

THE CASE OF THE HALLOWEEN CANDY KILLER

State of Texas v. Ronald Clark O'Bryan

Judge Mark Davidson



Ronald Clark O'Bryan.

During the month of October, many children are anticipating their annual trips around their neighborhoods to go “Trick or Treating.” When I was growing up in Southwest Houston, the one time I was allowed to walk around the blocks near my house was on Halloween. Sugar rushes often followed.

This changed for many in our community in 1974 as a result of a horrific incident involving cyanide-laced candy that led to the death of a child caused by his father and that could have led to the deaths of three more children.

Following the tragedy, many parents went years before allowing their children to get candy from neighbors.

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State of Texas v. Ronald Clark O'Bryan (CONTINUED)

Ronald Clark O'Bryan lived in Deer Park with his wife and two children. He was an optician and a deacon at his church. His financial situation apparently was dire. Records indicated that he was more than \$100,000 in debt. To get out of difficulties, he concocted a scheme to buy poison and put it in a "Pixy Stick" (a sweet and sour powdered candy that was popular at the time). During the months before Halloween, O'Bryan bought \$30,000 life insurance policies for each of his children. On Halloween morning, he bought potassium cyanide from a garden shop.

That night, O'Bryan, his two children and two neighborhood children were visiting their neighbors. One house was dark, indicating that the owner was not home. The children wanted to skip the house, but O'Bryan stayed behind, and told the children that the owner of the house gave him four Pixy Sticks from them. The ends of the straw-like containers had been stapled after being opened.

When the O'Bryans got home, Ronald urged his son Timothy to try the candy. He loosened up the powder. Timothy immediately started vomiting and convulsing. Ronald testified that he held his son as he died. An uproar went through the neighborhood looking for other poisoned candy. Four sticks were found still in the children's bags, and one stick was found unopened in bed with a child.

Eventually, the police learned about O'Bryan's purchase of the cyanide and life insurance policies, and a Harris County grand jury charged him with capital murder. O'Bryan hired Marvin Teague, a legendary criminal defense attorney, to no avail. After 46 minutes of deliberation, he was found guilty of murder and was ordered to be executed. Appeals took seven years, but the Court ordered that the sentence be carried out on Halloween night of 1982. Two more challenges to lethal injections followed, but he was put to death on March 31, 1984, almost ten years later. The night of the execution, some people stood outside the penitentiary and shouted "Trick or Treat!"

Opinions on the death penalty are widely divergent in our state and nation. What is not subject to debate is that killing one's own children, and endangering other children, is terrible. O'Bryan was called "The Candy Killer" and "The Man who Killed Halloween."

Those of us who take our children out on All Souls day should always be careful about what they get and what they eat.