# THE CROSSING By Kevin Vaughan Photos by Chris Schneider Rocky Mountain News

## **CHAPTER 15: SILENCE**

**38 NEWS** 

# **Alice Larson Richardson spent** most of a lifetime not talking about Dec. 14, 1961. She didn't visit it in her mind. She didn't bring it up with her parents. But sometimes, with no warning, the crossing would come to her.

On a cold December day in 1998, she stood in the brown grass at Sunset Memorial Gardens on Greelev's west side to say goodbye to her Aunt Winnie Jo

Alice's older sister. Linda Edstrom, turned to her during the graveside service.

"Alice." she said. "look down. There, below Alice, was a simple

marble gravestone sunken into the ground. Etched on three weathered brass plates were the name "Steven A. Larson" and two years, 1952 and 1961.

It was the first time Alice had ever seen the grave of her little brother, the one who had switched seats with her on the bus just before the crash 37 years earlier Emotions welled up in her.

Sadness, for the boy whose face Juanita Larson keep a school she sometimes had trouble remembering

A twinge of jealousy, that Linda had known where their brother's picture. grave was and she had not.

Regret, that she'd let so many years pass without coming to find this spot.

#### No memory of the day

#### It hurt.

in the hospital several days after Kathy Brantner, were gone; that the collision

Doctors had taken out her readybeenburied. crushed gallbladder and appendix and a piece of her liver. They'd put a half-cast on her fractured right hand

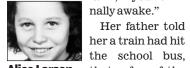
scrapes.

Now, finally, she was aware of what was going on around her. She turned her head.

She saw her father sitting in a big blue chair.

Alice was confused. She didn't know why she was in the hospital. She couldn't remember the acci-

"Oh," said Art Larson, a skinny truck driver who grew alfalfa for the cows and horses on his 23-acre farm, "you're fi-



Alice Larson that a few of the hurt?



COURTESY ART AND JUANITA LARSON **Remembering Steve:** Art and photograph of their son, Steve, tucked inside their wedding

children had been hurt, that she was recovering, that everything was fine.

On a doctor's advice, he didn't tell her that 20 children had died; That was the first thing Alice that the two girls sitting on either Larson knew when she awakened side of her, Mary Lozano and her little brother, Steve, had al-

He didn't tell her he'd stood up for bus driver Duane Harms.

During her three weeks in the hospital, Alice kept asking why They'd patched up her cuts and Steve and her older sisters, Nancy and Linda, hadn't visited.

> The answer was always the same: They're not allowed up here.

One night, Alice awoke in the dark and heard Jacquelyn White crying in the bed next to her.

A nurse was trying to comfort thegirl

As Alice listened to the muffled Jacquelyn's sisters, Elaine and Juleen, were dead.

Did they get in a car wreck on the the gift exchange for the way to the hospital to visit Jacque-sixth-grade class. her a train had hit lyn? Hadn't her father told her the school bus, that only a few people had been

"Shhh." the nurse suddenly said. "I think Alice is awake."

The day before Alice was well enough to go home, her mother came into her room. She had something to tell Alice.

"The wreck," she said, "was a lit tle bit worse than we told vou."

"I know," Alice answered. "Elaine and Juleen are dead." "So is Steven," her mother said.

Alice broke down.

But her mother also had a surprise. Linda and Nancy were waiting for her.

They were shocked at how pale and thin Alice was, but the sisters were happy to see each other.

When Alice arrived home from the hospital. Steve's things were

One day, during the months of doctor visits, her mom wheeled the car into Sunset Memorial Gardens. She pointed out some of the graves to Alice - Steve is over there, the Paxton girls are over there.she said.

They never got out of the car.

#### Moving on

For the rest of Alice's childhood, the accident simply wasn't spoken of. That's just how things worked — no grief counseling, no working through the sorrow out loud

Not talking about it was easy Not acknowledging that life had changed was more difficult.

One night, her mother set the table for six.

Then she remembered.

She didn't need a place for Steve, the chubby baby who'd fought rheumatic fever. The boy who'd smashed his thumb on the old iron gate at the Auburn schoolhouse, then calmly examined the mangled flesh at the doctor's office and said, "I really did it up that time, didn't I, Mom?"

Alice found solace in the outconversation, she realized that stretched arms of her blue teddy bear.

A mother who lost her daughter That didn't make any sense. in the bus crash had donated it to where she'd been a patient after the memories ambushed her.

Alice got it, and she loved it.

Her body healed, but she was ex-

scars and the long-healed scrapes by it every day. on her face that turned splotchy red when she got tired.

When she dressed for gvm. she'd hide her incisions

When her friends started wearing bikinis, she stuck to an old reached on that frigid December one-piece.

One night, she got all dressed up for a high school dance and twirled around the living room for her parents.

"You have a big hole in your nylons,"herfathertoldher.

She looked down. It wasn't a hole. It was a scar on her leg, showing through her stockings.

Alice graduated from high school, studied business management in Denver and took a job in the credit office of the hospital the crash.

Weld County deputy sheriff.

tremely self-conscious about her discussed, Alice was surrounded compositionclass.

She and Ron built their home on East 20th Street in Greelev, on the same piece of ground where Delta Elementary School once - the school she never stood morning in 1961.

Their four daughters - Rhonda, Melissa, Kynda and Tawnya attended East Memorial Elementary, opened in 1963 and named in honor of the children who died.

Every time she walked down the school's main hallway for a parent-teacher conference or a holiday program, she walked past a brass plaque listing those 20 names, with Steven Arthur Larson in the middle row

She was doing well, happy, with a great family, but every so often,

She had told her children about She married Ron Richardson, a the crash, and one day Kynda announced that she planned to write Though the accident was never about it for her college English

But Alice couldn't answer many of Kynda's questions, so she sent her to the library.

of newspaper stories, and Alice tracks were clear. sat down to read them.

They overwhelmedher. "I lived through it," she says, "so

I didn't think that reading about it would be as hard as it really was. ... I guess I just spent all those years acting like an ostrich if I don't know about it. I don't have to think about it, or deal with it, or something. I don't know why."

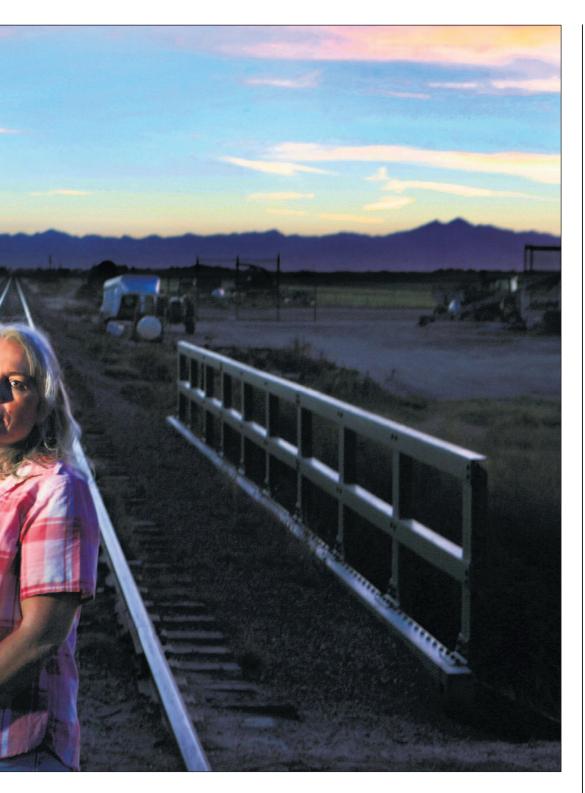
#### 'I don't like this'

Sometimes the pain was more visceral.

When Melissa was a third-grader, Alice volunteered to help shuttle voungsters from East Memori-Colorado for swimming lessons.

dent, Greeley school leaders re- this?"

keeping this busload of kids safe. The bus crossed, went on to the college and picked up another al to the University of Northern group, fresh from the pool. At another crossing, the same thought For many years after the acci- returned — "Why am I doing



quired an adult "monitor" on each bus. It was the monitor's job to get out at every railroad crossing Kynda came home with copies and wave the bus forward if the

Alice agreed to monitor the swimming trips. She'd ridden the bus after the accident, and it had never bothered her.

The day came. Alice sat in the front seat. At a railroad crossing in Greeley, Alice stepped out of the bus

As she started across the tracks, her knees shook

"Why am I doing this?" she thought.

Panic grabbed her, for no reason and every reason

As she tried to calm herself. she felt the awesome responsibility of

Then another one hit her: "I don't like this. I don't like it at all.'

She took one step down toward the street. A train whistle reverberated in the distance.

She froze on the bus steps. The train wasn't in sight. The red crossing lights were off. The bells were silent. The red-and-white striped arms remained up.

Finally, the bus driver said, "Sit backdown, Mrs. Richardson."

She moved shakily back to her

In a few moments, she would carry out her duties, but for a time she just sat there.

The children, antsy in their seats, didn't understand the de

This is stupid, one said, we could make it

We had plenty of time to get across, another one said. Alice sat there.

"Sometimes." she said. "voi don't

#### **A strong belief:** Alice

Larson Richardson stands on the tracks a few feet from where her father. Art Larson. stopped his delivery truck on Dec. 14, 1961, and gazed west. When he did, he saw her school bus stopped at the crossing. Alice survived the collision with a train that day, but her brother, Steve, died. "For some reason, God kept me alive," she says.

#### 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 - wil ripple over a lifetime.

But 45 years after that bitter morning outside Greeley, we car 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 RockvMountai



Video: Alice Larson Richardson finds that the crossing pops up in her life in surprising ways. Slide show: Larson family photos.

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 chanters: See previous installments in the 33-part series

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