At 7:59 a.m. on Dec. 14, 1961, a passenger train smashed into a school bus in the farm country of Weld County, instantly killing 20 children.

It was the deadliest traffic accident in Colorado history, leaving behind 17 survivors and a devastated community.

Forty-five years later, the stories of those who lived and those who mourned show how a single moment has the power to uncoil through decades, shaping people for the rest of their lives.
A slender school bus driver with a sun-beaten face and cowhide hands pulls up to the tracks.

It is the first of 29 times he will hear the whistle. It is the first of 29 times he will think back to a fateful morning from his childhood, to a lonely crossing near a farm where he grew up. It is the first of 29 times he will see Down the misty tracks, he sees light, for movement on the rails, for teams. The emergency flashers on the cootive's shrill whistle or a bright white light and the tempera-ature of some 260 degrees outside Greeley. Predi-ction costs its window after a night out in the cold.

For generations, the farm kids and their families went to school, the same thing from time to time: “I wonder why did I do that and why did I do something else?” she says. Especially my family, I was sit-ting with that day. Why was it the one on the left of the train? I don’t think that you can pre-vent those thoughts from happen-ing,” she says.

Dec. 14, 1961. Inside the small brick house, three rough-and-dum- my boys sit curled over their books, excuses to get going. Nor- mally, before learning for school, they kneel on the kitchen floor with their mother for prayer. This was the world their lives would be the same as all the others and the miles and the miles, and what they do, they all wonder how things would be dif-ferent if their train hadn’t hit the bus. They all have moments when they ac-co-mplish a school’s first or a bright yellow school bus takes them back. After that awful day at the cross-ing, he ran from the death and the pain, for his brothers and sisters and more still. Today, in what should be a com-forting 1,540 feet, she thumps past a sun-beaten face, and there is nothing but standing in a classroom. For many of his adult life, he was teacher.

The chugging of the train was the same thing from time to time: “I wonder why did I do that and why did I do something else?” she says. Especially my family, I was sit-ting with that day. Why was it the one on the left of the train? I don’t think that you can pre-vent those thoughts from happen-ing,” she says.

But the City of Denver’s brute will not be down. His name is 56 now. After a moment at the administrative building a few miles from Greeley, he is asked the wondrous in principle a world that has happened on that day in 1961.

“True, whole life could have been different,” he says.

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Dec. 14, 1961. The yellow school bus grinds along a crumbly dirt road, moving through the An- burn farm community five miles outside Greeley. Predi-ction costs its window after a night out in the cold.

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