

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

CHAPTER 29: NEW LIFE

Rebecca Alles arrived first, on Feb. 9, 1962. Then came Crystal Freeman on April 11, and Karen Walso on Nov. 6. Susan Craven arrived Oct. 23, 1964.

Four girls born after the deadliest traffic accident in Colorado history. Four girls welcomed by parents who had buried other children after a passenger train blasted into their crowded school bus on Dec. 14, 1961.

Getting to know Linda

Becky Alles Badley, 45, sets a beat-up wooden trunk on the living room floor in the black brick home she shares with her husband, Glenn, near the old Auburn school. She pops the rusty latches and lifts the top. It smells damp and moldy inside.

She reaches in and pulls out a girl's dark gray wool coat, flecked with little stitches of orange and blue and white.

It belonged to the sister she never knew, Olinda Louella Alles. The girl everyone called Linda.

Linda wore it for the last time on Dec. 14, 1961, when she climbed onto the school bus with her brother's wrestling medal for show-and-tell.

Beneath the jacket are a robin's-egg blue dress with a lacy white collar, a pink dress, a brown-and-white striped dress. A grocery bag bulges with condolence cards. A box overflows with newspaper clippings about the crash.

The trunk holds Linda's membership card for the Huck Hound Club, her last report card—blank after the first quarter of the 1961-62 school year—and a poem she wrote in 1959, when she was 7. That year, her parents celebrated their 25th anniversary.

On your 25th anniversary I always loved you, you see? I never quit loving you two And so I hope you'll never quit loving Linda Lou. I loved you so much I prayed for you every day I hope you'll never die and that's all I say. The End

A little later, Becky pulls a box from a closet. She digs through it and finds Linda's green diary with the last entry on June 9, 1961—"went music lesson."

The box holds a wrinkled brown sack with the broken remains of a necklace and a pewter pin Linda wore the morning she died.

These are the things that connect Becky to a sister who died eight weeks before Becky was born.

"It's good to look through it," she says, the dresses and the coat and the clippings spread out on the floor.

"This is how she really comes to life for me," Becky says. "She basically is an enigma, a story."

A blessing from the Lord

In the days after the accident, Elizabeth Freeman could not wrap her mind around the idea that her daughter, April Melody, was dead.

She asked her husband, Young Freeman, to take her out to look for Melody. Maybe she'd

gotten hurt in the accident, had run away, was hiding someplace.

Two of their other children, Smith, 7, and Joy, 10, were recovering from their injuries.

Melody was an outgoing little girl who would talk to anyone, who snuggled up to her mom and wrapped her arms around her.

"She was a very loving girl," Elizabeth says. "I missed her a lot."

Four months after Melody was buried, Elizabeth gave birth to a dark-haired, brown-eyed girl. They named her Crystal Yvonne.

"I kept telling people, 'She did not replace Melody, but she's here, and I have to take care of her,'" Elizabeth says.

The two girls looked alike, but their personalities were different. Crystal was a quiet, even shy child. Even now, she does not want to talk about growing

up in the aftermath of the crash that took her sister.

But her mother sees her as nothing less than a blessing from the Lord, sent for a purpose, a bundle of love that helped her heal.

"It wouldn't have been as easy if I wouldn't have had that distraction of having Crystal and raising her and everything," Elizabeth says.

Learning from stories

Karen Walso Schott has always wondered: Who was the sister I never knew?

It's been on her mind as long as she can remember.

Linda Kathleen Walso was 13 on Dec. 14, 1961. She tried to talk her mother into taking her to school that morning. Instead, she died at the crossing two miles from her home.

Karen has spent her life trying to know Linda.

Karen was 9 or 10 when she pried open a trunk and looked through all of Linda's old dresses. She heard the stories about Linda, how she loved to ride her horse. How she'd fallen off one day and broken her arm. How she'd gotten her braces off just before she died.

Over the years, Karen, born 11 months after Linda died, asked her mother a question. Did you have me because you lost Linda? Her mother always answered the same way: "I don't know. That's just the way it was."

Wanted and unwanted

For years, Susan Craven worked to solve the mystery of a brother and sister she never met, trying to find her place in her family.

Her parents, Ralph and Aleta Craven, were raising three children when that fatal Thursday in 1961 arrived. Calvin turned 10 that day. Ellen was 8. And Mike was 4½. After the accident at the crossing, only Mike was left.

Early in 1964, Ralph and Aleta began the process of trying to adopt a baby. Nine months and nine days later, on Oct. 23, they



Looking back: Becky Alles Badley stands with a swing near the home she shares with her husband outside Greeley. Becky was born two months after the death of her sister, Linda Alles, and knows her only through stories and keepsakes.



Wondering: Karen Walso Schott looks out the front window of her Greeley home. Karen is one of four girls born after the train-bus crash to families who lost children.

were introduced to a little girl who was nearly four months old. They took her home that day and named her Susan.

One day a few years later, Aleta gave little Susan a doll that had belonged to the big sister she never met. She tried to explain adoption that day. She tried to help her know Calvin and Ellen.

Calvin was a little boy who had climbed to the peak of the garage his dad was shingling and said, "I can almost be in heaven up here."

Ellen was a little girl who loved dolls, who helped her mother with canning pickles and watermelon pickles.

Through the years, Susan experienced pangs of guilt — she had a family, this family, because Calvin and Ellen died.

"I'd wonder, 'Where would I be if that hadn't happened?'" she says. As an adopted child, she sometimes found herself caught in conflicting emotions — feeling wanted by the Cravens, feeling unwanted by her birth parents.

Today she is a 42-year-old mother to two children, grateful for her parents, for her big brother Mike. Grateful for the presence of Calvin and Ellen in her life.

Why?

Forty-five years have drifted by since those children died on the bus, and their families have

changed.

Ralph and Aleta Craven are still here, but Allen and Bernice Walso are dead, as is Ruben Alles. Marie Alles battles Alzheimer's. Young and Elizabeth Freeman are divorced.

Each of the girls who came into those families after the accident has her own questions.

Becky Badley sits at her kitchen table, a cup of hot cocoa in her hands, and talks about her faith, and the belief that one day they may all have the answers.

"Ultimately, I think we believed it was always in God's hands, part of God's plan," she says.

"We really don't understand why, but maybe someday we will."

MONDAY: Filling the void

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: Mementos help bring to life those who died in the bus crash.
- Discuss: Share your thoughts on the series and read others' comments at RockyTalk Live.
- Sources: Read an annotated version of the story.
- 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



Linda Alles



April Freeman



Linda Walso



Calvin Craven



Ellen Craven