



Helen Wilson was murdered and then raped in her apartment in Beatrice, Nebraska, on February 6, 1985. Six individuals—the “Beatrice Six”—were convicted for involvement in this crime: James Dean, Kathy Gonzalez, Debra Shelden, Ada Joann Taylor, Joseph White and Thomas Winslow, who collectively spent over 75 years in prison.

THE “BEATRICE SIX”

BEATRICE, NEBRASKA

The threat of the death penalty was a key factor leading to confessions in this case. DNA testing in 2008 led to the exoneration of the Beatrice Six and linked the biological evidence at the crime scene to Bruce Allen Smith.

From the autopsy and crime scene, investigators recovered semen and blood. Initial testing of biological samples given by the Beatrice Six showed that none of them matched the blood or semen from the crime scene. Despite having this information, officials still prosecuted and obtained convictions against them.

The initial investigation focused on Bruce Allen Smith as a suspect. He was found in Oklahoma City, where police laboratory technician Joyce Gilchrist—later fired for her involvement in years of forensic fraud—tested Smith’s biological sample and mistakenly eliminated him as a suspect.

The Gage County Sheriff’s office began relying on rumors, statements contradicted by crime scene evidence, and statements from an individual known to be mentally challenged, to obtain arrest warrants for Joseph White, Ada Joann Taylor, and Thomas Winslow. White denied knowing anything about the Wilson murder. Officials fed Taylor false information that White had implicated her in Wilson’s murder. Taylor had a significant psychiatric disorder making her prone to delusional thought,

and under the stress of interrogation began imagining a murder inconsistent with the crime scene evidence. She later recanted.

When testing proved that White, Taylor and Winslow were not the source of the blood in Wilson’s apartment, Beatrice Police became convinced that they had no involvement in the murder and told the Sheriff. The Sheriff and County Attorney told the Police Chief to keep quiet and “don’t muddy the water.”

After five hours of interrogation, Debra Shelden, who had significant mental health issues, eventually claimed to be with White, Taylor, and Winslow at Wilson’s rape and murder. Officials obtained Shelden’s confession through threats that she would lose custody of her infant daughter if she did not cooperate.

After a session with a psychologist, Shelden claimed to remember James Dean being present. Officials arrested Dean and interrogated him over 22 days. He continually denied any knowledge of Wilson’s murder. The same psychologist who worked on Shelden came to the jail to calm Dean when he became hysterical over death penalty threats made by interrogators.

After a session with a psychologist, Dean started “recalling” Wilson’s murder in his dreams. He, along with Shelden, claimed to recall from dreams that Kathy Gonzalez was present in Wilson’s apartment, which led to Gonzalez’s arrest. The Sheriff and County Attorney knew that their “dreams” were not an accurate account of Wilson’s rape because White and Winslow were not the source of the crime scene semen, but their testimony was still used as evidence at trial.

In 2006, White and Winslow petitioned the district court for DNA testing of the crime scene evidence. The same County Attorney who knew neither could be the source of the crime scene semen fought their request. Finally, in 2008, DNA tests proved that the crime scene semen and blood came from the same source—Bruce Allen Smith—not White, Winslow, or any other members of the Beatrice Six.

Convicted: 1990

Served: Over 75 Years Collectively



Vindication: 2008

- DNA Proved Innocence
- False Confessions or Admissions
- Unvalidated or Improper Forensic Science