

## THE CROSSING Chapter 12

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ANNOTATED VERSION

**H**ow much sorrow should one family have to endure?  
Having buried two of their eight children after the accident at the crossing, Joe and Katherine Brantner faced that question on Feb. 7, 1962.

Early that morning, 12-year-old Bobby Brantner stood out in the barn, cleaning up after the morning milking.

Joe approached him.

It had been 55 days since Bobby's 6-year-old brother, Mark, and 9-year-old sister, Kathy, had died at the crossing.

Bobby had missed the crash because he'd ridden to school early with his older brother, Johnny, to discuss a project with a teacher.

In those 55 days, Bobby hadn't yet gotten back onto the school bus. Every day, Johnny had driven him to Meeker Junior High in Greeley.

That was going to change.

"It's too much trouble for John to take you to school," Joe Brantner told Bobby.

"You have to ride the bus."

Bobby washed up, grabbed some breakfast, walked out front, got on the bus.

That morning, Johnny, 16, got into his prized two-tone Chevy.

Another brother, 14-year-old Jimmy, jumped in with him.

They drove off.<sup>1</sup>

## **A HARD LIFE, A GOOD LIFE**

Joe Brantner and Katherine Morton married on June 6, 1942, at Holy Family Catholic Church in Denver.

They had their first baby, a daughter they called Susie, 11 months later. Johnny was born in 1945.

During World War II, Joe operated machinery at the Remington Arms plant in Lakewood and worked as a mechanic, but he longed to have his own farm.

So in the spring of 1946, Joe and Katherine bought 320 dormant acres about three miles east of U.S. 85, not far from the Auburn school, near a Union Pacific rail line.

They moved their young, growing family into a rundown, two-bedroom house where transients had huddled for several years.

The kids kept coming — Jimmy in 1947, Bobby in 1949, Kathy in 1952, Mark in 1955, Paul in 1960, Mary in 1961.

1. Descriptions and statements of this section based on *Greeley Tribune* accounts of the Feb. 7, 1962, automobile accident involving Johnny and Jimmy Brantner and interviews with Bob Brantner and Katherine Brantner.

Along the way, they built a big, new home with dormer windows and green asbestos siding.

They worshipped at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Platteville.

They worked long hours, raising crops to support their dairy operation.

All the kids pitched in, driving the truck out in the fields, helping milk the cows each morning and evening around 5.

“You can go wherever you want,” Joe would tell his sons, “as long as you’re home by milking time.”

If anything needed to be done, they did it.

When the grain truck threw a rod, Joe and his older boys had the engine in and out of it three times before it finally chugged back to life.

Long before Bobby could drive, he could weld.

It was a weary-in-the-bones life, but a good one.

Years later, Bob Brantner would say of his parents, “They’re the best people I’ve ever known.”

But Dec. 14, 1961, broke Joe and Katherine Brantner’s hearts.

Alerted to the crash by a neighbor, they rushed the quarter mile to the crossing, where they found Mark and Kathy dead.

Gone was Mark, the curious little boy who wanted to know how everything worked, who lay down on the living room floor one day with a catalog and carefully copied down the names of all the toys he wanted for Christmas.

Gone was Kathy, the neat little girl who kept her side of her bedroom spotless, who fumed at the mess on her sister’s side.

But the grief would have to wait as Joe and Katherine dealt with the chaos in front of them.

Joe and a neighbor, Albert Bindel, got their cars, loaded up as many injured children as they could find and floored it for the hospital.

That day is a blur to 57-year-old Bob Brantner now.

When he looks back through the haze of 45 years, he sees snapshots and film clips.

Being called out of class by someone, the principal, maybe.

Descending the stairs at school to find Johnny and Jimmy waiting near the front door.

Finding a crush of people at his house. Walking the 500 yards to the crossing.

Seeing the mangled last few feet of the bus, sheared clean, resting on one side of the tracks. Peering into the front section of the bus. Turning to walk away, his head down.

In that moment, a newspaper photographer snapped a picture, then

asked him if he knew anyone on the bus.

That photograph ran in papers all over the country and in other parts of the world. Bobby was flooded with good wishes, cards and notes.<sup>2</sup>

## **MILES OUT OF THEIR WAY**

The numbness of that day had hardly started to wear off when Feb. 7, 1962, arrived.

Johnny and Jimmy jumped in the Chevy.

Johnny headed south, then west toward LaSalle, instead of north, then west toward Greeley — his normal route to school. Some would later speculate that he and Jimmy were trying to avoid the crossing where their little brother and sister died.

But that made no sense — avoiding the crossing meant going miles out of their way.

Instead, Johnny probably decided to stop at the Mobil station in LaSalle, where he pumped gas after school to pay for his car.

Whatever the reason for taking a different route, the boys never made it to school.

As Johnny approached an intersection, a pickup crossed his path.

Johnny's Chevy slammed into the driver's side of the truck, and both vehicles spun to a stop off the road.

Johnny was thrown out.

He died at 11:25 a.m. at the hospital in Greeley.

Jimmy suffered debilitating wounds: broken hips, knees and legs and — worse — a terrible head injury that would plague him all his life.

As word of the accident spread, friends and neighbors rushed to be with the Brantners.

They offered prayers and words of comfort. Many wondered the same thing:

How could such a thing happen to a family that had been wounded so badly already?

The Brantners buried Johnny in Linn Grove Cemetery, next to Mark and Kathy. Joe and Katherine spent 21 days at Jimmy's bedside as he lay unconscious. They helped him through months of fighting his way back.<sup>3</sup>

## **'FAITH BROUGHT US THROUGH'**

The reminders of Katherine Brantner's life are everywhere in her Greeley home.

On a shelf in her bedroom rest two small black-and-white

2. Descriptions and statements in this section based on interviews with Bob Brantner and Katherine Brantner.

3. Descriptions and statements in this section based on interviews with Bob Brantner and Katherine Brantner; *Greeley Tribune* accounts of the Feb. 7, 1962, automobile accident involving Johnny and Jimmy Brantner; Weld County court documents; and interviews with Karen Walso Schott, Ed and Betty Heimbuck, Art and Juanita Larson, and Eldon and Genevieve Yetter.

photographs of Mark and Kathy, each of them smiling innocently.

Photo albums next to a wingback chair in the living room burst with pictures, many showing her 11 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren.

Her husband is gone. Joe died Aug. 9, 2004, two months after they celebrated their 62nd anniversary. But his handiwork covers the walls — a clock set in a piece of glimmering lacquered driftwood, photographs from their mountain trips framed in rust-stained barnwood, a wind chime he built using thinly cut pieces of mocha and caramel rock.

Katherine moves slowly. She leans on a cane for support.

She also leans on God, just as she and Joe did in the wake of their losses.

“Life has been hard,” she says, “but then, God didn’t promise us a rose garden.

“Our faith brought us through all these tragedies. If it wasn’t for our faith and our friends, we couldn’t have gotten through it.”

She questioned God a few times over the years. Each time, she came to the same conclusion.

“In the end, he’s there to give you strength and helps you through it,” she says.

Her mind replays Dec. 14, 1961, and all that she lost after that morning.

Back then, after the deaths of Mark and Kathy, and after the death of Johnny and the injuries to Jimmy, she could not have imagined that many years in the future Dec. 14 would again be a day of sorrow for her family.<sup>4</sup>

4. Descriptions and statements in this section based on reporter’s observation and interviews with Bob Brantner and Katherine Brantner.