

THE CROSSING Chapter 2

ANNOTATED VERSION

At 6:41 on the icy Thursday morning of Dec. 14, 1961, a Union Pacific streamliner lurched away from the station in Sterling, one hour and 41 minutes behind schedule.¹ An unusually heavy volume of Christmas mail had delayed the train at a number of stops. Now it was starting the last leg of the overnight Chicago-to-Denver run, with 173 passengers aboard.²

Engineer Herbert F. Sommers, in his OshKosh overalls and wire-framed glasses, opened up the throttle in the cab of the lead locomotive. Fireman Melvin C. Swanson sat across from him.³

The three diesel locomotives growled, and soon the 16-car train clipped along at close to 80 mph.⁴

Ninety miles away in the small Weld County farming community of Auburn, Duane Harms faced the same bitterly cold morning.⁵

The 23-year-old school bus driver, a slender man with reddish-blond hair and freckles, had tried college, but struggled.⁶

Now he had a job with School District No. 6, driving a bus in the morning and afternoon along a latticework of straight gravel roads.⁷

During the day, he worked as an elementary school janitor.⁸

He and his wife of 2 1/2 years, Judy, had a 3-week-old baby,

Lynda, who had been born the day after Thanksgiving.⁹

Judy was a student at the state college in Greeley, working toward a teaching degree. She and Duane lived next to the old Auburn school in an 800-square-foot home originally built for the teacher.¹⁰

Five miles southeast of Greeley, the Auburn area had no general store, no post office.¹¹

Simple frame houses stood along its straight, bumpy roads. Sugar beets, corn, alfalfa and pinto beans grew in its vast, flat fields.¹²

The families who lived there were first-, second- and third-generation immigrants — German-Russian, Swedish, Mexican — with names like Alles, Geisick, Munson, Brown, Rangel and Ford.¹³

They drove into Greeley, or to Platteville or Gilcrest, to worship. They went to Catholic, Baptist and Congregational churches.¹⁴

For three generations, children had taken their lessons in the Auburn school's classrooms, played ball out by the backstop.¹⁵

But the school was closed, and now, for the first time, the farm kids of Auburn rode a bus into Greeley.¹⁶

Harms had arisen at 5:30 a.m. At 7 a.m., he closed his front door be-

1. Train's circumstances based on transcript of Union Pacific engineer Herbert F. Sommers' testimony in a court hearing the afternoon of Dec. 14, 1961. Description of conditions as icy comes from Interstate Commerce Commission accident report.

2. Train's delay by Christmas mail attributed to Union Pacific spokesman Ed Schafer, as reported by the *Rocky Mountain News* on Dec. 15, 1961.

3. Descriptions of Union Pacific engineer Herbert F. Sommers and fireman Melvin C. Swanson based on transcript of testimony at court hearing on the afternoon of Dec. 14, 1961. Description of Sommers based on photographs taken at the scene of the accident and in court on Dec. 14, 1961, by the Colorado State Patrol, the *Associated Press* and the *Rocky Mountain News*.

4. Train's speed based on transcript of Union Pacific engineer Herbert F. Sommers' testimony at a court hearing on the afternoon of Dec. 14, 1961.

5. Duane Harms' actions come from his sworn statement of Dec. 14, 1961, as reported in the *Rocky Mountain News* on Dec. 15, 1961. The original copy of the statement could not be located in official files.

6. Duane Harms' college experience based on interviews with him. Description of Harms based on interviews with one or more of the following subjects: Vicky Munson Allmer, Jerry Hembry, Smith Freeman, Alan Stromberger, Debbie Stromberger Keiser, Randy Geisick, Cheryl Brown Hiatt, Nancy Alles Stroh, Luis Lozano, Glen Ford, Bruce Ford and Alice Larson Richardson.

7. Duane Harms' duties based on interviews with him. Description of roads based on a map of the Auburn area.

8. Duane Harms' duties based on interviews with him.

9. Descriptions of Duane Harms' life based on interviews with him. Lynda Harms' birthday based on birth announcement in *Greeley Tribune* on Nov. 24, 1961.

10. Descriptions of Duane Harms' life based on interviews with him. Size of Auburn teacherage based on interviews with Daisy Boulter, the current owner of the property.

11, 12, 13, 14, 15: Descriptions of Auburn based on reporter's observation and interviews with one or more of the following subjects: Vicky Munson Allmer, Jerry Hembry, Colleen Yetter Lackey, LaDean Yetter Long, Eldon and Genevieve Yetter, Smith Freeman, Elizabeth Freeman, Young G. Freeman, Alan Stromberger, Debbie Stromberger Keiser, Randy Geisick, Cheryl Brown Hiatt, Nancy Alles Stroh, Herman and Louise Alles, Becky Alles Badley, Ed and Betty Heimbeck, Luis Lozano, Loretta Ford, Glen Ford, Bruce Ford, Judy Smock LaMaster, Kathy Smock Allmer, Karen Walso Schott, Alice Paxton, Alice Larson Richardson, Art and Juanita Larson, Katherine Brantner, Bob Brantner, Carolyn Baxter Tucker and Duane Harms.

16. Closure of Auburn school based on "A Report on Colorado School District Organization," Colorado Department of Education, October 2002, available at <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeedserv/download/pdf/sdorg.pdf>.

hind him as he headed out to the 60-seat school bus parked in the yard.¹⁷

He started the engine of bus No. 2, then hurried back inside while it idled. This was his morning ritual on cold days — he wanted the children to find warm seats waiting for them, and he knew he'd be arm-wrestling the stick shift if he didn't get the engine going.¹⁸

THE UNION PACIFIC

Seventy miles away, the train cut across the lonely landscape of northeast Colorado — past the no-stoplight towns of Atwood, Merino and Hill-rose as the tracks paralleled the South Platte River.¹⁹

Union Pacific streamliners ferried passengers in relative luxury, rocketing through the night across rural America. They had impressive-sounding names. The City of Los Angeles. The City of Portland. The City of Denver.²⁰

Sommers, the engineer, had been married for 39 years and had no children.²¹ He'd started with the railroad in October 1918, a month before the signing of the armistice that ended World War I. By 1941 he'd been promoted to engineer.²²

As the fall of 1961 approached — just as Duane Harms was beginning to drive a school bus — Sommers had grabbed a coveted slot on the City of Denver, one of the regular trains that moved passengers across the West in the days before air travel was commonplace.²³

Sommers, based in Denver, would leave the city in the afternoon and run the eastbound train as far as Sterling, 125 miles away.²⁴

There, he'd climb down from the engine and head off the clock while another engineer took the next leg of the overnight trip.²⁵

Early the next morning, Sommers would take over the returning City of Denver and run it over the last stretch back into Union Station.²⁶

On this day, the train reached Fort Morgan, 40 miles from Greeley, around 7:30 a.m. The sun had cracked the eastern horizon 15 minutes earlier.²⁷

About the same time, Harms said goodbye to Judy and Lynda, stepped into the bus and started the defroster.²⁸

The windshield was clear, but the 6-degree weather had iced over the windows along the sides and back.²⁹

Harms found three children waiting for him in the first two rows behind his seat.³⁰

Normally, he would pick up Vicky, Gary and Johnny Munson near the end of his run. But their father, Raymond, didn't want them to wait out in the cold, so he dropped them off at the bus.³¹

Vicky, 6, was a first-grader. Gary, 8, and Johnny, 9, were third-graders.³²

Harms put the bus in gear, pulled out and turned right to head north.³³

A couple hundred yards away, he stopped, grabbed the big chrome lever to his right and yanked open the folding door. Cindy Dorn, an 11-year-old sixth-grader who rode the bus each day with two of her cousins, hopped on and took a seat farther back in the bus.³⁴

On any other day it wouldn't matter where a child sat. But this day would be different. This day, it would be a matter of survival.³⁵

17. Descriptions of Duane Harms' actions based on notes of Weld County Assistant District Attorney Karl Ahlborn and on Harms' Dec. 14, 1961, statement as reported in the *Rocky Mountain News* on Dec. 15, 1961. Original copy of the statement could not be located in official files.

18. Descriptions of Duane Harms' actions based on interviews with him and his Dec. 14, 1961, statement as reported in the *Rocky Mountain News* on Dec. 15, 1961. Original copy of the statement could not be located in official files.

19. Route of train based on Union Pacific track map.

20. History of Union Pacific streamliners based on information from the railroad's web site, <http://www.uprr.com/aboutup/history/passengr.shtml>.

21. Herbert F. Sommers' background based on his marriage license on file in Arapahoe County and interviews with Michael Sommers and Dana Sommers Torsky, his nephew and niece.

22. Herbert F. Sommers' work history based on his personnel file, obtained from the files of Duane Harms' defense attorney James H. Shelton.

23. Herbert F. Sommers' work assignment based on transcript of his testimony in a court hearing on the afternoon of Dec. 14, 1961. Descriptions of Union Pacific streamliners based on information from the railroad's web site, <http://www.uprr.com/aboutup/history/passengr.shtml>.

24. Herbert F. Sommers' work assignment based on transcript of his testimony in a court hearing on the afternoon of Dec. 14, 1961.

25. An engineer's routine based on interviews with Jim Ehernberger, a former Union Pacific employee.

26. Herbert F. Sommers' work assignment based on transcript of his testimony in court hearing on the afternoon of Dec. 14, 1961, and interviews with Jim Ehernberger, a former Union Pacific employee.

27. Calculation of train's location based on the distance traveled and the speed of the train; time of sunrise obtained from the U.S. Naval Observatory.

28. Descriptions of Duane Harms' actions based on his sworn statement of Dec. 14, 1961, as reported in the *Rocky Mountain News* on Dec. 15, 1961. Original copy of statement could not be located in official files.

29. Descriptions of Duane Harms' actions based on his sworn statement of Dec. 14, 1961, as reported in the *Rocky Mountain News* on Dec. 15, 1961. Original copy of statement could not be located in official files.

30. Early arrival of Vicky, Gary and Johnny Munson on Harms' bus based on interviews with Vicky Munson Allmer.

31. Normal routine of Vicky, Gary and Johnny Munson and their father's decision to drop them off early based on interviews with Vicky Munson Allmer.

32. Ages of Munson children come from Colorado State Patrol accident report. Their grades based on stories published by the

HITCHING A RIDE

Down the road, 13-year-old Roger Reps stood at the end of his driveway.³⁶

He could see the school bus in the distance.³⁷

Normally he waited with his brother, Jimmy, but the 15-year-old was sick.³⁸

Just then, a neighbor pulled up and offered Roger a ride to town. The boy didn't know what to do.³⁹

"C'mon," the man said, and Roger opened the door and got in.⁴⁰

A little farther up the road, Harms passed by the home of another girl who was staying home sick.⁴¹

Then he pulled up in front of the home of Eldon and Genevieve Yetter.⁴²

Harms usually picked up three passengers at this stop — the Yetter girls, Colleen, 13, and LaDean, 6; and their cousin, Jerry Hembry, 16, who lived with the family and was a sophomore at Greeley High School.⁴³

But Colleen and LaDean were moving slowly. They'd been out late the night before at a Christmas program rehearsal at their church.⁴⁴

LaDean's hair needed to be combed. Colleen wasn't ready, either.⁴⁵

Jerry was.⁴⁶ He pulled on his jacket and sprinted down the long driveway to catch the bus.⁴⁷

Though he usually sat about four rows back, he plopped down into the front seat, just behind the door, a deck of cards in his jacket pocket to help pass the time.⁴⁸

Harms pulled away.⁴⁹

At the next stop, along U.S. 34, Harms picked up the three Freeman children — Melody, 8, Joy, 10, and their brother, Smith, 7 — and Sherry Mitchell. Sherry, 6, had wanted to go to the hospital to see her dad, who had been injured by a steer at the meatpacking plant where he worked. But her mother decided Sherry should go to school and carried her to the bus as tears streamed down the girl's face.⁵⁰

At the next corner, Harms stopped for 8-year-old Randy Geisick, who clutched some wrapping paper as he took a seat up front.⁵¹

He and his classmates had made Christmas gifts for their parents, and he was going to wrap his at school.⁵²

A little ways down the road, Harms picked up Alan and Debbie Stromberger. Alan, 10, took a seat in the second or third row. Debbie, 7, headed toward the back and sat down to pull on her galoshes.⁵³

Along this stretch of road, Harms missed more regulars — sisters who got a ride into town with their parents.⁵⁴

At the next intersection, Harms stopped for 13-year-old Cheryl Brown.⁵⁵

In her wallet was a Confederate \$5 bill she'd found in the wall of her home.⁵⁶

Harms turned right and headed back west toward his starting place.⁵⁷

Before he got there, he stopped for the Alles girls.⁵⁸

Nancy Alles, 11, lived on the south side of the road, on a farm where

Greeley Tribune on Dec. 15, 1961.

33. Duane Harms' bus route based on map in the files of Harms' defense attorney Jim Shelton.

34. Location of Cindy Dorn's home based on reporter's observation; Duane Harms' bus route based on map in the files of his defense attorney Jim Shelton; background on Cindy Dorn based on interviews with Nancy Alles Stroh and Becky Badley.

35. Locations of victims based on interviews with one or more of the following subjects: Vicky Munson Allmer, Jerry Hembry, Colleen Yetter Lackey, LaDean Yetter Long, Eldon and Genevieve Yetter, Smith Freeman, Elizabeth Freeman, Young G. Freeman, Alan Stromberger, Debbie Stromberger Keiser, Randy Geisick, Cheryl Brown Hiatt, Nancy Alles Stroh, Herman and Louise Alles, Becky Alles Badley, Ed and Betty Heimbuck, Luis Lozano, Loretta Ford, Glen Ford, Bruce Ford, Judy Smock Lamaster, Kathy Smock Allmer, Karen Walso Schott, Alice Paxton, Alice Larson Richardson, Art and Juanita Larson, Katherine Brantner, Bob Brantner, Carolyn Baxter Tucker and Duane Harms.

36, 37, 38, 39, 40: Descriptions of Roger Reps' actions based on interview with him. Description of Jimmy Reps' illness based on "Tragedy at 8 a.m." by Joseph P. Blank, *Redbook*, June 1962.

41. Duane Harms' missing a regular passenger based on "Tragedy at 8 a.m." by Joseph P. Blank, *Redbook*, June 1962.

42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48. Sequence of events involving Yetter girls and Jerry Hembry based on interviews with Eldon Yetter, Genevieve Yetter, Colleen Yetter Lackey, LaDean Yetter Long and Jerry Hembry.

49, 50: Duane Harms' bus route based on map in the files of his defense attorney Jim Shelton. Details on the Freeman children and Sherry Mitchell boarding the bus based on interviews with one or more of the following subjects: Smith Freeman, Young Freeman, Elizabeth Freeman, Bill Mitchell and Mary Mitchell.

51, 52: Duane Harms' bus route based on map in the files of his defense attorney Jim Shelton. Randy Geisick boarding the bus based on interviews with him.

53. Duane Harms' bus route based on map in the files of his defense attorney Jim Shelton. Alan Stromberger and Debbie Stromberger Keiser boarding the bus based on interviews with them.

54. Duane Harms missing a regular passenger based on "Tragedy at 8 a.m." by Joseph P. Blank, *Redbook*, June 1962.

55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61: Duane Harms' bus route based on map in the files of his defense attorney Jim Shelton. Cheryl Brown Hiatt boarding the bus based on interviews with her. Family connections and home descriptions for Nancy Alles Stroh and Cheryl Brown Hiatt based on interviews with them.

her father had grown up. Her cousin, Linda Alles, 10, lived on the north side.⁵⁹

Both girls were cousins to Cindy Dorn, the first passenger Harms had picked up.⁶⁰

Nancy Alles sat next to Cheryl Brown in the fourth row. Cheryl pulled out her social studies papers to study for a test.⁶¹

Linda Alles, carrying her brother's wrestling medal for show-and-tell at school, took her normal seat near the back of the bus. After pulling away from the Alles homes, Harms drove back past the old Auburn school.⁶²

He'd driven a touch over four miles, cutting a giant square across the countryside.⁶³

He took a left and headed down the road about a half mile, where he stopped at the farm of Ed and Betty Heimback for their two girls, Pam, 9, and Kathy, 12.⁶⁴

Just after they got on the bus, Harms pulled up to a set of railroad tracks and stopped.⁶⁵

It was about 7:45 a.m.⁶⁶

The City of Denver streamliner raced along, less than 20 miles — and 15 minutes — away.⁶⁷

62, 63, 64, 65: Linda Alles carrying her brother's medal based on interview with her sister Becky Alles Badley. Duane Harms' bus route based on map in the files of his defense attorney Jim Shelton. Length of Harms' route measured by reporter.

66. Calculation of time based on the distance of the route and the time Duane Harms had been driving.

67. Calculation of train's distance from Auburn based on the speed of the train.