

# THE CROSSING

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



**Holding tight:** Juanita and Art Larson lost their only son, Steve, in the bus-train accident and endured a scary time as their daughter, Alice, fought her way back to health from her critical injuries. But they stood behind school bus driver Duane Harms, remembering how he had supported Steve as the boy struggled to fit in.



## CHAPTER 7: MEMORIES

# Laughter breaks loose from Juanita Larson's throat, and a great torrent of happiness fills her living room. In her mind, she is back in 1961.

The cows have wandered away from the 23-acre farm where she lives with her truck-driver husband, Art, and their four children, Nancy, Linda, Alice and Steve.

Linda, 13, has driven off in the family car to look for the cows. Steve, not quite 10, has gone with her.

Linda returns, alone and on foot, the cows in tow.

Juanita is exasperated.

"You mean I have to go all the way down there and get that car?" she huffs.

"Oh, no," Linda answers, "Steve's bringing it."

And pretty soon, here comes the 9-year-old boy at the wheel of the maroon-and-white '48 Chevy, steering slowly along the irrigation ditch and up the dirt driveway.

"He brought it all the way home," Juanita says, her voice a rising tide of joy, "just as big as you please."

And the laughter erupts again in her Gilcrest home, not far from U.S. 85 south of Greeley.

For Juanita Larson, talking about her only son, the one she lost 45 years ago along the railroad tracks, is a pleasure.

As she reminisces, her husband of 60 years sits a few feet away, beanpole-skinny, his hands clasped loosely in his lap, thumbs fiddling.

A survivor of four strokes, he doesn't talk much, at least not on this day, but Juanita is as talkative as he is quiet.

The happy memories of Steve spill from her as if they had happened last month.

One time she was visiting down the road at a neighbor's house, while Steve played with a friend.

"He and Steve got on our horse, and they were riding it around their farm. The horse decided to go one way, and the kids went the other way," she says, the laughter coming hard.

Another time Steve sold some of his rabbits to an aunt. He beamed at the prospect of making some money.

But the smile slid off his face when his aunt handed him a check.

"He was so disappointed because he wanted money, not a piece of paper," Juanita says.

And there was the time Steve, the little instigator, talked Juanita into climbing onto a trampoline with him and his friends. They started jumping, and Juanita, unable to find her balance, got bounced around in the middle, her knees and elbows and nose rubbed raw on the black mat.



COURTESY ART AND JUANITA LARSON

**Missing their boy:** In this family photo, Art and Juanita Larson pose with daughters Alice, Nancy and Linda. Their son, Steve, died in the bus crash. They pasted his picture into the portrait.

"You start talking about it, and you start thinking about all the wonderful things, and people who don't ever have any children, they don't have any idea how wonderful it is to have children," she says.

## A deal with God

Her children came quickly into her life. She and Art married in 1946, and by January 1952, they had three girls and a boy.

Then, in 1955, Juanita was diagnosed with cervical cancer.

As she fought through radiation and surgery, she offered God a deal: Heal me, and I'll bring all my children up in the church.

"I knew that my kids were not going to be raised by a step-mother," she says. "I just told him, 'I'm not ready for you.'"

God kept his end of the bargain, and she kept hers.

In 1957, Art and a healed Juanita moved onto a small farm in the Auburn area southeast of Greeley. Art drove a truck, droning up and down U.S. 85, hauling merchandise between Greeley and Denver.

Juanita worked as a nurse's aide on the night shift. They raised a few animals and some alfalfa.

They went to church.

In the fall of 1961, Steve found a new friend.

His name was Duane Harms, the school bus driver. In Harms, Steve found a kindred spirit of sorts.

Steve was not quite 10, but he was already wearing size 12 pants, and his feet were big.

When other kids made fun of

the clumsy boy, Harms pulled Steve aside.

You're growing so much that your feet and your legs, they're not keeping up with what you want to do with them, Harms told him.

When there was no one else to play with Steve at school, Harms did, racing him on the playground.

Forty-five years later, Juanita still remembers the evenings that fall when Steve spent all his time talking "about what Duane did, or what Duane and I did, or what Duane said to me."

"Duane was so good to him," Juanita says.

On Dec. 14, 1961, Linda was sick, so Juanita kept her home. Alice, who was 11, and Steve, who was a month from his 10th birthday, caught the bus. After a couple minutes, they swapped seats.

As Art drove Nancy to high school in Greeley, the City of Denver streamliner screamed past him.

He looked west and saw the school bus, with Steve and Alice on it, a little more than half a mile away.

Reassured when he saw the red brake lights on the bus, Art headed on toward town.

Juanita was home from her night shift at the hospital, getting ready for bed, when the phone call came.

She jumped back into her clothes, told Linda to stay put in case anyone called and sped to the crossing.

There, a neighbor, Joe Brantner, grabbed her, told her she needed to come with him to the hospital, that Alice was badly injured.

They rushed off.

As morning turned to afternoon, the shock of what had happened at the crossing settled in.

The bodies of the 20 dead children had been taken to the old state armory building on Eighth Avenue in Greeley.

Confusion wracked the families of the 36 children on the bus.

Some parents wandered the hospital's hallways, looking for their children, unable to find them. Others huddled in the freezing cold outside the armory, hoping for some word.

Still others sat in a courtroom, where grim-faced clerks took notes as investigators asked a series of questions.

How tall is your son? What color is his hair? Does he have any scars?

What was your daughter wearing when she left the house this morning? How much does she weigh?

## Keeping vigil

At the hospital, Art, who had been ready to head out in his delivery truck when his boss told him about the crash, stood by Juanita's side.

They didn't know what to feel. They were unsure whether Alice would survive, unsure whether Steve was alive or dead.

Art held Alice, while Juanita helped prop up her feet and hand-pumped lifesaving saline and blood into her body.

For a time, Alice's life hung precariously.

Her liver torn, her gallbladder crushed, her appendix damaged, she was wheeled into an operating room.

Art and Juanita both hoped that Steve was all right somewhere, maybe knocked out, maybe getting treated in another part of the hospital.

Then, early in the afternoon, they learned the worst. Steve had been found dead in a ditch along the tracks.

Alice came out of surgery alive, but she was still in bad shape.

A doctor pulled Juanita aside. Alice's stability was so fragile, he told her, that finding out her little brother was dead could send her into a deep shock and kill her.

So they kept the news from Alice for three weeks, as she slowly regained her strength.

While she was in the hospital, they buried Steve in his blue Cub Scout uniform with the yellow neckerchief.

## 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](http://RockyMountainNews.com)



■ **Video:** Though Steve Larson died at the crossing, memories of his childhood bring great happiness to his family.

■ **Slide show:** Larson family portraits, candid shots.

■ **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](mailto:vaughank@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-954-5019

■ **Contact photographer Chris Schneider:**

[schneiderc@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:schneiderc@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-954-2270

## Inside

A sample of reader reaction to the series on **NEWS 46**



# Rocky Talk

# Readers speak out on The Crossing

■ These are among the postings from readers responding to *The Crossing*, an ongoing *Rocky* series. To post your own comment go to [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)

**My first question was "why?"** Why revisit that morning more than 45 years ago? Was a piece of your heart on that bus that day? Whatever the reason, you have me hooked. You certainly have the eloquence and grace with which to retell the story with the dignity that it deserves. A tragic picture of how hundreds of lives can change in a flash. Thank you.  
DONNA, Jan. 23, 12:24 p.m.

**This is an amazing story.** The fact that 20 children from a rural community were killed in seconds on one morning makes this so sad. A whole community was leveled. My father was the principal at the school that these kids were being driven to. He had to ID many of the kids from their remains when the parents were unable to handle the task. He hasn't spoken much of this for 45 years. It impacts all who were touched by the tragedy — to this day.  
KEN on Jan. 23, 11:27 a.m.

**I have read today's chapter** with compelling interest to try to understand why tragedies like these happen . . . and I just want to say with the sincerest of compassion, that my heart goes out to all those affected that day nearly nine months to the day before I was born in September 1962, to the families, townspeople, adults responsible on both sides of the tragedy, and most of all, to those innocent little schoolchildren whose only care in the world on that cold morning was to make it to school and stay warm. I have a good friend whose best friend was taken that morning; she was only eight years old at the time and still suffers survivors' remorse to this day. Let this be a reminder to each of us that no one knows whether or not this day will be our last; life is a precious gift that is best never taken for granted but entrusted daily to the Creator.  
DEE on Jan. 23, 3:58 p.m.

**Excellent story and series.** This is now an obscure piece of Colorado history that has left its mark on the community, state and nation. I'm sincerely pleased to see your tasteful and relevant series on this tragedy. I moved to east Greeley from the western slope many years after the accident. In an effort



**Duane Harms, 23, posed for this photo,** arranged by his lawyer after the crash, to show how he had to twist his body to see down the railroad tracks.

VIRGINIA SHELTON/1962

to learn about the area I would talk to the neighbors about the history of the rural neighborhood. This accident was always one of the first items they spoke of. One neighbor was a survivor of the accident. Another had children waiting for the very bus that was hit. Someone else had a sibling killed in the accident. Without a doubt it left an indelible mark on the community.

Thank you

ROY NICHOLS on Jan. 23, 9:58 p.m.

**Judging from the posts** that are already surfacing from people who were affected by this tragedy, this series is justified in its purpose, to examine the lifelong affects such an event can create. There are certain tragedies that have wounded our nation in years since and their coverage is hardly criticized or shrugged off, nor will it be 47 years from now. We don't need to revisit this story to gawk, to exploit, to hurt or to teach. We need to remember, to memorialize the victims, alive and dead. I believe that these writers are respecting history, affecting our lives and fulfilling the duty that all writing aspires to. Hard work and care has gone into this project and I believe it will shine through in the chapters to come. You can get

your news anywhere, but there are few publications that will offer you such a perspective as this one.

Those who think they already know what to expect, that they would rather read something else, or that they could get this from some other Denver publication should keep reading. They may be wrong.

ANOTHER ANONYMOUS on Jan. 24, 5:12 p.m.

**I think it's really cool** that you guys are doing this. my dad lost two sisters in this accident and one survived. i am seventeen years old and i think this is a good way to learn about something that was impactful on my dads life

K on Jan. 25, 3:30 p.m.

**This is a powerful story** that needs to be told as a reminder to each of us how incredibly important our friends and family are. Jobs are not. Clothes are not. What we drive or what we wear is not. What we weigh or how we wear our hair just does not matter. This story is a wonderful and tragic reminder of what we need to value. We all need to love our families. Love our friends. Do our jobs to live our lives, but not to become our lives.

Thank you to the *Rocky Mountain News* and

the *Greeley Tribune* for this truly painful and important story. May we never forget how precious and fragile life is. May God bless and keep every person involved in this horrific accident and its aftermath.

GINGER on Jan. 27, 12:40 a.m.

**Thank you, Mr. Vaughan,** for researching and writing this powerful story, and thank you, *Rocky Mountain News*, for printing it.

I was a seventh grader in a small Christian school in Denver when the accident took place. I am the same age as some of the children involved. I do not remember hearing about the crash at the time. I am very moved by getting to read about it now. I hope it will be made available in book form. It's definitely something I want to keep. Even this early in the story, I am amazed by the courage of those who experienced this terrible tragedy.

To those who are reading who are the survivors, whether you were on the bus or are relatives or friends of those who were, may God be very close to you. I know that this sort of pain never goes away.

SUZANNE WOLFRAM on Jan. 27, 2:25 p.m.

**My family never blamed anyone for this accident.** My parents always said it was God's will and we are not to question God. Accidents are just that. If it is your time to go then God will take you. My grandma always told me God needed more angels because it was Christmas. And the kids who died where all angels now.

All my Mom asks is that you learn from our pain and not let it happen again.

MARY BRANTNER on Jan. 26, 8:51 p.m.

**As one of the surviving victims** of this tragedy I must compliment Kevin on his outstanding writing, and thoughtful presentation of this story. When Kevin first contacted me last fall, I wasn't sure I wanted to open old wounds, but felt that it was a story worth telling.

Mary, my heart goes out to YOU. My first thoughts were of your Mother and Father, and the hardships they have endured. I know how hard this must be on your mom, and I know that she is thankful that you are there for her. That morning, your dad put me in his car, and I rode along as those seriously injured were rushed to the hospital. I will always remember that drive, and the courage of your dad that morning.

You never really had a chance to know Mark, Kathy and John. All you know of them lies in old photographs, and the memories of those around you.

Thank you, Mary, for standing strong and supporting this series.

RANDY GEISICK on Jan. 28, 9:28 p.m.

## Denver Square by Ed Stein [stein@rockymountainnews.com](mailto:stein@rockymountainnews.com)



### RockyTalk Live with Mark Wolf

#### Fitness challengers

*Rocky Fitness Challengers* David and Arlene Boyle will chat online at 11 a.m. on [Rocky MountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)

■ **NO LITWIN:** Columnist Mike Littwin is taking the day off.