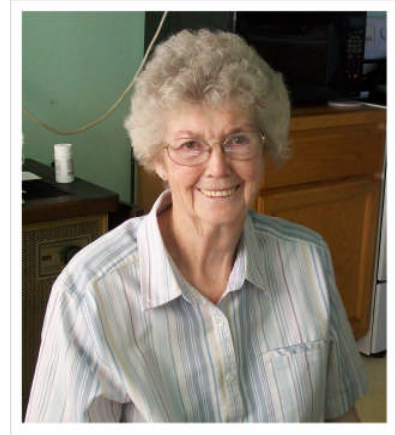


Interview of Kliss Sparks—September 21, 2010

Transcribed by Russ Sherwin, October 12, 2010, Prescott, Arizona

Version VI: First draft for review.

- Interviewee: Kliss Sparks
- Date of birth: Not given
- Interviewer: Mark Junge
- Interview date: 9/21/2010
- Place of interview: Cokeville, Wyoming
- Topic of interview: 1986 bombing at Cokeville Elementary School
- Source recording: CD from Sue Castaneda, Oral History Program Coordinator, Wyoming Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources



Transcriber's notes: In most cases I have deleted redundant ands, ers, uhs, buts, false starts, etc. If I deleted an entire phrase, I have inserted ellipses ... Where you find brackets [] I have added words for explanation or to complete an awkward sentence. Parentheses () are used for incidental non-verbal sounds, like laughter, or comments by others in the room. Words emphasized by the speaker are italicized.

Interview Begins:

This oral history collection is titled, “Survivor is my Name,” and features remembrances of the Cokeville, Wyoming Elementary School bombing of May 16, 1986¹. It is produced for the Wyoming State Archives by Sue Castaneda. The interviewer is Wyoming Historian, Mark Junge. The entire project is funded by the Wyoming Cultural Trust Fund. No part of this audio recording or transcript may be reproduced in full or in part without written permission of the Wyoming State Archives. Here now is Kliss Sparks, a fourth grade teacher at Cokeville Elementary School.

Mark Junge: Today is the twenty-first of September, 2010. My name is Mark Junge, and Sue Castaneda, who is the head of this Wyoming Oral History project, is sitting here at the kitchen table at the Sparks house, and [we’re] talking with Kliss Sparks who lives here in Cokeville and was a fourth grade teacher. She’s going to tell us about her story.

Kliss Sparks: Alright. My name is Kliss Sparks. I was a fourth grade teacher. I came to Cokeville on a dare, and I spent the next thirty-three years teaching second, third and fourth grades. After I got into the fourth grade I loved that, and so I wouldn’t let ‘em change me. I wouldn’t let ‘em take me out of it and put me somewhere else.

I never ever really thought about having anything extraordinary happen to me, but on this day this lady came in—Every day, when the kids came in from recess, I read ‘em a story. I read them different books, and I always made different voices so that they would be able to separate the characters. And I still get compliments even after twenty years from the kids that heard the stories. They loved it! I had a good time doing it.

¹ The **Cokeville Elementary School hostage crisis** occurred on May 16, 1986, at Cokeville, Wyoming, United States, when former town marshal David Young, and his wife Doris Young, took 167 children and adults hostage at **Cokeville Elementary School**. After a two-and-a-half hour standoff, a gasoline bomb the couple was carrying went off prematurely, injuring Doris Young while David Young was out of the room. Returning to the scene, David Young shot his wife, then himself. All the hostages escaped, though 79 were hospitalized with burns and injuries. *Wikipedia*

Anyway, this lady came and knocked on the door of my room and she said, “They want you down in the other end of the school. They want you in the hallway.” And I said, “Okay.” So we lined up, went out of the room, walked down the hall, and I could see no one that was saying come on in this room, and so we just walked right on out through the door, through the south door, sat on the grass and I continued reading to them. Well then here came the lady, and this time she had a gun. And she said, “Oh! You can’t stay here! You have to go in with the others!” And I thought, “Hey, don’t take a chance with your kids.” So we got up and followed her into this other room. We were the last class to go into that room, so when we got in there we were kind of—didn’t exactly have places to sit and things. They made us take the furniture that was in that room and put it in the hall. They had tables, I think two or three, and then the chairs that went around the tables, and then they had some desks that they made us take out into the hall. We carried them out and set them so that they didn’t block the hallway and then we went back into the room with the children.

The kids were afraid. They realized much quicker than I did that this was dangerous. This was something that they were not going to enjoy. Once in a while, I would have a child who would—we ended up sitting on the west end of the room because that was where there was the most room. And many of the other children would come over and get a drink or sometimes throw up in the sink. They were very, very frightened. And yet, from the very beginning, those kids from the different classes would get together and sitting in a circle, they might have six, eight, ten kids in a circle, and they would say a prayer, asking very quietly so that neither he [David Young] nor she [Doris Young, his wife] knew what they were doing. They would ask to be protected.

Well, the men in the room thought that he was dangerous enough that he might try and kill them. And he would have done them in. He was very angry with the men. He had some guns, rifles and other kinds of guns, sitting on the north—on the little table there, sitting with the bottom on the floor and the tops leaning against the—whatever it was that they were leaning against. I said to him, “You can’t leave those

there! What if one of the kids would knock them down? That's too dangerous. You're going to have to move them!" And he said, "Oh, you're right!" And so he took two of them and took 'em out in the hall. I had no idea where he put them, but as we were going out, I saw that he had leaned them out on the places where the kids hung their clothes when they came in from recess.

Anyway, there are people who say they saw Heavenly Beings. I did not. But I do believe that the Lord was there with us.

Before they came, we had a lot of fire alarms. And the fire troops would come up, and they would go through the school and look to see if they could find where the fire was. They would go upstairs and look at the furnace. There was never anything that they found, but they taught those kids how to get out of that school fast. It was a learning experience for those children, and they learned it well.

The men who were there, Jack and Rocky both, they said, "We don't want him to shoot at one of these kids, so let's put something around where they are standing, so that no one will step in their area." I can't remember what it was they put, but they put things around so that the man had a special place so that he could stand and hold his guns.

We were there probably almost two hours. He didn't really want to talk to anyone. He just wanted to make sure that the kids stayed where they were. We were in a room that had a doorway into another room. They had put chairs in that doorway so that no one could get out through that doorway. Jack, he sent over to the west door, and Rocky, he sent near the window. And they were really having to be very, very careful, because he was very quick to antagonize them. I said to him, "You know, this is not going to work. These kids are not going to do what you tell them to."

"Oh, yes," he said, "they will. I'll make sure that they do." What he had in his mind was that when he exploded the bomb that he had built, that everyone would be killed and he and all these children would be translated to an island somewhere off the coast. I don't know whether it was the East Coast or the West Coast, or I don't know

where the island was that was in his head, but he was just sure that everything was going to go exactly the way he wanted them.

I talked to the kids, you know, I didn't talk to him. I didn't like the man. As we were going, he kept saying, "It's going to be alright. It's going to be alright." I said, "We have to take care of these children. We can't let anything happen to these children!"

"Oh," he said, "you're right! You're exactly right! We've got to protect the kids!" and I said, "Yes, we do." It got finally close to the point where they were supposed to get out of school. They had been very, very good! Very good, well behaved, excellent. But as it got time for them to go home, they were getting nervous. They were getting fidgety. They knew that it was time to go home. I mean, they'd been doing it for however many years they'd been in school, and so they were beginning to get nervous.

He finally got to the point that he had to go to the bathroom, and he said to his wife, "Would you come and take hold of this [a string attached to the explosives] so that I can go to the bathroom?" In the little hallway between the two rooms, there was a bathroom over on this side. So he handed—put the whatever it was on her hand—

Mark Junge: When you say this, describe it. What was it?

Kliss Sparks: He had a like a basket, not a regular basket from a grocery store but straight up and down. On the very bottom there was a—I don't know—I think there was some kind of bombs. Above that, he had some light chains and things so that if anything exploded they would go all over and they would hit a great many children. And then above that he had another little—I don't know what he had in that unless it was something that would explode and the dynamite or whatever it was would go off so that it would be sure and be a very violent blast.

He walked off and left his wife and went into the bathroom. His wife stood there and Gene Mitchell said, "Oh, look!" and she turned to look at whatever Gene was talking about and as she turned she jerked the thing he had attached to her hand and it set the bomb off.

Now, there was no reason for that bomb not to go off the way it was set up. It was very, very dangerous. And yet, it did not. When it went off, it went up into the ceiling. It didn't go out like it was supposed to. He came out of the bathroom and was so angry with his wife—I guess because she set the bomb off—that he shot her. Well, as he came out of the bathroom after the bomb had gone off, there was instant black smoke everywhere and you could see flames in that smoke. Jack started saying, "Run, kids, run! Get out! Get out!" and Rocky said, "We can go out the window. We'll put kids out the window! Let's go! Let's go!" Someone else said, "Let's go through the little hallway, out that other room."

He [David Young] shot the music teacher in the back.

Mark Junge: What was his name?

Kliss Sparks: Miller. Good man. A good man! Several days after—well, just about the time we got back in school he came in and he said, "Okay, you guys! If you want to see where he shot me, you gotta come and look now, 'cause it's getting better fast!" He took off his shirt and let the sixth grade—anybody who wanted to see it—he turned so that they could see where he had been shot.

The kids went out of that building in about 45 seconds. They knew exactly how to get out of there and they went absolutely fast. He was talking to our principal—well our principal he had on a telephone—the secretary was coming down and taking messages back to the principal, and he said he wanted a million dollars, and then he changed his mind and said he wanted a million dollars for every child that was in there. It just happened accidentally that we had a safety meeting in Cokeville that day and people from Star Valley and Kemmerer were both there at the city hall, down in the basement, having this little meeting.

Well, when the bomb had gone off, they immediately called every town that they were from. We had ambulances there from Montpelier, from Afton, from Kemmerer, they even tried to send one from Evanston, but it was a little late getting there. We had some children who had been burned. They had to be taken to a hospital. There

was one little girl who was running toward the window and got knocked down and some other kids didn't see her because of the smoke, and they stepped on her. It kind of upset her, and I don't blame her. They went out fast!

When we got outside there were people who had come up, and they wanted to come into the school and were going to try to get into the school, and they wouldn't let 'em. They said no, we won't let you. Because if you go in there, if you try and get in there, he'll start shooting and we don't want anyone killed. So they kept a lot of people who were going to attack and come in and get him, they thought, outside.

Now, when I was talking to the children, I said to them, "Don't worry! Don't worry! We'll be okay. It's not time for us to go home yet. When it gets time for us to go home, something will happen and we'll be okay." Now there were some of them who believed me, and there were some of them who absolutely didn't! But when that bomb went off, nobody needed to be told to go. They all knew exactly how to get out of there.

When we got out on the south end of the building, I was trying to see if we had anybody left inside in the smoke and flames, so I began trying to call the kids in different classes together, and I was standing with my arm up in the air saying, "First grade! First grade! First grade!" When I came home, I told my husband, "You know, I thought I was pretty cool and calm and collected." And he said, "No you weren't!" He said, "You were well excited! You were looking for those kids everywhere, and you were shouting pretty good!" And I thought, "I didn't think I was that bad!" But apparently he did.

Sue Castaneda: How did you get them to come to you and not just run to their parents?

Kliss Sparks: Well, because so many of them went on the bus, and they ran over across the street to a teacher's house that they were just building the home. They knew the teacher, and so they kind of trusted him. It was really quite interesting. As we got outside, I went around the school and I saw Rocky Moore and I put my arms around him, and I said, "Oh, Rocky! I'm so glad to see that you're alright!" and he said, "I know, I told

you I had to see it to believe it! But this is too damn close!” I said, “You’re right! You’re right! It was.”

Then we ended up—the kids had to be calmed down. We didn’t even hold school for about three days. One day we went over to the high school and in the gym and let them talk and do what they felt like they needed to do. Another day they went over and looked at the school and saw the marks that were on the walls and on the ceiling, and another day they just were friends. They saw that their friends were alive and they were very, very happy with that.

Mark Junge: Some say that there was an outline of an angel on the wall. What do you think?

Kliss Sparks: I didn’t see it, but then I wasn’t looking for it. I will tell you this: I had more courage that day than I have probably ever had in my life, but just a week before, I had gone to the LDS temple and taken out my own endowments, which said that I was promising that I would be more religious and do things that the Lord wanted me to do. Apparently that gave me the courage that I needed that day. I don’t know—but I have never—there have been some people who have been—they can’t even talk about it yet, and it has never ever bothered me. I have thought how grateful I am. We had people in that room that day that had nothing to do with the school. We had a little girl who was delivering for—I don’t know which delivery—UPS—and she said, “Yeah, I went to Rock Springs and told ‘em I’d been in a bombing and they just poo-pooed.” She said, “They didn’t even listen to me. I come back here and all you guys are saying, ‘are you okay? Is everything alright? Did you get hurt?’ Huh! All those Rock Springs people didn’t even appreciate it!”

Sue Castaneda: You said you told him [David Young] things you never would have told him the week before.

Kliss Sparks: I did. I told him things I never would have dared to tell him. Telling him that we needed to be careful with the children. That we had to make sure that the children were going to be alive. And he kept saying, “Oh, yes! I believe that! I understand that!”

Mark Junge: Dave Young? Okay.

Kliss Sparks: I don't even like to say his name.

Mark Junge: Now tell me what happened to him. We kind of skipped that part.

Kliss Sparks: Okay. After he shot his wife—he came back out of the bathroom and shot his wife, then he went back in the bathroom and shot himself in the head. I guess he decided that there was nothing that he could do, and so he'd just as well get rid of it. I took the book that he supposedly had written and it told of all the wonderful things that he was going to do. It was absolutely malarkey. It did not make any sense. It was not well written. He didn't even have complete sentences.

Mark Junge: What do you think was going on in his mind?

Kliss Sparks: I have no idea! I do know that what he believed was going to happen was absolutely impossible to ever take place. If he had gone ahead and gone out of the building without shooting himself, some of those men in town would have killed him. He would never have survived. You know, that man worked for Cokeville as a cop for a short time. And he sat on the—there was a wooden hotel, and it had a front porch, and he sat on the front porch with one of the women in town. He was kind of romancing her—not the woman he brought with him when he came back to hold us hostage. But you know, he was not normal.

Mark Junge: They said he had a big gun that he carried around like Wyatt Earp? Is that true?

Kliss Sparks: Had a gun down his leg, you know. He was well armed.

Mark Junge: Has your life been changed by this incident at all, Kliss?

Kliss Sparks: Yes, in some ways, because I know that whatever goes on the Lord's in charge, and he will have us do what he wants us to do. And the kids who were in there that day have stayed very very good. We haven't had a lot of the drinking and smoking and sex go on. Don't think I'm saying we never had any of it, 'cause that's not true. We've always had a few hooligans, but our kids accepted the fact that they were

given a blessing. During that whole two hours, there would be one group or another group that would be saying a very quiet prayer.

Mark Junge: What do you think the significance of all this is? If you look back on it do you ever ask why? What's the significance of this?

Kliss Sparks: I think he was nuts. I don't think he even began to understand what the significance would have been. But for the people who were there, some of them still can't talk about it.

Mark Junge: Why are you able to talk about it?

Kliss Sparks: Well, because I felt like that the Lord was there to bless us. And I was the last one in the room, remember. My kids were the very last ones in the room.

Mark Junge: You took 'em outside? At that point in time did you have any inkling of what was going on?

Kliss Sparks: I was completely and totally stupid!

Mark Junge: When I read your piece in the book, *Witness to Miracles*, I thought to myself, I bet she spends a good deal of her time wondering—had she told the kids to run. Do you ever look back on it that way?

Kliss Sparks: No, because she had that gun, and she had it up, and she had it pointed. That's why we came back in.

Mark Junge: But you were out of the school for a while?

Kliss Sparks: We were out of the school, but not very long. I'll bet we weren't out of the school more than five minutes, because I took them out that south door, had them sit down on the lawn. I didn't even have the book back open again when she came out, and that time she had the gun, and she had it up and she had it pointed. I felt like if I had said to the kids—you know, when I saw the gun I felt like, oh dear! What have you done? But I didn't tell 'em to run because I was afraid she would shoot 'em. And I

didn't know how many she would shoot, but I really did feel like she would take aim and shoot them.

Mark Junge: Was Doris his wife? He had been, you know, carousing with this other woman and he came back with a different woman, Doris. Was she actually his wife?

Kliss Sparks: Yes, he had—somewhere along the line, he had married her.

Mark Junge: What was she like?

Kliss Sparks: (Long pause) She was a dumb bitch! Sorry!

Mark Junge: (Laughs) That pretty much sums it up, doesn't it?

Kliss Sparks: Yeah. You know, her hair was long and it was dark, but she would have done anything he asked her to do and done it willingly. And when she came to my door to bring me down to that room so that we could go in to be held with all the others, she hid the gun. I don't know where she had it, but when we went right on outside, when she came out there was no kindness, nor sympathy, she wanted us in that room.

Sue Castaneda: How old were they—the couple?

Kliss Sparks: Oh, probably—I don't honestly know because I'm not good at telling how old, but I'd guess he was close to fifty, maybe even a little bit more.

Mark Junge: Did you ever dream about this again, did it ever affect you in such a way that you had to recall it involuntarily?

Kliss Sparks: Not really. In fact, I believe that the first night I was home, after my husband told me what a fool I made of myself, I thought oh, hey, you better not let this bug you or he'll tease you forever!

Mark Junge: I get the distinct impression, though, that you're the type of person who is strong internally, and you wouldn't let it bother you anyway.

Kliss Sparks: Well, I tried not to, because I didn't think it would do my school kids any good.

Mark Junge: Do you think your teaching, your experience in teaching, helped you that way?

Kliss Sparks: Sure. The fact that I finally decided to go into teaching made me really—I'm kinda laid back, I'm not really wildly excitable. So when I got to the school, I wanted those kids to work, and I wanted them to learn and I wanted them to move fast so that whatever they got in my grade, they would have an easier time in the fifth grade.

Mark Junge: You were structured.

Kliss Sparks: Yes, I'm afraid, very. And yet, I loved those kids. I have arthritis and then two months ago I had a hip operation. I had my hip replaced. I'll bet I've not missed more than—the ball games, the football games that are out of town I don't go to, but I always listen to them on the radio. The basketball games, if they're in town, I go! The girls basketball and volleyball, if there's any way I can possibly get there, I go!

Mark Junge: So it has more to do with your love for the kids than being just a part of the community.

Sue Castaneda: How many years did you teach?

Kliss Sparks: Thirty-three. Actually, I had one more year in Granger, Wyoming, and the lady who was teaching in Granger had me come in—well, they had me come in once a week—one day a week, and toward the end of the year, I hadn't taken my wages at all. She said to me, "Kliss, why don't you go back to college and get the rest of your degree?" She said, "I watch you in that classroom, and you are good! Why don't you go back?" I thought, mmmmm? And when Elwin came home that night I said, "Elwin, what would you think if I went back to school? I could go down and stay with mother this summer and take the kids and get maybe three years and I'd be graduated." And he said, "If you want to go, go ahead." And so that's when I went back to school and got my degree.

Mark Junge: Elementary Ed?

Kliss Sparks: Mm hmm. Elementary Ed. And it's funny: I went one year at the University of Utah, and they set a plan out for me that would have taken about five years to

accomplish. They had me taking classes that I'd already had, so I went back to Pocatello. When I left Pocatello, they gave me a graduation plan, and I saved it. I had it in a drawer in the bedroom, and when I went back I took it out and took it up there and they had to follow it.

Mark Junge: What college was that?

Kliss Sparks: Idaho State, at Pocatello. By that time they had gone from a two year school to a four year school.

Mark Junge: Have you stayed in contact with any of the people who were in the event? Are they all around you, or do you talk to them at all?

Kliss Sparks: Yeah. Yeah. I consider that these people are good friends. Now there are a few people, a few couples in town, who still go into hysterics over this. I'm sorry—I do not. I think those people did something that was very foolish. They did something that was not common sense.

Mark Junge: Where do you get your stability, from your mother? Your father? Your upbringing?

Kliss Sparks: Must be. I had a wonderful mother. And my dad was a corker, but he was also very good. He was a good man.

Mark Junge: Do you think this whole incident, Kliss, brought this community together or sort of fragmented it?

Kliss Sparks: Oh, no, no, no. It brought it together.

Mark Junge: It's interesting, because the bomb was meant to fragment everything, and it did the opposite.

Kliss Sparks: And, you know, when that bomb went off, it was just amazing to me that it went right up into the ceiling. It should not have done that! It should have gone out, and it didn't. That tells me that the Lord was there. I don't know who he wanted in that

room, but there must have been some kids that he wanted to keep on this earth so that they could be good influences wherever they went.

Mark Junge: Well then, Doris went up in smoke with this thing. Were you watching when this happened?

Kliss Sparks: No. I didn't look at them any more than I had to. But I did hear the shot, when he shot her. He shot her—I don't know where, if it was in the back or in the head, or—but he shot her and then went in the bathroom and shot himself.

Mark Junge: A lot of people said they saw flames. Did you say you saw arrows of flames?

Kliss Sparks: You bet! You bet! You could see—as that bomb went off, you could see the smoke come and there were arrows of flames on top of the smoke. The room was black! It was absolutely full of smoke. You couldn't see anything, but you could see the flames.

Mark Junge: You're a very staunch Mormon, right? LDS?

Kliss Sparks: Yes.

Mark Junge: Do you think that you were meant to be a part of this?

Kliss Sparks: Probably, I don't know.

Mark Junge: For the benefit of the kids and their training?

Kliss Sparks: Well, let me tell you. I don't think I'm that good.

Mark Junge: Wait a minute! You just said you were!

Kliss Sparks: Naw. I'm active in the church, but I don't think I'm that good.

Mark Junge: Oh. I thought you meant as a teacher.

Kliss Sparks: I'm fairly active. In fact, since I was operated on with this stupid hip, I have not been able to go to church for two months until last Sunday. And they had the primary

children do a program for the sacrament meeting, and I went up and went to it, and it was the sweetest thing!

Mark Junge: It brought you joy?

Kliss Sparks: It brought me joy!

Mark Junge: How would you describe this community of Cokeville?

Kliss Sparks: It's a good little town. If anybody has trouble, you can be guaranteed that the people in this town will do something to help them out. We have probably had four or five times when we had supper and things brought in so that they could be auctioned off and then contributions given, and they always get four, five thousand dollars. Maybe more. I've never ever asked how much they get, but they always get—you know, people are amazed when done with what—

Mark Junge: How long have you lived here?

Kliss Sparks: Let me see: I came in '49, so sixty-one years.

Mark Junge: Do you know everybody in town?

Kliss Sparks: No, there are people who have moved in who I don't know. When I was in school I knew everybody in town. But now that I'm not in school there are people who have moved in who I don't know.

Mark Junge: Do you pray every day?

Kliss Sparks: No.

Mark Junge: You don't?

Kliss Sparks: No. I tell you, you just as well see the whole black side of me, 'cause it's here!

Sue Castaneda: I have a question. Now that this has happened, what do you think about or what do you—when you see Columbine or the things that happened recently I guess in Colorado where the kids are all taken hostage?

Kliss Sparks: I think, my heart aches for them. And I think, oh, I hope they can get over it and let it go behind them, and that they won't let it affect them for their whole life, because that can be a destroyer.

Mark Junge: How have you spent the rest of your life since that event?

Kliss Sparks: Well, I taught until the end of '61 and then I thought my husband was going to die because he was having heart problems, and so I took early retirement so I could help keep him alive. And I did, for seven years.

Mark Junge: '61 did you say?

Kliss Sparks: '81. — '91! Let me tell you: years, I'm always putting it back when it has no business being put back.

Mark Junge: Okay. Well this has been great. I really appreciate this.

Kliss Sparks: Well, I don't know that I've done anything for you. I hope I've told the story so that it would help you.

Conclusion of interview

This oral history was produced by the Wyoming State Archives for the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources. It was produced by Sue Castaneda. The interviewer was Wyoming Historian, Mark Junge. The entire project is funded by the Wyoming Cultural Trust Fund.