

SUPREME COURT OF ARKANSAS

Combs v. State

286 Ark. 74 (1985) · Decided May 20, 1985

SUMMARY

The Arkansas Supreme Court held that the accomplice's testimony was not sufficiently corroborated by independent evidence tending to connect Lynette Combs with her husband's murder. Because the State's remaining evidence established the crime but did not connect Combs to its commission, the court reversed the conviction and dismissed the charge.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Arkansas
WRITING FOR THE COURT	George Rose Smith, Justice; Holt, Chief Justice; Hays, Justice; Newbern, Justice
JURISDICTION	Arkansas
DECIDED	May 20, 1985
DISPOSITION	reversed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Combs appealed her jury conviction for first-degree murder and life sentence, arguing that the accomplice testimony against her was not sufficiently corroborated under Arkansas law.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Supreme Court reviewed de novo whether the evidence legally satisfied Arkansas's statutory accomplice-corroboration requirement and whether it was sufficient to support the conviction.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Arkansas Supreme Court decision; precedential.
PARTIES	Lynette (Burnett) Combs v. State of Arkansas

TOPICS

- criminal procedure
- evidence
- burden of proof
- appellate procedure
- standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

- criminal law
- criminal procedure
- appellate practice

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the testimony of the accomplice, Hubert D. Henry, was sufficiently corroborated by independent evidence tending to connect Combs with the commission of the murder.
2. Whether the State could rely on evidence that Combs's testimony was false as corroboration of the accomplice's testimony.

HOLDINGS

1. The State failed to present substantial independent evidence tending to connect Combs with the commission of the murder; evidence establishing the corpus delicti, blood in the station wagon, and Combs's association with Henry was insufficient corroboration.
2. The State may not satisfy the statutory corroboration requirement merely by persuading the jury that the accused gave false testimony.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"It does not suffice for the State, as purported corroboration, to convince the jury that an accused person has given false testimony." (286 Ark. 74)

"The judgment is reversed, and since the proof is insufficient the charge must be dismissed." (286 Ark. 74)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

William Ray Burnett's decomposed body was found near the Arkansas River approximately two months after he had been shot in the neck. Hubert D. Henry, who had pleaded guilty and agreed to testify, claimed that Combs took his pistol and shot Burnett, after which they concealed and disposed of the body and cleaned blood from the station wagon. Combs denied involvement and testified that Henry had raped, confined, and threatened her for approximately two months. The State's independent evidence established the death and involved blood in the station wagon, but did not independently connect Combs to the murder.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Combs was charged with first-degree murder along with Hubert D. Henry. Henry pleaded guilty in exchange for a twenty-five-year sentence and agreed to testify against Combs. A jury found Combs guilty and sentenced her to life imprisonment. The Arkansas Supreme Court reversed because the independent evidence did not sufficiently corroborate Henry's accomplice testimony and ordered dismissal of the charge.

DISPOSITION

reversed

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The charge was ordered dismissed because the proof was insufficient.

CASES CITED

- Olles v. State, 260 Ark. 571 (1976)

OPINION

SMITH, J.

George Rose Smith, Justice. On November 12, 1983, a badly decomposed human body was found in Pulaski County near the Arkansas River. An autopsy showed that death had been caused by a gunshot wound in the neck. The body was identified as that of William Ray Burnett, age 30. Investigation disclosed that he had been murdered about two months earlier, though it is not clear from the record whether he had been reported as missing.

On December 13 first-degree murder charges were filed against Hubert D. Henry and the appellant, Lynette (Burnett) Combs, who was Burnett's wife and had been for some ten years. Henry negotiated a plea of guilty in exchange for a 25-year sentence and his agreement to testify against Ms. Combs.

The appellant was tried by jury, found guilty, and sentenced to life imprisonment. The only issue on appeal is whether the testimony of Henry, as an accomplice, was sufficiently corroborated. Before summarizing the evidence we quickly restate settled rules governing the necessity for corroboration. By the terms of the statute the testimony of the accomplice must be corroborated by other evidence tending to connect the defendant with the commission of the offense, and the corroboration is not sufficient if it merely shows the commission of the offense and the circumstances of it.

Ark. Stat. Ann. § 43-2116 (Repl. 1977). When the corroboration is weighed, the testimony of the accomplice must be completely disregarded. The independent testimony may be circumstantial, but it must be substantial evidence and must do more than raise a suspicion of guilt. *Olles v. State*, 260 Ark. 571 (1976).

For simplicity, instead of narrating the testimony of the many witnesses we will begin by summarizing the really essential evidence in the case; that is, the version given by the accomplice and that given by the accused.

We use the first person, with explanatory comments in brackets. Testimony of Hubert Henry. For about three years before Bill Burnett's death, he and Lynette and I had been together most of the time. At first there was also a woman named Angie.

We stayed together but moved around Little Rock a lot, from place to place. Lynette and Angie were prostitutes, and I procured men for them. [There is an implication that the two men were engaged in other illegal "things," but Hubert never said exactly what they were.]

After a time Angie decided to get out and go straight. I had sexual relations with both women. Bill was shot about September 13, 1983. Shortly before that Lynette had asked me to kill Bill; she said

she was tired of moving around. I refused. Bill and I spent the first part of the night in question looking for drugs.

In the early morning hours we got back to the room where they were staying. They took me in their [brown] station wagon to the place where I was staying, in Calvary Cemetery. [Other testimony and photographs show a small house with all the windows having bars on them. Part of the house was the cemetery office; another part had been furnished with a couch, bed, TV, cook stove, refrigerator, and a bathroom.

Close by was a larger storage shed, with a pull-down garage door.] Bill drove the vehicle into the shed; he didn't want to be seen because he was scared of the police. As I started to the house to get marihuana Lynette asked me whether I was still going to do her that favor. I said, no. She reached over and took my Luger pistol from under my belt. I didn't say anything; I didn't think she would do it.

It took me a few minutes to roll the marihuana. When I got back to the shed Bill was laying on his back; blood was coming from his back. I had not heard a shot. I put the pistol under some newspapers and got it later. She asked what we was going to do. I said I know one thing, we've got to get it up before Mike [the cemetery caretaker] comes back, because it was early in the morning and he would get there about 6:00.

We got newspapers, cleaned up, put the body in the back of their station wagon, and drove down to the river. We pulled the body out of the station wagon and down to the river. We went to the car wash and cleaned up the blood that was in the station wagon.

After that we lived at the cemetery together until I was arrested by York [Buddy York, the bondsman on Henry's bond for some other offense. York testified that he picked up Henry on November 26, at the cemetery]. Lynette was free to come and go as she pleased.

After the murder we sold the [brown] station wagon for \$200, bought a station wagon that had a bad transmission, and then got a yellow station wagon. I was not living with my wife, but Lynette would drive me over there and circle the block until I came out. Testimony of Lynette Combs. Bill and I met in Michigan; I was then 13, he was 15.

We never dated anyone else. We were married in 1973. Bill was a good man, good to me. We were very close. We went to church. We went camping and fishing together. I was never a prostitute and never had an affair with anyone. I last saw Bill on September 13, at 2:00 a.m.

We were at our place at Sixth and Cedar. Henry came by and asked Bill to take him home. In about two hours Henry came back, said that Bill had hurt his knee, and I should go to Henry's apartment to bring Bill home. Henry had Bill's station wagon.

We went to Henry's apartment in the cemetery. Henry opened the door, looked in like he was talking to somebody, and turned and said to me he wants you to come in. When I walked in, Henry locked the door and said, "I'm going to rape you." I said, "I can't believe you're doing this. I don't understand; why me?" I told him that he would never get away with this, that Bill would be after him.

Henry raped me twice, tied me up, and locked me in a closet. When he left the doors unlocked the next morning, I got loose and saw Henry and three men outside working on a truck. I ran out screaming for help and asking them to call the police. Henry started beating me and dragged me back into the house. He kept me a prisoner for about two months, continuing to abuse me sexually.

We would go out in the day, but he always had a gun and sometimes chained me to the car. After those three men had not offered to help me, I was afraid to ask for help again. Henry told me that if I tried to get away he would kill me. He forced me to take part in selling the station wagon and getting another one. When Henry was arrested I at once called my friend, Carolyn Nelson, who picked me up at the cemetery.

At her house I called my parents in Michigan, to tell them I was all right. [Apparently her father called the Little Rock police the next morning, who came out to question her.] I learned for the first time from the police that Bill was dead. I loved my husband; I never had any thought of divorcing him or killing him. I did not ask Henry to kill him. I was not attracted to Henry in any way.

[This is the end of Ms. Combs's summarized testimony.] Apart from the accomplice's testimony, the State's proof was directed to two points. First, the fundamentals were established by evidence of the finding of Burnett's body, the cause of death, and its identification.

Second, an effort was made to dispute the truth of Ms. Combs's expected testimony. Her statements to the police were not introduced, but the prosecution had evidently seen them and devoted much of its evidence to their refutation.

The man who bought the station wagon from Henry and Ms. Combs testified about that transaction and said that Henry did not apparently have a gun and that Ms. Combs was not tied up and did not seem to be afraid. His testimony had no tendency to connect the accused with the actual commission of the murder. Henry's wife testified that Ms. Combs did not appear to be under restraint after the date of the crime, for she drove Henry in the yellow station wagon to the witness's house for a visit and came back to pick him up.

Even so, the testimony had nothing to do with the murder itself. An expert witness for the State testified that what proved to be human blood was scraped from three areas in the station wagon that Henry and Ms. Combs had sold, but those findings do not show that the accused was present at the murder or had any part in it.

The only remaining source of possible corroboration is the testimony of the accused herself. She did not, however, admit her guilt in any way, directly or indirectly. She testified to facts intended to establish her innocence, such as her asserted imprisonment until the body was found, which would explain her failure to report his disappearance. (Under the court's instructions to the jury, Ms. Combs could not be found guilty of any offense if Henry alone committed the murder and she merely failed to report it.)

No doubt the jury concluded that much of the accused's testimony was false, leading them to reason that she therefore must be guilty. But that reasoning is forbidden by the statute requiring corroboration and by the State's burden of affirmatively proving the accused's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. It does not suffice for the State, as purported corroboration, to convince the jury that an accused person has given false testimony.

If that were not true, innocent defendants might be afraid to take the witness stand for fear that they would be sentenced to imprisonment for life not for the commission of murder but for the commission of perjury.

The judgment is reversed, and since the proof is insufficient the charge must be dismissed. Holt, C.J., and Hays and Newbern, JJ., dissent.