Rocky Mountain News

THE CROSSING
Chapter 32

ANNOTATED VERSION

Time. It creeps by slowly in sad times and thunders past in happy ones. Sometimes, it stands as still as the granite monuments in a cemetery, as the face of a cherished child captured in a third-grade photograph.

Forty-five years have passed since a powerful locomotive ripped through the Auburn community.

For some people, it might as well have been 100 years ago, for all the impact it had on their lives. For others, the crash is as close as yesterday.

Not long ago, Alice Paxton rolled a piece of yellow legal paper into her typewriter. She wrote her own obituary. In a few lines, she recounted her life. Her birth in 1925. Her marriage to Jim Paxton in 1945. The places she worked over the years — Cook's Drug Store, Denver Dry, Hested's Department Store, State Bank, Monfort.

She left only one spot blank: the date of her death.

To the top of the page she paper-clipped a photograph, a wallet-sized studio shot of her in a baby blue blouse with a frilly collar and a sapphire jacket.

She knows that when she dies, there will be no one else to compose an obituary. Her only children, Marilyn and Jan, lost their lives at the crossing. Her husband, Jim, died on Nov. 27, 2005, after a three-month battle with a stomach infection.

"I know I'm alone now," she says, a sense of resignation in her voice. "I'm completely alone. I have brothers, but that isn't the same.

"You're just completely alone in the whole world."

She still drives out to Sunset Memorial Gardens on the west side of Greeley, walks across the grass to visit the graves of Marilyn and Jan, 13 and 11 when they died, and now Jim.

"There's one spot in between left for me," she says.

She still holds the same bitter feelings for Duane Harms, the driver of the school bus that carried her daughters to their deaths. It does not matter to her that he has had a difficult life since leaving Colorado, that his wife and daughter are mentally ill.

"Well, that's too bad," she says. "I don't feel a bit sorry for him. I'm sorry for them, but not for him — not a bit.

"The people that feel sorry for him — I don't know what they're thinking." [1]

1. Descriptions and statements in this section based on reporter's observations and interviews with Alice Paxton.

LEARNING TO CRY

Juanita Larson feels sorry for him.

"God bless him," she says.

Juanita cries, too, for her son, Steve, the clumsy, fast-growing boy she lost at the crossing.

She wasn't always that way. For years, she thought she had to put on a brave face, that the best way to get beyond the sorrow was to act as though it never happened. For years, her daughters thought Steve's death didn't affect her deeply.

It did, of course. But she did her crying in the dark, in the middle of the night, into her pillow.

She felt alone, even with her husband, Art, asleep beside her.

She tells the story of one night soon after the accident when she lay awake, crying quietly.

She felt her mother, who had died six months before Steve, kiss her gently on the cheek and tell her it would be OK.

As she remembers, her eyes redden, and the tears come. She doesn't fight them the way she once did.

"I think I allow myself to cry more now than I ever did before," she says. "I just didn't allow myself to cry. That's the way we dealt with stuff."

It's something she could only see many years after Dec. 14, 1961.[2]

The children who lived through that day are middle-aged now. They, too, see things through the prism of time gone by.

When he stepped onto the bus that morning, Randy Geisick was 8 years old.

Duane, his bus driver, was 23 and seemed so much older.

Duane was the grownup who stuck his arm across the aisle to keep the energetic boy and his friends from bounding off the bus and dashing for the swing set.

Now, Randy thinks about it and shakes his head. Randy is 53. He realizes that Duane was just a kid.[3]

Alice Larson Richardson, who was 11 when she got on the bus, thinks the same thing.

It amazes her "to think now how young he was at the time, and to have that responsibility of taking all of us to school," she says.

As a wife, as a mother of four grown daughters, as a grandmother, she's amazed that people were able to pick up the pieces and move on.

"I've always attributed that to the fact that almost all the people in the neighborhood were religious people," she says.

2. Descriptions and statements in this section based on reporter's observations and interviews with Art and Juanita Larson.

3. Descriptions in this section based on reporter's observations and interviews with Randy Geisick.

"And I think that I honestly believe that it was God's guiding hand that guided them through this tough, horrible time."

As she and her husband, Ron, raised their four girls, they talked about the accident.

They wondered how parents who lost children kept going through their bleakest days.

"We sit and think, 'I couldn't have. I would have totally lost it,'" she says. "There was strength back in that little community.

"We were still a close neighborhood where these kids had all gone to that little school, and we knew everybody. It was just a little old farming community that stuck together." [4]

4. Descriptions and statements in this section based on reporter's observations and interviews with Alice Larson Richardson and Ron Richardson.

A TIME OF KINDNESS

Some of those touched by the tragedy marvel at the absolute kindness of strangers in the days and weeks after the crash.

Becky Badley reaches into a brown grocery sack overflowing with condolence cards mailed to her parents after her sister, Linda Alles, died in the accident.

A cousin, Nancy Alles, opens a scrapbook, looks at page after page of get-well cards she received as she recovered from a broken back and cracked ribs.

Jerry Hembry can't forget the stranger who sent him a new coat after reading a newspaper story about him.

On the morning of the crash, he'd yanked on his jacket as he ran for the bus, but he'd lost it in the confusion after the collision.

And Vicky Munson Allmer can't forget a soldier named Roy Meek. He wrote letters to her and her two brothers, Gary and Johnny, after they were injured in the accident.

He asked them each what they wanted for Christmas.

Gary and Johnny wanted BB guns. Vicky wanted a gold watch.

Roy Meek sent them.[5]

5. Descriptions and statements in this section based on reporter's observations and interviews with Becky Alles Badley, Nancy Alles Stroh, Jerry Hembry and Vicky Munson Allmer.