

# THE CROSSING

By Kevin Vaughan ■ Photos by Chris Schneider ■ Rocky Mountain News



**Sad survivors:** Colleen Yetter Lackey, left, and LaDean Yetter Long missed the bus on Dec. 14, 1961. The sisters, 13 and 6 at the time, attended the funerals for many of those killed in the crash and saw the devastation families suffered. "It just breaks my heart to realize what all they had to go through, and to realize strong people are dealt stronger and harder tests," LaDean says.

## CHAPTER 11: REVERBERATIONS

Her lip quivers, her voice breaks and the tears come quickly. Colleen Yetter Lackey is surprised by how hard it is to talk about Dec. 14, 1961. It doesn't matter that 45 years have passed, and it doesn't matter that she and her little sister LaDean overslept that morning and missed the bus.

It hurts, and the pain — even after all this time — comes at 80 mph.

The tragedy at the railroad crossing southeast of Greeley inflicted heartache far beyond the homes of the 20 children killed. Even those who buried no one, who were spared injury, who weren't even on the bus can still feel reverberations from the accident. They are people like Colleen and LaDean.

For them, the first sign of trouble came with a phone call and a cryptic message.

Their cousin, Jerry Hembray, was injured on the bus.

He was at a nearby farmhouse and needed to be picked up.

Until that moment, the sisters had been most worried about getting back on the good side of their parents.

Eldon and Genevieve Yetter were not happy that the girls had slept late and missed the bus.

### Disturbing scene

They all piled into the family's big Oldsmobile 98, Eldon Yetter at the wheel, to find out what happened to Jerry. Eldon drove down one county road, turned right. He drove a mile, turned left.

"We didn't know what to expect," Colleen says, her voice wobbling.

"We had to climb this hill going south," she says. "And we could see..."

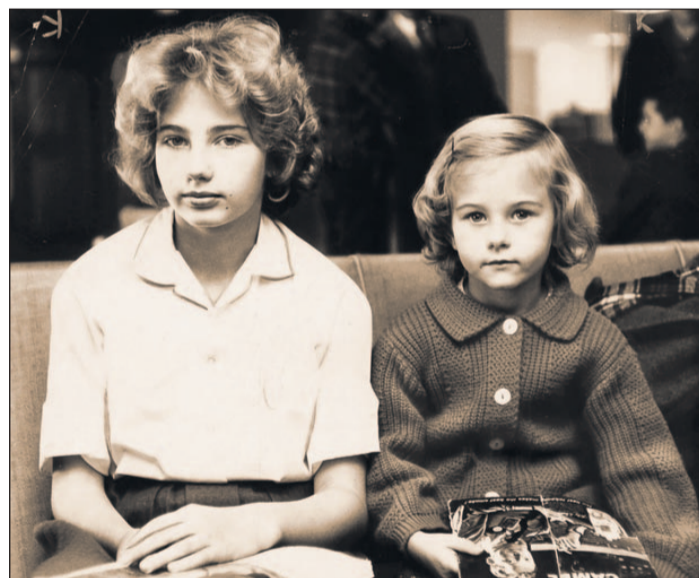
Her voice breaks. "I'm sorry," she says. She pauses and composes herself.

"We could see a train stopped across the tracks," she says, "and then we looked down to the crossing, and we could see the bus in pieces."

Colleen began praying that her friends would be OK.

Her parents stopped at the farmhouse and found Jerry inside, his shoulder torn up.

**Jerry Hembray**



**BOB TALKIN/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS/1961**

**Overslept:** Colleen Yetter and her sister, LaDean, wait for news at the hospital on the morning of Dec. 14, 1961. They lost many of their friends on the school bus they missed that day because they overslept.

der torn up.

They drove him to the hospital. The minutes crawled by as Colleen and LaDean sat in a waiting room.

Newsman snapped their pictures, jotted down their words.

"At the hospital, again, I was hoping my friends would be OK again. And we waited and waited, and really we didn't hear any word. So I asked Mom and Dad if I could go out in the car.

"And I turned on the radio, and we were listening... We were listening for the...," she says, her voice thick with emotion, her lip shaking, tears welling in her red eyes, "and it didn't matter how hard I prayed.

"All my friends were gone." As Colleen talks, her parents sit a few feet away in their home east of LaSalle, less than two miles from the crossing, listening quietly.

Genevieve Yetter picks up a tissue, dabs at her eyes. Eldon

Yetter stares straight ahead.

### 'It just wasn't my time'

Thirty-six children were on the school bus when a passenger train split it in two.

Ten others, including Colleen and LaDean, normally would have been riding the bus but weren't.

Some stayed home sick. Some caught other rides, as Roger Repts did with a neighbor.

"It just wasn't my time," Roger says. "You know..."

His voice trails off. For a moment, he cannot speak. Like Colleen, he carries the pain of Dec. 14, 1961, deep inside him.

"It's amazing," he finally says.

"It makes you emotional."

### 'One in a million'

Colleen opens a scrapbook, pulls out a small white envelope and gently folds back the flap. She removes a pink birthday card with four black-and-white kittens on the front.

Inside, it says:

*You're one  
In a million  
And that's why I send  
A million  
Best wishes  
For joy without end*

Beneath that is a simple inscription, written in blue ballpoint pen in a 13-year-old's cursive.

*Your friend, Linda Walso*

Just 15 days before the accident, Colleen had turned 13. Linda, her best friend and one of the crash victims, had brought the card to her.

Colleen is now 58 and a cancer survivor. She and her husband live on a few acres near Hudson.

She has mules and rides from time to time. She's embarking on a new career as a pharmacy technician.

### 'How did you know?'

On the night of Dec. 13, 1961, the Yetter family got home late after a Christmas rehearsal at church. They overslept, and Colleen and 6-year-old LaDean missed the bus.

Jerry Hembray, a cousin who lived with them, ran and made it.

After the crash, the family attended funerals for 18 of the 20 children who died.

Everything was different. Before the accident, Colleen's 4-H group — the "Auburnettes" — consisted of 12 girls.

Afterward, only four remained.

Nobody knew how to talk about what had happened.

Some people didn't understand how Colleen and LaDean could have missed the bus. One day, a woman rushed up to Eldon and asked him, frantically, "How did

you know?" She was convinced that Eldon had kept the girls home for a reason.

Another day, a father who'd lost a daughter asked Colleen why she was alive, why his girl was dead.

"At 13, I didn't have any answers," she says.

Forty-five years later, she still doesn't. And she doesn't fully understand all the ways that day settled in her, shaped who she became.

"At the beginning," she says, "I was wondering, 'Why in the world would God take all these kids?' I prayed so hard. And we were taught that if you prayed hard enough that your prayers are going to be answered and everything. But it just wasn't God's will.

"As I've gotten older, I've realized God has purpose for my life."

She tries to be a good person. If she feels the urge to visit someone, she goes. She knows it's best to appreciate friends and family while you can.

But there is still something deep inside her, some hurt that she can't quite identify or salve.

"Even though I have happy moments and everything, I think that there's a sadness real down deep, and I think I've put up barriers, and I don't let myself love as freely as I could have, maybe," she says.

Her sister, LaDean Yetter Long, 51, feels it, too. She spent years trying to hold it all inside.

"It seems like most of my childhood or most of my life I was taught to just block things out and it will go away, and it does work for a while," says the mother of two grown children. "But it doesn't go away. It's always there."

They aren't alone.

Another boy skipped the bus that day. A boy who caught a ride to school with his older brothers.

**MONDAY: Tested faith**

### About this series

In just seconds, 20 children died, and a community was devastated.

At 7:59 a.m. on Dec. 14, 1961, a high-speed passenger train smashed into a school bus carrying 36 students in the farm country of Weld County. It was the worst traffic accident in Colorado history. Only 16 children and the bus driver survived.

We cannot know how today's tragedies — Columbine, Oklahoma City, Sept. 11 — will ripple over a lifetime.

But 45 years after that bitter morning outside Greeley, we can see — if not fully understand — how a single moment has the power to uncoil through decades, shaping people for the rest of their lives.

### Online at RockyMountainNews.com



■ **Video:** Sisters Colleen Yetter Lackey and LaDean Yetter Long still deal with the impact of losing their friends in the crash.

■ **Slide show:** Yetter family photos, then and now.

■ **Discuss:** Share your thoughts on the series and read others' comments at RockyTalk Live.

■ **Sources:** Read an annotated version of the story with sources of information listed.

■ **Earlier chapters:** To see previous installments in the 33-part series, go to RockyMountainNews.com/the Crossing.

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