

THE CROSSING

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



ASSOCIATED PRESS/1961

Shock: Bobby Brantner, 12, turns away after taking a close look at the demolished bus in which 20 children perished, including his brother, Mark, and his sister, Kathy.

CHAPTER 19: DEC. 14

A dispatcher for the Colorado Springs Police Department answered a 911 call at 6:25 a.m. on Dec. 14, 1992. On the other end of the line was an 18-year-old calling from a home at 5640 Red Onion Way in northeast Colorado Springs.

"This is the police department," the dispatcher said. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," answered the young man. "I have to report a death. I believe it is a possible homicide."

"OK," the dispatcher responded. "I need you to speak up, sir. You need to report what?"

"I need to report a death," the teen said, "and I believe that it is — that it very possibly could be a homicide, officer."

The dispatcher began the process of sending police officers to the home, a split-level brick house at the mouth of a cul-de-sac with a commanding view of Pikes Peak to the west. The dispatcher kept talking to young Bill Brantner, asking more about what he had seen.

"I went upstairs and walked into the bathroom, and my mother was laying face down in the shower, and the shower was on, and it just filled to the brim of the bathtub with water," Bill said.

"And I believed that she is dead because there were no air bubbles. And I looked up over the shower curtain that fell down on top of her, and I realize this is a horrible thing to say, but I believe that my dad has tried to make it look like my mom fell in the shower."

It was 31 years to the day since a speeding passenger train had plowed into a school bus outside Greeley.

A farm boy grows up

Bill's father, Robert Joseph Brantner, was born June 18, 1949, the fourth child of Joe and Katherine Brantner. He joined an older sister, Susie, and two brothers, Johnny and Jimmy.

Joe and Katherine were hard workers who worshipped at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Platteville, and they had staked their future on their 320-acre farm a few miles southeast of Greeley.

They began life there in a cramped, two-bedroom house. In 1954, they built a large, modern home, with dormer windows on the second floor, a stone fireplace and a recreation room next to the garage. By 1961, the couple had

eight children. Kathy had come along in 1952. Then Mark was born in 1955, Paul in 1960 and Mary in 1961.

In the fall of 1961, Bobby was a seventh-grader at Meeker Junior High, and he normally rode the bus to school with Kathy and Mark. But on Dec. 14, he needed to talk to his teacher before school, so he caught a ride with Johnny, who drove his own car to high school each day. On that day, a Union Pacific passenger train cut through the bus and killed their little brother and sister.

After the accident, Bobby kept riding to school with Johnny and Jimmy until Feb. 7, 1962, the day his father told him he needed to get back on the bus.

Bobby did as he was told, and he once again narrowly avoided a tragedy that devastated his family. Johnny and Jimmy headed for school that morning in Johnny's 1956 Chevy and smashed into a pickup. Johnny died, and Jimmy suffered terrible head injuries he would never fully overcome.

Bobby and the rest of the Brantner family picked up as best they could, working, going to church.

Looking for more

Bobby loved the farm. He loved romping through the endless fields, loved saying "hi" to everyone who came down the road, loved watching the calves being born. But farming was a hard life, and he knew it wasn't the way he wanted to earn his living.

So he did whatever he had to do. Operating a combine for his father. Driving a feed truck. In between, taking classes at the University of Northern Colorado, working toward a degree that would allow him to teach industrial arts. While he was at UNC, he met Cheryl Ann Sawyer, a native of Elgin, Minn., who was in the Army and studying nursing.

They married on Aug. 21, 1971.

Her Army commitment took her to Fort Carson, so the young couple moved to Colorado Springs. Bob got a teaching job, first at Gorman Junior High, where he taught metal shop, wood shop and drafting. Then he moved to Sierra High School.

Cheryl went to work at a Colorado Springs hospital.

They bought the house on Red Onion Way in a new development.



THE GAZETTE

Tragic date: Bob Brantner's wife, Cheryl Ann Brantner, is shown in her driver's license picture. She died Dec. 14, 1992.

They had three sons. Bill was born in 1974. Then came Michael in 1977 and Brian in 1981.

Life was work and family. Cheryl enjoyed her job, where she helped mothers give birth.

Bob won respect as an industrial arts teacher. His students racked up blue ribbons, at one point winning the state industrial arts championship five years in a row.

But, over time, the marriage deteriorated. By the fall of 1992, it was falling apart. Tension was high inside the home on Red Onion Way. Cheryl was working long hours. The boys weren't getting along. Bob was having an affair with a woman in the neighborhood.

'Dad's killing mom'

Bob came home late on Dec. 13, 1992. He told Cheryl he wanted a divorce. They got into an argument.

Early the next morning — Dec. 14, 1992 — the fight continued.

Brian awakened to his mother's screams. He lay in his bed for a few minutes, unable to figure out what was going on. He walked down the hall and up a flight of stairs to his parents' bedroom. He would later tell a police officer that it looked as if his father was pushing his mother around on the bed.

Cheryl saw Brian, screamed his name frantically. Bob saw him, too. He told the boy that his mother was having a nightmare, that he was trying to wake her up and calm her down.

Brian ran to the basement and woke up his brother, Bill.

"You've got to do something," Brian said, according to Bill's statements to police and prosecutors. "Dad's killing Mom."

Bill went up to the living room. His father came down from the bedroom carrying bedsheets, took them to his truck, then returned.

He told Bill that Cheryl had an awful nightmare and was going to take a shower. He said she should not be disturbed. He left for school.

Bill decided to go upstairs anyway. He found his mother and called 911.

The first police car arrived at 6:39 a.m. Officers found 42-year-old Cheryl dead in the tub, the shower curtain and rod on top of her.

A coroner looked at a gash in the side of her head and concluded that it could not have come from a fall, that it had to be the result of a blow with an unspecified weapon.

Detectives drove to Sierra High School. They found Bob in the office in the industrial arts classroom.

By 9:15 a.m., he was sitting in an interview room at the Sand Creek division of the Colorado Springs Police Department. He agreed to talk. Bob told officers that after 21 years of marriage, he could no longer live the way he'd been living. Cheryl mistreated their sons, he said. She did little around the house. She was consumed by her work. He told the officers that he had come home the night before and asked Cheryl for a divorce. They argued and finally went to bed.

He told them that he'd awakened at 4:45 a.m., showered and dressed. He and Cheryl got into it again, he said, and he told her the only things he wanted were his pickup, his motorcycle and half the value of everything the two of them possessed.

He told them that Cheryl shoved him, that he shoved her back, that she fell and slammed her head on something.

He said he grabbed a towel and helped her stop the bleeding, helped her into the shower. He said she insisted she would be all right and demanded that he take the bloody bedsheets to a laundromat so the boys wouldn't see them.

He told them he had lied to his sons about Cheryl having a nightmare. He didn't tell them that exactly 31 years earlier — on Dec. 14, 1961 — he saw the remains of the school bus he was supposed to be riding, crushed along a set of railroad tracks. He didn't tell them that his little brother and sister died in that crash.

He didn't tell them he had cheated death twice in an eight-week span.

WEDNESDAY: Last run

About this series

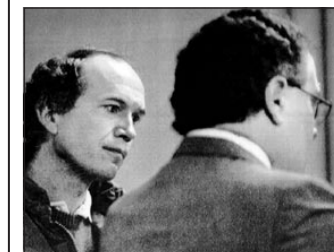
In just seconds, 20 children died, and a community was devastated.

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



■ **Slide show:** Brantner family photos.

■ **Documents:** The arrest warrant for Bob Brantner.

■ **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:** See previous installments in the 33-part series.

Contact reporter

Kevin Vaughan: vaughank@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5019

Contact photographer

Chris Schneider: schneiderc@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-2270

Public forum at 7 p.m. Feb. 21 in Greeley

Reporter Kevin Vaughan, photographer Chris Schneider, multi-media producer Tim Skillern and projects editor Carol Hanner will discuss the Crossing series at the Union Colony Civic Center, 701 10th Ave., Greeley.

The event, sponsored by the City of Greeley Museums, is free, but advanced tickets can be picked up at the Civic Center box office. Tickets at the door available at 6 p.m. Feb. 21; theater opens at 6:30 p.m.

■ **Information:** 1-970-350-9220, 1-970-356-5000 or 1-800-315-2787.



Mark Brantner



Kathy Brantner