

# Interview of Janel Dayton

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From the Archives of the Wyoming Department of State Parks & Cultural Resources

*Transcribed and edited by Russ Sherwin, October 28, 2010, Prescott, Arizona*

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- Interviewer: Mark Junge
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- Topic of interview: Cokeville Elementary School bombing, May 16, 1986
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*Transcriber's notes: I have added some reference footnotes to this transcript where I thought appropriate. 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. Words emphasized by the speaker are italicized.*

## **Introduction: By Sue Castaneda, Program Coordinator**

*This oral history collection is entitled “Survivor is my Name” and features remembrances of the Cokeville, Wyoming Elementary School bombing of May 16, 1986<sup>1</sup>. 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 Janel Dayton, a first grade teacher in 1986.*

## **Beginning of interview**

Mark Junge: Today is September 21, 2010, my name is Mark Junge and I’m in the home of Janel Dayton. We are in Cokeville at Janel’s house and we’re in the kitchen, at the kitchen table. At my left is Sue Castaneda. She is the head of this Oral History project. Today we’re going to talk with Janel about her experience in 1986. So if you would just give me your name and tell me what you did at the school, and then on what day it was, and so forth.

Janel Dayton: My name is Janel Dayton. I was a first grade teacher in 1986 at the Cokeville Elementary School. The day of the Cokeville Incident, as we refer to it, I was doing some teacher preparation work. At that point we had two first grade groups: I taught one of them and Jean Mitchell taught the other group. We’d decided inasmuch as it was in the spring, that we’d better put the two groups together because they would be together in second grade. So I was taking the afternoon off to do some preparation work, and then later, another day, she would take the day off and we would combine the groups.

I was sitting at my desk and noticed a white van pull up to the back of the building. I could see it through the window, and I didn’t think much of it because

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<sup>1</sup> 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*

it was the delivery area and often this type of vehicle drove up. It was about one o'clock in the afternoon, and I decided I would go down to the office and get my mail. I walked down to the office and as I came to the crossroads in the hallway, I saw a man and a woman pushing a cart that had some gallons of fluid in it, and my first impression was that they were probably cleaning fluid sales people. I had a kind of an ominous feeling, but I thought, well they've seen me, so I'll keep going. So I went down to the office and by the time I got there they had talked to the secretary. I went in and got my mail and as I was approaching my mailbox, I had my back to them, the secretary introduced me to them.

I'd read an article that there was a group of dissidents coming up from the south. The article had said what states they were going to go into and Wyoming wasn't one of them. So I thought maybe I needed to tell them they were in the wrong place if this was part of it. So I asked them, "Who do you represent?" and they said, "Ourselves." And then he showed me the bomb and how it operated and said that if anyone tried to harm him that this bomb would go off. He indicated that it could take quite a bit of the building with it.

About that time a lady that I didn't know came in, and she was applying for a job. The lady that was with David Young, the lady Doris, who was his wife, put the lady applying for a job and myself in the conference room. The lady that was in there with me noticed that the window was open. She said, "Let's go out the window." I said, "No way!" Because there was too much at stake. So we waited in there for a few minutes and pretty soon Doris came and got us and took us down the hall. Our custodian, who was a very big man, was coming down the hall and I saw him and motioned to him to not come any further, and Doris said, "We'll have none of that!" She was upset that I had indicated to him that he shouldn't come. But they let him go because I think he didn't serve their purposes at all.

We went on down the hall. As she was ready to take us into the second grade room, this young woman, very pretty young woman, came flying through the door and she was just hysterical. She screamed at David and said, "I can't believe that

you're going to go through with this!" He tossed her the keys to the van and told her to get the heck out of there, which she did. I understand that she went down to the City Hall and alerted people.

We went into the room. David had unloaded an arsenal of weapons along the blackboard, and I was pretty close to him and talking to him. There weren't many others in the room, if anyone, because nobody else had come in yet. He indicated that he wouldn't mind dispensing with the teachers. The kids were important to him but the teachers were not. He told me to go back by the bathroom door and make sure that anyone that went into the bathroom came out, because there was another doorway on the other side of the bathroom. He instructed us to put up a barricade so that nobody could get through the other side. Then the classes started coming in. The room was filling up.

David was—it was just like he was dead. There was no life in his eyes—no spirit there, seemed like. But when they got us all in, he passed out something that he'd written to the teachers and some of the students. I remember some of the little first graders sitting there trying to read that. It was the spring of the year. They'd been in school for a year and they figured they could read everything. But it was really—

Mark Junge: This was a manifesto and they weren't used to reading manifestos!

Janel Dayton: It made no sense whatsoever! Anyway, then he decided that he wanted the kids away from him. So they moved furniture out of the middle of the room and taped off an area that he had the bomb in so that the kids weren't with him. I think they didn't understand what it's like to be with children. There's an energy that comes at you that you feel; maybe can't necessarily explain. The little kids needed drinks. You know, they need a lot of nurturing and a lot of care. They needed drinks and they needed to go to the bathroom and Doris decided that they shouldn't get drinks because then the traffic to the bathroom would be greater, so she discouraged them from getting drinks. They were settling in because they knew we'd be there for a while, and so they were passing out papers and so forth

to the kids so they could draw and color to kind of keep them occupied. They brought in the video machine so that they could watch TV and keep them occupied.

So the afternoon kind of dragged on. One little kid made [his] way to me and said, “Teacher, are we going to be alright?” The thought came into my mind, “Well, we’re alright right now.” And I decided that’s all you can expect out of life is to be alright right now, because you don’t have a clue what the future will bring. But the kids kind of settled in, and then toward a little later in the afternoon, not sure exactly what time it was, David needed to come in the bathroom and this other teacher and I thought well, maybe we can lighten him up a little bit and he’ll think, well, let’s just all just go home.

I told him he’d have to wait in line to go in the restroom, cause it was occupied and he didn’t think I was very funny at all.

Mark Junge: He said something about the potty?

Janel Dayton: Well, and then this other teacher, or one of us said, “You’ll just die when you go in there.” And the other one said, “Yeah, the potty’s only a foot high.” He didn’t think we were a bit funny! But anyway, it was finally his turn and he went in the restroom and I turned to the school secretary, Tina Cook—‘cause he had given the bomb to his wife, and attached it to her—I turned to the secretary and I said, “She wouldn’t blow these kids up!” The secretary says, “Don’t be too sure!” And when I turned my head I saw a fireball hit the ceiling.

What I understood was that she had raised her hand and said, “I have a headache.” And when she did that it detonated the bomb. It went off, and I didn’t hear anything after the bomb went off. I’ve commented to my husband, who was down at the City Hall—because everybody had gotten word and had congregated—I said, “I didn’t hear any voices.” He said, “I could hear them down to the City Hall.” So the concussion—‘cause I was pretty close to the bomb—it had damaged my hearing. But any rate this one teacher was on the floor and I pulled on her to get her up, and then when I got out, her husband said, “Have you seen Jean?” and

I said, “No.” Because you know, the adrenalin had really kicked in and you weren’t sure what had happened.

So I went through the door and tried to move the barricade. Pretty soon one of the teachers came through—Mr. Miller—and he fell at my feet, and I thought, oh, he’s tripped. But that was when David Young came out and shot him. I was just feet from him. My greatest blessing was that I had stepped back to move the barricade when David Young came out of the bathroom just feet from me, and when he shot Mr. Miller. So I didn’t see any of that. I didn’t see when Doris was on fire and stumbling around asking for help. Nobody could help her.

Mark Junge: She asked for help?

Janel Dayton: As she reached out for the little mother that was there with a bunch of her kids, and the mother said, “My responsibility’s to my children.” And I didn’t see when David came out and shot her. I have no idea when that was because I was standing right by that door, or right through the one door.

Mark Junge: Plus, it was dark.

Janel Dayton: And it was dark. It was very dark from the smoke. So anyway, I cleared out the debris and tried to go back in to see if anybody needed help, and it was just as black in there as could be. It was like black cotton, like the room was filled with black cotton. So I thought, well I’ll go around to the other door because maybe the visibility would be better there. I went down the hall and was going to go in the other door and it was the same. It was just black! It seemed like there was a glow on the floor.

Mark Junge: Could you breathe, though?

Janel Dayton: I didn’t really notice the smoke so much. The children that were in the room for a little bit longer, they had black under their noses from breathing it. I turned around and the firemen told me to get out of the building. By that time I was hysterical, because what happened to these little children that I was responsible for?

One of the very interesting things, I don't know if it was two weeks, a month before this happened, one of us, and I think I might have been the one who said, "What would happen if we were all in the same room and had to get out?" Because we had fire drills on a regular basis, but we had them from our own classrooms. So we decided to have a fire drill in the lunchroom where all the children would be there. And they would need to be directed to get out of every exit possible. And of course, that was very useful when this actually happened, because we cleared the room, someone said in forty-five seconds. We had two windows that they were bailing kids out of and two doors. So that really helped to get people out.

Mark Junge: You went out the south door, I assume.

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm.

Mark Junge: Okay. So when you got out there, what did you see then?

Janel Dayton: Well, when I got out there and cleared the barricade, I saw one little girl fall and she looked at me like, "What is going on?" And I never saw that child again. Her mother moved, immediately. She picked up the kids and they were gone. Then the second person that came was the music teacher that fell at my feet. But then he got up and took off, and then the next time I saw him was down at the corner and he was on the ground. I thought he was just out of breath and so I just went on, I didn't know he'd been shot. Yet it happened right in front of me! But your brain, your mind does strange things—

Mark Junge: Yeah, did time get stretched out?

Janel Dayton: Oh, time was totally immaterial!

Sue Castaneda: How long were you in there total?

Janel Dayton: I think it was getting close to being bus time. That was a crisis, because when the kids, when it was time to go home, then they realized that they weren't going home. And he had planned to keep us in there for a long time. Then I ran—after

the fireman told me that I needed to leave—I ran down to—I ran out of the building and ran down to the corner where everyone was gathering, and then I started looking for the little first graders. ‘Cause they’d all gone out different exits. I ran down to one of the houses and one of the little children was just sitting there all by themselves, and their faces were just stark white. I think they’d been burned. I think a layer of skin had gone.

Mark Junge: Now, when you got outside, you said something about a lady that didn’t know what was going on, she drove down the street and she didn’t know what was happening? What was that incident?

Janel Dayton: I think they’d just come into town and it was absolute chaos! So she was really disturbed and she told me to get the h... out of the street! Which really, you know, with all the emotion of the rest of the day—‘cause around here we treat each other nice—I thought, how insensitive of you! But then they started loading kids in ambulances and busses to try to deal with it, and I think they dealt with it pretty fast. But one of the miracles of it was that there was so much emergency personnel in town, and I’m sure you’ve heard about that. They were having mock drills at that time.

Mark Junge: So what did you do right afterwards, when you found out that everything was going to be taken care of?

Janel Dayton: Then I went home, because after everybody’d gone in ambulances—

Sue Castaneda: Did you come home and cry?

Janel Dayton: I’ll tell you one thing that I did. I came in and there was a murder mystery on the TV. I shut that off so fast, and I’ve never watched one since, because I found out bad things DO happen. That’s not entertainment to me anymore. I was never really big on it, but when you find out that these things do happen, then it’s—

Mark Junge: That’s a really interesting statement!

Janel Dayton: —not in the realm of entertainment any more.

Mark Junge: Do you still have dreams, or did you have dreams about this?

Janel Dayton: No, I learned how to deal with that.

Mark Junge: How did you—

Janel Dayton: I always win! If there's ever a bad situation, I always win! (Laughs)

Mark Junge: How do you do that?! (Laughing) Well, I don't mean to make light of it, but, I mean, I just wonder how you were affected? Were you affected for days, or months, or weeks?

Janel Dayton: Well, the only thing that I noticed—one thing I was worried was that somebody'd come back and try to finish the job. That worried me. The fact that the perpetrators didn't survive was a huge blessing or we'd still be going to court to make sure they were treated fairly. But I just had a feeling, you know, what if somebody comes back and tries to—that bothered me.

Sue Castaneda: What did happen to the other two guys, because I don't know. Did they go to court?

Janel Dayton: No.

Sue Castaneda: Nothing happened to them?

Janel Dayton: No. Not that I know of. Because they didn't go along with it.

Mark Junge: Nor did Princess?

Janel Dayton: No. Some of the teachers said, "Oh no, she was in on it!" She wasn't. Because I heard when she came in, she was just hysterical. I didn't feel like she had anything to do with it.

Mark Junge: Did you see 'em dispose of the bodies?

Janel Dayton: No. Some people said they thought the one on the grass was me, because we were about the same build, same height, same coloring. Because nobody—the parents didn't know what had happened. They were probably in worse shape than any of

us because they didn't know what was happening to their children. We knew what was happening, but they didn't.

Sue Castaneda: Where was your husband?

Janel Dayton: He'd come to town with his gun. See, that's what everyone does around here. But then, there was a police line. One effect is that, for quite a long time after I went in any public building, anything, I made sure I sat by the exit. They brought a circus in which wasn't a good thing, because it was kinda sleazy with sleazy characters, you know, kinda scary.

Mark Junge: Carnies.

Janel Dayton: Yeah, and I don't think that helped. They thought that they'd kinda lighten things up, but when you bring a bunch of strangers in after an incident like that, then—

Mark Junge: Did the kids get over this fairly soon?

Janel Dayton: Some didn't.

Mark Junge: And some may still not be over it.

Janel Dayton: When this book was written, one young man says he put it in a badger hole. My husband was the one that decided that they would do that. He was the one that resurrected it.

Mark Junge: What's his name?

Janel Dayton: Sharon.

Mark Junge: Interesting, for a man to be called Sharon. And he was the one that came up with this?

Janel Dayton: He didn't write it. Three ladies wrote it. They didn't want their names attached. But he was the one that wanted the thing perpetuated.

Mark Junge: Why didn't they want their names attached?

Janel Dayton: I don't know. There was a lot of controversy over it. And at first, I thought, please, just leave it alone. But then I realized the miracle it was. And that that needed to be remembered.

Mark Junge: Some of the people saw angels. Did you see angels?

Janel Dayton: No. But some of the little children went over and prayed. I don't know why I didn't think of it, 'cause I do about everything else, but I didn't. And I was a little of the thought that, is this a hoax? Is that bomb a hoax or is it real? I didn't really think it was real until I saw the fireball go up.

Mark Junge: Were you trying to keep the kids quiet, tamped down?

Janel Dayton: My assignment was to stay at that bathroom door and make sure they came back. Because one of the policeman's little sons came out of the door and looked at the barricade, and I knew what he was thinking: "Should I go over that and get out of here?" I said, "No, you can't do that." I felt bad about that, but that was my assignment.

Mark Junge: There were people who probably were thinking of doing something, but I think it's a miracle that nobody did anything.

Janel Dayton: No, and our kids are trained to be pretty obedient to authority.

Sue Castaneda: What do you think—when we were little we did fire drills, but all it was, was line up, go outside. Wait to be told to come back in. We never had the kind of fire drills that it sounds like you guys kept going over. What made you do that? Do you have—

Janel Dayton: Inspiration! It was. Because it was the only time we've ever done it from one room. But it was a very valuable experience.

Mark Junge: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. So this thing has gradually worn off your conscious, or your sub-conscious, you think?

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm. But it gets brought up a lot.

Mark Junge: Why?

Janel Dayton: One thing, my husband thinks that it needs to be kept alive, because it was a miracle. Angels came—in fact, he can't ever tell anybody about it, and he tells a lot of people—he can't ever tell anyone about it without crying. It's a very, very spiritual thing to him. And to me, it's a type in a shadow of what's going to happen to the world, according to the Bible. There'll be a contest between good and evil, and it'll look like evil's going to triumph, but it doesn't. We're told that life is a school. I feel like it was pretty significant.

Mark Junge: That's why you think it's significant, because it teaches us something?

Janel Dayton: Yes.

Mark Junge: Do you stay in contact with the people who were in the room?

Janel Dayton: Not so much. Whenever you happen to meet them, you're glad to see them. Two of the other teachers were here this weekend. So I went and visited with them, but the topic didn't come up. But it was interesting. For the next few years something would trigger, you know, among the teachers, because we all of us were there for quite a long time. But something would trigger and then we'd go clear through it again, and then it was done until a trigger came again.

Mark Junge: Does this bother you? Doing this?

Janel Dayton: No.

Mark Junge: Good. I'm glad! So what's your assessment of Doris and David Young? I mean, what do you think was going on in their minds? Do you have any—you're a pretty perceptive person, so what do you think was goin' on?

Janel Dayton: I think she was just going along with him. And I think he was what we would call crazy. Cause and effect didn't add up for him.

Sue Castaneda: Did you know him before?

Janel Dayton: No.

Sue Castaneda: Because they said he worked here before.

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm. My husband had had an association with him, but I'd never seen him before.

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

Janel Dayton: Very cohesive. And part of it's because we're isolated. Montpelier is about 31 miles away, Kemmerer 45, and Afton 55, and if that weren't the case, there would be no school here. Because economically, it's probably very expensive to have a school here. So, I mean, it's pretty close. And if anything happens to one, everybody just clamors to do all he can to help.

Mark Junge: Are there any downsides to a small community like this?

Janel Dayton: Well, everybody knows everybody's business. You know, your information is no longer *your* information; it's *everybody's* information! (Laughs)

Mark Junge: Did this whole incident, Janel, strengthen you, or do you think it kind of shook your trust in people?

Janel Dayton: I don't think it did. I think there are lots of good people. The news doesn't portray that, but it should.

Mark Junge: Yeah, we always pick on the outstanding events that are murders and rapes and molestations and wars, and people dying in accidents, and it's kinda like, well, you know, you get to thinking after a while, maybe people like reading about this stuff. But that's not what life's about.

Well, this is obviously—well, I shouldn't say obviously—but it seems like it would be the most outstanding event in your life so far—traumatic event, is that right?

Janel Dayton: Yeah, pretty much.

Mark Junge: Nothing comes close to this?

Janel Dayton: Well, I fell off Mount Timpanogos once, and that was a little bit of a scare! And once again, my life was preserved miraculously!

Mark Junge: Coming out of Timpanogos Cave, or something?

Janel Dayton: No, on the other side. I had this little ditzzy-doodle roommate that said there was a beautiful lake up there and we ought to go see it in April. But I understand, you don't go up there in April! Now I understand.

Mark Junge: Because of the snow?

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm!

Mark Junge: Oh, you slid off?

Janel Dayton: We slid down and just happened to hit a hole, and the fella that I was with, we both fell in that hole or we'd gone to the bottom.

Mark Junge: Do you get this feeling that you've been protected?

Janel Dayton: Well, I think everybody is, don't you?

Mark Junge: Well, obviously, I look in the paper and I see some people who just get wiped out, like these seventy two immigrants that got wiped out in Mexico by these drug lords. They were just innocent people. Trying to get in the U. S., granted, but they were innocent people and they just got wiped out. So I'm wondering where the protection is for those? But I guess, you have to judge it day by day. So if you are protected, you're being protected right now. Do you have a strong faith in God?

Janel Dayton: Very.

Mark Junge: Were you raised that way?

Janel Dayton: Very much so.

Mark Junge: Strong LDS?

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm.

Mark Junge: Were your parents that way too?

Janel Dayton: Yes.

Mark Junge: Your husband?

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm.

Mark Junge: Everybody. Were you married in the Temple?

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm.

Mark Junge: Boy, you've done everything you were supposed to do!

Janel Dayton: Oh, well! (Laughs) Won't go quite that far! No, but it's a huge part of our lives. My husband and I just got home in January, we were on a mission at Temple Square.

Mark Junge: Oh, okay.

Janel Dayton: That's a fantastic place!

Mark Junge: Yep. It is. What was your job?

Janel Dayton: We were missionaries. Our job was to tell people about the church and—

Mark Junge: Do you speak any language?

Janel Dayton: No.

Mark Junge: There's a lot of different people there, in Temple Square, from all over the world.

Janel Dayton: A lot of little sister missionaries. They have—someone said there were 280 of them now, from all over the world, and we just got the biggest kick out of 'em because they're just so fun. But these little sisters sacrificed a lot to come. You know, give eighteen months of their lives at their own expense, and some of them came from very poor circumstances, but they said, "The lord wants us here."

Mark Junge: What makes people do this? Is it their faith? Or they're trained to be obedient?

Janel Dayton: It's their faith.

Mark Junge: I'm just curious. Do you go back to the Mormon hand-cart history in your family?

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm. Walked across the plains.

Mark Junge: Tell me a little about that.

Janel Dayton: My grandparents, on my father's side, came from Denmark. They got to America, and that wasn't easy. Then they walked across the plains, 1300 miles. Pretty amazing!

Mark Junge: Pushing hand-carts?

Janel Dayton: Actually, I think the hand-cart was only for about two or three years, and it was the poor people that came. A lot of them had lost everything. My husband's grandfather, or great-grandfather was in the Nauvoo period when there was a tremendous amount of persecution. He said that he and his wife had lost their home five times and he said, "Neither of us have ever murmured." So that's faith!

Mark Junge: Where was your classroom in relation to the one you were forced into?

Janel Dayton: Right across.

Mark Junge: Right across the hall?

Janel Dayton: A couple of little interesting incidents: We had a couple of men teachers who said that they didn't believe in God. We'd taught for years together and one of 'em after the incident—I was over here preparing, and one of the men teachers came in and I said, "Look across there." Because the teacher'd had some papers up here, and you know, the smoke had seeped up underneath 'em and when she took the papers down it looked like a death's head with it's arms spread out. And this teacher came in and I said, "Look across there. That looks like a death's head with his arms spread out." And he says, "No, that's where the lord stood when he protected us."

Mark Junge: So even he was affected by it.

Janel Dayton: Mm-hm. And then another teacher—I'd been over preparing a talk for church once, and he came in and I was talking to him a little bit about religion, and he said, "Oh, I'm waiting to see the burning bush." And so, after this happened, I said, "Well, what did you think?" He said, "I don't know who saved us, but I sure like his style!" (Laughs)

Mark Junge: Well, whose room was this where the kids were forced into?

Janel Dayton: I think that was the other first grade group.

Mark Junge: Okay. Who would that have been?

Janel Dayton: Jean Mitchell.

Mark Junge: Jean Mitchell, right, right.

Janel Dayton: She and her husband live in Cheyenne. She was here over the weekend.

### ***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.*