

Case Study- Richard Crafts "Wood Chipper Case"

It was a horrific crime that thrust the state of Connecticut into the national headlines.

The "wood chipper case" involved sex, money, and a gruesome murder -- the ingredients for a huge news story. The case also brought Dr. Henry Lee, the Director of Connecticut's Forensic Science Laboratory, into the national spotlight and is one of many cases that would make him one of the most respected forensic experts in the world. In the Wood chipper case, Lee and other members of his forensic team managed for the first time in Connecticut history to secure a murder conviction without a corpse, demonstrating in the process an uncanny ability to marshal several different forensic techniques in collaborative pursuit of a murderer who thought he had pulled off the perfect crime.



Richard Crafts

The case started in November 1986 with the disappearance of Helle Crafts, a strikingly beautiful Danish-born flight stewardess for Pan American Airlines who lived with her husband in upscale Newton, Connecticut. Richard Crafts worked as a commercial airline pilot and has previously flown missions on Air America for the Central Intelligence Agency; he was a man of adventure and intrigue. Crafts went to the police saying his wife had gone away after an argument and never returned, prompting him to file a missing persons report. But friends of the missing woman alerted investigators that she planned to divorce her husband and had said he was afraid for her life.

Although police began to suspect foul play, they had no evidence that a crime had been committed. But their suspicions increased when a witness came forward to report that he had been out plowing snow at 4 a.m. at the time of the disappearance when he had observed Richard Crafts acting suspiciously. He said he had spotted Crafts in a remote location overlooking the Housatonic River. And the strangest thing was that the flight skipper was frantically operating a huge woodchipper at the height of a major snowstorm.

Detectives found out that, immediately before Helle Crafts was reported missing, her estranged husband had rented an Asplundh Badger Brush Bandit 100 model woodchipper, an unusually large model for someone doing non-commercial work. During the same frenzied period, Richard Crafts had also gotten a new truck, picked up a large Westinghouse Chest Freezer, using an alias, and travelled outside his immediate area to purchase several other noteworthy items such as rubber gloves and a flathead shovel. Further investigation revealed that Crafts had been cheating on his wife and exhibiting some bizarre behavior involving firearms. To their horror, police began to suspect that he may have killed his mate, dismembered her body with a chain saw, shredded the corpse through the woodchipper, and emptied the pieces into the river.



Dr. Henry Lee

After routine searches turned up nothing, and the police still lacked any body or blood to prove that a murder had taken place, Dr. Lee set out to comb the possible crime scenes for biological traces or other physical evidence. When ordinary inspection failed to turn up any brown stains, Lee and his team methodically scoured the couple's home using more sophisticated methods. At several suspicious locations, Lee sprayed luminal, a chemical mixture that can help investigators detect stains, especially the heme portion of hemoglobin in red blood cells that are otherwise invisible to the naked eye, and TMB (tetramethylbenzidine), another blood enhancement reagent. This enabled him to discover several tiny stains of Type O blood, the same type as Helle Crafts'.

They also located the same woodchipper that Crafts had rented and minutely examined the river location where the snowplower had sped the suspect. Like any skilled crime scene investigator, Lee also noticed some items that were missing from the likely crime scene, such as the box spring of their bed, which caused him to hypothesize that Crafts may have committed the murder on the bed and later disposed of that part due to the bloodstains.

After many long hours of painstaking search the team assembled a catalogue of telltale evidence, including human blood spots, more than sixty tiny chips of human bone, 2,600 strands of blond hair resembling that of Helle Craft, and part of a finger containing fingernail polish that matched a cosmetic found in her home makeup kit.

Eventually, the evidence persuaded a grand jury to indict Richard Crafts for the murder of his wife. Newspaper tabloids plastered their pages with gruesome details about the alleged killing, one of them calling it, "DIVORCE, CONNECTICUT STYLE."

At the first trial held in New London, Dr. Lowell Levine, the famous forensic dentist, positively identified a tooth fragment from the scene as having belonged to Helle Crafts' lower-left bicuspid, but the contest ended with a hung jury.

Then a second trial, held in Stamford in March 1989, ultimately resulted in Crafts' murder conviction. He was sentenced to 50 years in prison—and Lee's reputation was carved out, not just in the media, but also in police and legal circles.

Under Lee's expert guideline, the celebrated Woodchipper Case had brought together odontology, serology, fabric and hair examination, pathology, time-line analysis, weather evidence, credit card tracing and other techniques to determine the essential facts of the crime—the corpus delicti, or body of evidence.

Modified from "*Bodies of Evidence*" by Dr. Scott Christianson