problems, and had even threatened suicide. John, the good doctor, was simply trying to counsel her. And while he may have stepped over his boundaries professionally, he said he never had an affair with her. Susan's friend, for one, believed him, and encouraged Susan to do the same.

Susan Johnston: I said, "Susan, I don't think it's true. I do not think that John's havin' an affair. He's crazy about you. You have a good marriage. And I just don't think that it's true." At the end, I think she was calmer and she said, "I'm gonna think about it."

When Susan's ex-husband learned of her murder -- and the domestic melodrama about the cell phone log -- he thought he knew right away what had happened.

Dick: They had to find the stripper. The stripper did it.

Dennis Murphy: Because then you know the history of the phone calls.

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Dick: Right. And we're thinkin' that maybe he was having an affair. Maybe he ends up terminating that to save his marriage. And then she decides to eliminate her competition.

One thing everyone who knew the couple -- including the neighbor -- seemed to agree on -- was that whoever Susan's killer was, it certainly was not John Hamilton.

Susan Johnston: He just couldn't have done it. He was so kind, and you never heard him raise his voice or anything like that.

Investigators had plenty of theories to work with. But before that valentine's day was over, they would have a suspect in custody. A name that would shock everybody.

Investigators have a word for rage crimes: "overkill." And that's what had happened to Susan Hamilton on that Valentine's Day morning. Whoever killed her had cracked her skull open with an object never found, and bashed her face into the bathroom tile. Two men's ties were tightly knotted about her neck. The scene was a bloody mess. And while there were scenarios to seriously consider: a berserk robber, or maybe the legion of activists opposed to the couple's abortion practice, the crime scene wasn't telling them that. Not least of all in a bloody crime there were no footprints leading out of the house. Shouldn't the killer have left a trace?

Randy Scott: There's no burglary prints to obtain downstairs. There's no tracks that ran out through the creek bed and behind.

Soon after their arrival, investigators started questioning Dr. John Hamilton himself. By then there'd been that neighbor's tip about problems in the Hamilton marriage. And that wasn't all. The doctor's behavior in the minutes after finding Susan dead seemed "off."

Hamilton had told the 911 operator he was performing CPR. But when the first responder -- firefighter David Bradbury-- arrived on the scene, he thought there was something odd about the way the doctor was performing chest compressions.

David Bradbury: He had one hand on her chest, one hand on her abdomen, attempting to do compressions in this manner right here. The way that we are taught to do CPR, we interlock our hands. The palm goes on the center of the chest, on the sternum.

And, Bradbury says, he didn't see any signs that the doctor had even attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

David Bradbury: The way that this woman had been beaten, I mean, her face was swollen, her face was bloody. I didn't notice any blood on his mouth whatsoever.

After arriving at the crime scene, investigators placed John in the back of a police car. And it was there they noticed something else odd.

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Detective Teresa Sterling: He was acting very upset. He was scraping his knuckles on the screen, mesh screen in the police car. He was banging his head into the screen. He was acting bizarre.

By that afternoon, police had taken the doctor down to the station. They took his clothes as evidence, and placed him in an interview room. They kept him there for hours on end. Watching. Taping him on the surveillance camera.

Randy Scott: John Hamilton was just not the victim's spouse that we were seeing. He was -- more suspicion drawn each time that we'd watch something.

When left alone in the room, Hamilton seemed to be checking out his shoulder area. Had he hurt himself? If so, how? And when they found fresh scratches on his hands and arm, did that explain maybe the business about scraping his hands on the patrol car cage? Was he trying to cover up earlier injuries?

Randy Scott: That would cause a suspicion for us to wonder why he's wanting to scrape his hands up. That goes to another issue of we talk about possibly being staged or draw attention to me instead of emotionally upset over the loss of his wife.

Still, there was the doctor's seemingly solid alibi. After all, he'd had a busy morning -- performing not just one, but two surgeries with only a brief stop at home in between.

Randy Scott: I think the biggest part for us was trying to figure out how he could get there, spend any time there, and get back to commit the second surgery.

And as the detectives looked more closely into the doctor's timeline that morning, they saw a hole -- not a big one but maybe enough time to kill and get back. They'd learned that second surgery, originally scheduled for 9 am, hadn't actually gotten underway until 9:40. And why was it delayed? Because Dr. John Hamilton was late. The surgical team was about to get started when they realized the doctor was still at home.

Detective Teresa Sterling: He's supposed to be there. And they've got a lady under anesthesia without the doctor, and that is just unheard of.

To investigators, that delay opened up the doctor's window of opportunity by up to an hour. Late that Valentine's Day afternoon, they arrested John Hamilton for the murder of his wife.

He was jailed immediately and denied any bail. The case now landed in the hands of Wes Lane, the district attorney who would try Dr. John Hamilton for murder. The prosecutor was well aware of the hurdles he faced, not the least of which: the lack of motive. Lane looked for signs of spousal abuse in the past, but couldn't find anything substantive.

Dennis Murphy: Until that Valentine Day morning, there was no-- no anger issues, no histories of this guy hit-- hittin' the switch and flipping out, and-

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Wes Lane: Nothing. Let's put it this way, nothing that we could really present.

Everyone who knew the couple was saying the same thing -- it just didn't make sense for the mild-mannered doctor to have killed Susan.

Horton: Anybody that you ask, nobody that I know that knew John Hamilton would say that he had the capability of doing it.

Even Susan's children were standing by their stepfather.

Steve Jimerson: Susan's children, when it first happened, were calling me, trying to find if I had knew of any reason somebody or some person might have been there. And I don't think they-- believed it.

Over the next few months, though, with the help of some unique forensic evidence, the D.A. would put together a novel theory of just what happened between husband and wife, something maybe grimly fitting for Valentine's Day.

Wes Lane: She was talking leaving him. And so, the motive was love lost.

The state of Oklahoma would charge Dr. John Hamilton with just loving his wife to death.

In December 2001, ten months after the Valentine's Day killing of his wife, Susan, Dr. John Hamilton was being tried for her murder. A crowd lined up to attend the proceedings -- loyal patients, former employees, and fellow physicians -- all standing behind the doctor.

Vesta Hall: I have never, ever, one second, not one moment in time have I ever thought he was guilty. Ever.

Wes Lane, the prosecutor, was surprised to find he had an unpopular case on his hands.

Dennis Murphy: There were people that thought this guy was being sandbagged, railroaded. A very nice, innocent guy was facing a nightmare.

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Wes Lane: Yeah, I mean, I talked to everybody from the restaurant waitress that would wait on them on Saturday mornings, and she was agasp that we could have charged John Hamilton, because she would see them at breakfast together all lovey dovey, and so, yes, there was just a vast amount of opposition and grand skepticism.

What he hoped to show the skeptics through trial was that yes, the doctor was indeed a man who loved his wife -- loved her maybe too much.

Wes Lane: John Hamilton is a control guy. He wants everything in control in order.

To the prosecutor, the Valentine's Day card John had received that morning lit the fuse for the violence that followed. In that card, Susan had written a message alluding to the couple's flare-up just days before: Susan ballistic over suspicions that he was having a fling with a stripper.

The prosecutor told the jury he envisioned the murder this way: the doctor coming back mid-morning after his first surgery, trying to patch things up with his wife who, majorly, wasn't buying it.

Wes Lane: He knew that she was still considering divorce. Something happened in that bathroom that absolutely triggered him, which he grabbed the ties, and he then, surprised her, and in his rage, did all the rest of the work.

The doctor, according to the prosecution's version, now had to cover up his frenzy by going back to perform his second surgery as though nothing had happened. And here's the thing about that timeline: John had to have left the house by 9:20 to make it back to the hospital by 9:30, when he was seen scrubbing up for surgery. Susan, as it turns out, should also have left by 9:20, because she had a 9:30 meeting at a friend's house ten minutes away.

But from all appearances, she never got much of a chance to get ready -- when she was discovered, she was still undressed, her hair still wet. Which means if John Hamilton didn't do it, you'd have to believe whoever did arrived right as he was leaving, or had been waiting inside all along.

Wes Lane: So somebody would have had to come in, get enraged, surprised her, and thrown her to the ground, and done the rest.

And in photos of the crime scene, the prosecutor pointed out for jurors something that needed explaining -- a wet rag left in the pool of blood from the victim's head. It looked like the start of an attempted -- and then abandoned -- clean-up.

Wes Lane: We could tell that-- that the blood had been moved around. We actually believe that-- that-- John Hamilton was trying to clean things up before he got paged.

Dennis Murphy: So, you'd have to think that the opportunistic robber breaking in to steal some jewelry and the TV--

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Wes Lane: They're not gonna do that. What motive? And there was nothing-- it-- and there-- and there was nothing stolen.

Nothing was stolen, and yet, there was this curious story that cropped up in the days after Susan had been murdered. A friend was combing Susan's clothes closet for something appropriate for her to be buried in, when she came upon something concealed in an underwear drawer. It was Susan's good jewelry. Dick Horton heard the story firsthand from the friend.

Dick Horton: She calls us and says, "I found the jewelry in her underwear."

Dennis Murphy: Now what did that mean?

Dick Horton: Well, Susan was a very disciplined individual. She would've never hidden it in her underwear and all of a sudden the, you know, it just clicks that he's tryin' to make it look like a robbery.

Now this was the reasoning as prosecutors saw it: The doctor wanted the police to believe the crime had started as a robbery. And what do robbers take? Jewels. So he hid his wife's jewelry before the 911 forces arrived, fully intending to get it out of the house sometime later. But he never had a chance to do that -- or to tell the cops that the killer had gotten the jewels -- that's because he was put in the back of the police car and never got back inside the house again. And finally, there was the story told by blood.

The medical examiner had determined that Susan had been strangled with two neckties, but her fatal injuries came from being bludgeoned with a blunt object, a murder weapon never found. Investigators had to interpret the blood evidence left behind. And for that, they hired a blood stain expert Named Ross Gardner.

Ross Gardner: This was a relatively contained crime scene. Good amount of blood. A lot of impact spatter.

Gardner carefully examined everything the doctor had been wearing that morning. A lot of the blood on his clothing could be explained by his attempt to administer CPR. But the expert looked at John's shoes -- the left one in particular -- and found that to be a different matter. The shoes were found next to Susan's body -- John said they fell off his feet as he was attempting to revive her.

The expert, though, was certain that whoever was wearing that left shoe that day was present when Susan Hamilton was being bludgeoned to death.

Ross Gardner: Effectively, the inside and front of that shoe was in motion around this spatter event from Mrs. Hamilton that's radiating out. And the only explanation of that event is the wounding to Mrs. Hamilton.

And then there were these curious stains on the doctor's shirt -- the blood expert thought he saw a similarity between their angular shape, and the wound created on Susan's head. His theory was that the stains on the shirt were left by the murder weapon as it came in contact with the garment.

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Of course, he didn't have the actual murder weapon to make a true comparison but he was able to leave the jury with a vivid impression: The doctor's shirt may have taken a kind of photograph in blood.

Ross Gardner: We took a one-to-one image of Mrs. Hamilton's head -- the injury, the laceration. We took a one-to-one image of his shirt, and we overlay it. And you could overlay the pattern transfer right on top of the wound, and you see an immediate -- I mean, they match up.

But the most damning blood evidence of all, may have been found in the doctor's car. On the steering wheel and driver's side seat and door sill, crime scene investigators recovered strands of Susan's hair and a piece of her flesh.

How did they get there from the bathroom? To the investigators, the only plausible explanation was that the doctor had bundled up the murder weapon to dispose of it somewhere along the way as he raced back for his second surgery, a bloody bundle that leaked.

Randy Scott: You know, you wouldn't a had time to washed up. Or you wouldn't have had time to have gotten it off your clothing. He left in a hurry, obviously, the first time that he was at the house. So leaving in a hurry, that's evidence that gets transferred from one thing to another.

By the time the prosecutor had wrapped up his case, he'd laid out a theory of what happened -- that the doctor had used the neckties to pull his wife down from to the ground, then bashed her head in with that murder weapon never found. Afterwards he tried to clean up, but quickly gave up.

Wes Lane: This had a lot of dots to connect. And we knew we had enough dots that if we get it to lay out in an understandable manner, we knew the jury would be hard pressed not to convict him.

Dr. John Hamilton, though, was ready to explain it all, and his version of the truth would be completely different than the prosecutor's. His long silence behind bars ended as he prepared to tell the jury -- and us -- what really had happened that Valentine's Day morning.

For ten months -- ever since that Valentine's Day when he was arrested for the murder of his wife -- John Hamilton had kept his silence behind bars. Now he would be able to tell his side of the story. Mack Martin, the doctor's lead attorney, knew it would be uphill.

Mack Martin: We've got a circumstantial case and I think that the prosecutors in this case were putting as sinister a spin on it as they possibly could.

To the defense team, it seemed obvious from the first moments that investigators never seriously considered any suspects other than the husband.

Mack Martin: The focus was always on John. It was never anywhere else. It was never on any abortion protesters. It was never on anyone that, there were calls that were made to Susan that scared her that weren't brought out.

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The defense was dealt a setback at the start of trial. The judge ruled that he would not allow any testimony about threats the abortion doctor and his wife may have received. So the strategy would be to pick apart both the evidence and the logic of the prosecution's case.

Mack Martin: I never saw anything to indicate that John said, "If I can't have you, nobody can."

After all, only two people in the world knew what was really going on inside the Hamilton marriage. John Hamilton, who had spent every day since his wife's murder in a jail cell, would finally get a chance to testify about the last days of the marriage -- a story he also told to us.

John Hamilton: The more Susan and I talked about things the more things were clarified, the more things we got straightened out. Things weren't nearly as bad as they portrayed them to be.

As John Hamilton told it, by Valentine's Day the couple had already patched up the raw wounds of that ruckus over his unorthodox relationship with a stripper. The doctor said he'd even started seeing a therapist on his own, to earn back Susan's trust, and that she, Susan, had decided to go into counseling with him.

John Hamilton: Initially, she didn't want to go. But eventually, she said, "Yes, I'll go."

Dennis Murphy: You were starting to see her come around?

John Hamilton: Yes. In fact, she even told her best friend Sharry, "I don't believe John had an affair." So in Susan's mind, the affair was not an issue anymore.

Even the prosecutor, Wes Lane, had to admit that John had been telling the truth about that suspected affair. Lane had questioned the other woman.

Dennis Murphy: Had there been a fling? Had there been an illicit relationship with this stripper, topless dancer?

Wes Lane: No.

The doctor refuted the prosecution's case against him point by point. Like the observation made by detectives at the station that he seemed to be checking out scratches to his shoulder? They'd been suspicious earlier, back at the house when he scratched his hands against the cage in the police car. Was he nervous about what an examination of his body would reveal?

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John Hamilton: I was frantic. I mean, I knew Susan was dead. I knew they that they were suspecting me. I was scared. I had a million thoughts were running through my head. The major one is that I've lost the love of my life. I was never gonna see Susan again.

Dennis Murphy: They're gonna accuse you of trying to cover up the scratches that Susan made defensively as you were killing her.

John Hamilton: If Susan had scratched me wouldn't you assume that they would have found tissue, blood, DNA of some sort under her fingernails? Nothing was found. It was looked for extensively.

Prosecutors had made a big deal about the doctor showing up late for his second surgery that morning. Was he, in fact, late -- they theorized -- because he was killing his wife during those moments then trying to figure out what to do next?

Dr. Hamilton had a more simple explanation for being late. He'd been told that the surgery before his was running long and he decided to use the delay to run home and give his wife a valentine.

John Hamilton: I talked to the surgery nurse and she said, "The surgery before yours started 30 minutes late."

Dennis Murphy: You thought that the second operation was gonna be backed up?

John Hamilton: Right. I still had 15 or 20 minutes. I have a bad habit of trying to do too much in too short a period of time. But because it was Valentine's Day, I wanted to give Susan her first Valentine's card. And you know, start her day off right before she got busy with her meeting.

Dennis Murphy: So that was the reason you went home?

John Hamilton: Right. And Susan's getting ready you know, trying to get dressed. And we kissed. I gave her her Valentine's card. She went in the closet and got one and gave it to me.

Dennis Murphy: And the card would later become an issue because people saw kind of a snarky line from Susan of, "Well obviously, I got this before the trouble, huh? Did you understand what she was saying in it?"

John Hamilton: Oh, sure. And, but it also said something to the effect how much she loved me and our time together.

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As for the discovery of Susan's hair and blood tissue in his car, Hamilton explained it this way: he said after calling 911 he realized the EMTs wouldn't be able to get their ambulance past his car out front, so he raced out to move it. He said he'd gotten Susan's blood on him from performing CPR. Blood that then transferred from his hands and clothes to the car.

John Hamilton: I wanted EMT to be able to get in.

Dennis Murphy: A lot of people don't get that. Here there might be a spark of life in your wife and you're giving her CPR, "Oh, I've gotta move the car."

John Hamilton: Yeah. I think that that just goes to I think probably in my heart I knew she was dead. But I didn't wanna believe that or give up. I just, I wanted them to be able to get in and help. And I didn't want any obstruction. So yes, I went and tried to move the car. And I was, you know, I was so nervous. I was shaking so much I was unsuccessful.

Dennis Murphy: So these things that you say are kind of like out of focus- moving the car, there was the other thing -- the business about moving her jewelry, hiding it in her drawer? Why do you do that?

John Hamilton: I don't know. I mean, because it was out there in view, I guess.

In murder cases constructed on the interpretation of blood evidence, it's not unusual for juries to hear from dueling experts when they go to trial. And that's what happened here. It was seen as a coup for the defense that it locked up one of the most highly regarded blood spatter experts in the nation. Tom Bevel, a veteran of almost three decades with the Oklahoma City P.D. He'd even mentored the blood expert used by the prosecution.

Tom Bevel: I was hired-- either the-- the next day, or within two days at least-- of-- of the actual crime-- by the defense.

Dennis Murphy: And they thought they were very clever 'cause they took you, in effect, off the market. The prosecution wasn't going to be able to tap your expertise.

Tom Bevel: I would believe that they thought that, yes.

And, as expected, his take on the story told by the blood put his client, Dr. Hamilton, in a better light. For instance, the shirt that the prosecution suggested had a blood stain left by the murder weapon... The defense's expert, bevel, couldn't go that far.

Tom Bevel: In order to say that, you have to have the murder weapon. The murder weapon was never found. So, you don't have an object to compare it against.

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And the shoe splattered with Susan's blood from different directions as she was being killed? Not necessarily a killer's shoe, countered the defense expert, but the shoe of Dr. Hamilton as he gave his wife CPR.

Tom Bevel: He jumped out of his loafer shoes, which would have reorientated them, and he jumped over to her side and knelt down to try and assist her and to do CPR.

Bevel was the last witness in the trial, and from everything he testified to under the defense attorney's gentle questioning, he'd helped dr. Hamilton. An authoritative figure on the stand turning blood evidence from damning into benign. Then the prosecutor rose for his cross-examination. And oh! How the case changed, the bottom fell out of everything.

Wes Lane: All the air in the courtroom was gone. It was one of those moments.

Tom Bevel, the blood spatter expert hired by Dr. John Hamilton, had wrapped up his questioning under defense attorneys. As the last witness in the trial, he'd refuted a lot of the prosecution's findings, and bolstered his client's case.

Then came the prosecutor, Wes Lane's, turn on cross-examination. Now, courtroom lawyers like to talk about Perry Mason moments when a trial is electrified by unexpected testimony, but it

hardly ever happens. It did in this case, though. Did it ever. The prosecutor tossed out an open-ended question:

Wes Lane: *Well, Mr. Bevel, is there anything that either the state's experts or the Oklahoma City Police Department missed in their examination of the evidence?*

The blood spatter expert on the stand -- on the payroll of the defense -- hesitated before answering.

Tom Bevel: I expected an objection. And I looked at the defense table which was over to my left. And there wasn't an objection. So I answered. And I said, "Yes, sir."

There was a detail that the witness wanted to talk about. Something he'd noted and what would later be regarded as the atomic bomb of the trial of Dr. John Hamilton. It was about that bloody shirt taken from the doctor.

Tom Bevel: In my examination, I found additional blood that was not talked about anywhere, on the inside of the right cuff.

The prosecution hadn't talked about this stain. Maybe they missed it altogether. It was up inside the sleeve. How did it get there?

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Wes Lane: And that's when he started explaining that the blood spatter inside the sleeve. The only thing that he could think of that it was consistent with was John Hamilton when he was beating her with that blunt instrument that was driving that up inside his shirt.

If you can get whiplash in a courtroom, that's what happened. The defense's expert was saying that Dr. John Hamilton most likely created those blood stains by bashing in his wife's skull.

John Hamilton: It was a shock to everybody. Nobody expected that to happen.

Dennis Murphy: Jurors saying, "Look at this shirt. This is the shirt."

John Hamilton: His own expert is saying he's guilty.

Dennis Murphy: And that you can almost envision whatever that murder weapon is, the-- the bludgeon coming right down on poor Susan's head causing the blood spatter. It's a vivid picture.

John Hamilton: It sure is.

On re-direct, Hamilton's lawyer tried to diffuse the bombshell testimony by suggesting that the spatter could have resulted from the doctor performing cpr. But his argument wouldn't be enough. It took the jurors just two hours to reach their verdict.

Foreman: We, the jury and panel, sworn in the above-entitled cause, do upon our oath sign as follows...

The doctor realized he'd been scuttled by his own man, the expert on blood spatter.

John Hamilton: I still believed that the system would work. And that justice would come out. And I was wrong. I was horribly wrong.

Two weeks later he was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. The doctor was still in shock, as the judge added his opinion.

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Judge: Based upon the comments a majority of the jurors said to me in which they indicated they were very disappointed they didn't have the sentence of death as an option, I would consider yourself, you should consider yourself very lucky.

But for John Hamilton, the fight wasn't over.

John Hamilton: You know, I've come to find out that blood spatter is really junk science. If this is real-- if this blood splatter is real science then why should two prominent, national authorities disagree with the findings? One says, "The shoes is what convicts him." The other says, "It's his shirt that convicts him." The-- they don't agree.

Hamilton hired a new attorney, Rob Nigh, to appeal the verdict.

Rob Nigh: I've been doing criminal trials and appeals for 22 years and I've never seen a case like Dr. Hamilton's where the defense expert offered the most compelling evidence against the defendant.

One of their arguments was that Tom Bevel should never have been allowed to testify.

Rob Nigh: Either Tom Bevel lied to the defense about what his testimony would be or defense counsel took a risk that should never be taken.

Tom Bevel denies lying about his testimony, and the courts didn't buy the argument either. The appeals made their way all the way up to the u.s. Supreme court, but they ultimately failed.

Dennis Murphy: There are a lot of people, the ones who would think you are guilty are saying, "It's time for Dr. Hamilton to finally admit his guilt, be a guy, step up to the plate, and tell the story the way it was."

John Hamilton: I'm telling the truth now. If I was the guy they think I am, then, what do I have to lose by telling the truth? I don't have anything to lose. If I really did it, if it would, if it would clear my conscience, but I didn't do it. I didn't kill Susan.

For Susan's family and friends, the case is now closed, but it may never bring closure. After all -- nothing can bring back the beautiful, headstrong, woman they all loved.

Dennis Murphy: It's changed Valentine's Day forever for you and your kids, huh?

Dick Horton: Actually, we've turned it into a positive. It started out negative. And-- my children started, "Well, I'll never celebrate it again." We changed it to, instead, that-- Valentine's Day is a day to celebrate love. There isn't any greater love.

Today, John Hamilton resides in a maximum security prison, behind the walls where Valentine's Day has little meaning at all.

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