

Interview of Kevin Walker

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

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- Subject: Kevin Walker
- Occupation: Fireman at the time
- Interviewer: Mark Junge
- Interview date: September 21, 2010
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City Hall
- Topic of interview: Cokeville Elementary
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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, 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 Kevin Walker, Public Works Director, fireman and father of three young children in the school.

Mark Junge: Today is the 21st of September, 2010. My name is Mark Junge. I’m at the City Hall in Cokeville, in the conference room, talking with Kevin Walker who had a role to play in the Cokeville bombing incident on May 16, 1986. So Kevin, I’ll just let you go ahead.

Kevin Walker: I’m Kevin Walker, it is September 21, and reflecting back on the date of May 16th, I’ve thought about this a little today. Reflected on events that could not be changed by anyone. When I first came to City Hall—my job is Public Works Director for the town of Cokeville—I was a fireman with the Cokeville Fire Department and also an EMT.

I came in the City Hall approximately around one o’clock, a lady² followed in just a few minutes after me, and I was talking to NaDene [Dana], told her that I was going to be gone for the rest of the day. She came in using very belligerent language and asked us what the *%* was the matter with us people! We don’t understand it, we don’t love our kids!

Mark Junge: Do you remember exactly what she said?

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

² The lady, “Princess,” was David Young’s daughter.

Kevin Walker: Oh, I won't repeat it. (laughs)

Mark Junge: 'Cause I've always wondered exactly what she said. We can edit it out if you want.

Kevin Walker: She said, "You stupid f-ing people! What in the sam hell is the matter with you? Don't you give a f... about your kids? There's a—my father's over there and he's going to blow 'em all up!"

I said, "You don't need to use that language here. We're in a public building. Now if this was Chicago, I'd believe you. We're in downtown Cokeville. I don't believe you! I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't talk."

Kathy Davison³—and also the State Coordinator—were there. And I kinda [thought] that maybe they were doing a mock drill. They were trying to do a mock drill. So when she said, she went on talking and she said, "You don't believe me?" And I said, "No, I don't. I do not believe you. This is Cokeville, Wyoming. This isn't a big city. Why would anybody want to do that here?"

And she said, "Then, will you believe the two men out in my van?" And I said, "Show 'em to me." So she went out and got 'em⁴. I seen that they were handcuffed together. We came into this very room I pulled her away outside, and they told me what he was doing. I walked out and said, "It's real! It's real, guys!"

Wayne Harmon was working with me at the time. I got hold of him and DeMont Grandy. They went and barricaded off the school, because she said if anybody tried to get to the school he would kill a child. And I believed him, because I had three witnesses. So my main concern was, get the EMTs, get 'em here, get the fire department here, and not have it go out over the pagers. Because I knew Gayle Chadwick was in that school and she would have her pager with her. So I went to the high school, got hold of Dale Lamborn, the [high school] principal, told him what was going on, and I said, "You get these kids home. We're not going to have

³ Lincoln County Emergency Coordinator at the time.

⁴ Gerald Deppe and Doyle Mendenhall had been recruited by David Young who told them he was working on a "Formula to revolutionize the system." They knew nothing of the bomb plot.

'em here. You dismiss them now.” They went in the auditorium and had a prayer, dismissed them.

Then, I had to go home and tell my wife that three of our children were held hostage. Terrible thing to have to do. Heart wrenching! But I kicked into a mode of, I’m a fireman, I can take care of the situation and do what I have to do. So that’s what I done. I sent my oldest son, [Shane] who was in high school, down to my father’s home. I said, don’t you tell Grampa what’s going on, because they had heart conditions. Jana, that was Glenna’s Niece, was living with us also at the time. Shane was in seventh grade and Jana, she would have been in ninth grade. So they went down there.

So we got the fire trucks together, and I can remember Lyle Forrest, Alan Burton and myself were on number 10, sittin’ down by Spring Street—corner of Main Street and Spring Street. And we barricaded off there. That was our perimeter. Then we had it barricaded off at Pearl Street. One of the cops was sittin’ down by Second and Sage so that nobody could go to the elementary school.

The one thing she [Princess] told me that I can remember, that I should have said, she said, “He’s got enough explosives in there to blow that whole school up. Gone.” She said, “If it goes off, it’s gone! He’s planned this for a long time and it’ll be gone!”

So, we sat there, and we sat there. I can remember when we got the news that he wanted a million dollars per child, I had three kids in there. Public Works Director. Can you come up with three million dollars? I can remember banging my head on the hood of that fire truck and saying, “Lord, whatever happens, it’s up to you. I’m puttin’ my kids’ lives in your hands, and I expect you to take care of ‘em. And whatever happens, I will accept.”

We waited. We had one person come down and he had his ought-six in his truck. He said, “My kid’s in there and I’m going to go get him.” And I says, “You’re not

gonna pass me.” He says, “Oh, I will!” I said “You won’t!” He said, “I’ve got a gun here.” And I said, “And I’ll kill you with it. You’re not goin’ in there and have one of those kids get killed.” I said, “Now you go on and go out around and you go on and you wait at the football field like everybody else. You’re not goin’ in there!”

Mark Junge: And he knew you meant business?

Kevin Walker: Yep. We need to go back too, because just before I went out to the fire trucks and got in ‘em, the custodian from over there came. He came into this building and he asked me, he said, “Kevin, do you know what’s goin’ on over there?” And I said, “Yes, Delbert, I do.” And Delbert was like—kinda like a second father to me. I worked with Delbert for about two and a half years. He was my shift leader, he was my boss. I really learned to trust the man. And that was another testimony that I knew that what was goin’ on, pretty much where people were at. I can remember seeing a lady come out and run around the school. She was all in white. Had on a white top.

And we sat and we waited. Everybody wanted to do something. Everybody wanted to help. And people started coming in and of course, it got out into the news media. Helicopters started coming and it was a blessing because what he was hearing. He thought he would control the situation there, I’m sure. And it was a hard wait.

Now, what are we going to do? So we picked a strategy and I told Lyle, I said, “I can’t go in. If we are packed up, if we have to go in, I can’t go.” Alan Burton was there and he said, “Well, I’m goin’ in because my sister’s in there.” And I said, “That’s fine. You guys pack and go in and I’ll help you, and I’ll hook up the water and we’ll get everything goin’ if we have to go in.”

It was sometime close to three o’clock. I can’t tell for sure the time. We heard something like a muffled BOOM! I looked over at the school and I thought, “It’s

gone!” But it was still there! And I told ‘em, “Let’s roll!” and we jumped in the truck and away we went. When we got out in front of the window, the third grade room, I heard one shot. I went over, hooked up the fire hose, and I heard another shot. And inside the room there was always a little poppin’ goin’ on.

Kids were comin’ out of that window when we pulled up. They were actually throwin’ them out of that window. I can remember seein’ those kids stacked two and three deep out that window. My children saw me and I never even recognized them. My two girls. I thought, “What did they wear to school this morning? How can I recognize them?” Everyone of them came out, their little soot covered faces, all you could see was eyes and panic. And so they were all gone. I seen a person come and grab hold of that window to help ‘em out. And in two jerks he pulled that window right out of its braces. He helped the kids get up and go.

Mark Junge: He was the Basque. The strong Basque man?

Kevin Walker: He knew my kids. You know, we all—in Cokeville, everybody knows everybody. That’s just the way it is. And then I can remember all the kids being out. They were packed up then and they headed in. They could still hear stuff goin’ off and they took the fire hose and went in, and they came out and they said, “Here’s the first one, Kev.” There was two or three guys that was there with me to bring her out. And it was his [David Young’s] wife. And he said, “There’s no sense in saving her.” The top of her head was gone. She was dead for sure. So we just laid her there in the flower bed and went on ahead with our business.

Mark Junge: You’re talking about Doris, now.

Kevin Walker: Yeah. Doris.

Mark Junge: So you took her out the window?

Kevin Walker: She came out the window and when we realized who it was, we just dropped her down into the—there alongside the elementary school. Because we figured we’d

be bringing out a bunch more kids. And come to find out, they made the whole search and Lyle came out pullin' his mask off, and he said, "There's no more! They're gone!" That was really a blessing.

Mark Junge: Was it you or somebody else who said that when you took Doris's body out it was hard to lift because she was just fluid?

Kevin Walker: I figured that we were gonna be triaging kids. But the thing is, they'd had a fire drill the Friday before and all of 'em went over and would stand on the lawn where we told 'em to go. What a testimony that's been to me throughout everything. People—even adults, do what they've been trained to do. And so that's what they done. We waited there to see who was—what children was hurt, and then it came back that the band teacher had been shot, but he was okay, he was alive, and they were transporting him, and that all the kids were out. Mark Junge: Did you know your kids were okay at that time?

Kevin Walker: I knew my kids were out. I didn't know how they were, and it was about—right around about four o'clock.

Mark Junge: Your heart must have lifted a little bit when you heard that?

Kevin Walker: When I heard that the kids were all out I really felt well, this is really good. But we're trying to stay there and secure the building because they told us that if you opened the door, bombs would go off. And I knew that the people, the Sheriff's department and everybody had went in the south door. I knew that.

Mark Junge: Somebody almost got shot going in there.

Kevin Walker: There was—I can't think of his name, but he went in there looking for his child. They thought that he was David Young and they actually brought him out in handcuffs.

Mark Junge: Really!

Kevin Walker: Um hm. And on the lawn and questioned him there, and then they knew that he wasn't David Young or an instigator in the thing.

Mark Junge: Did you go in and get David Young?

Kevin Walker: No, I did not.

Mark Junge: You stayed out?

Kevin Walker: I stayed out. The EMT president at that time, came around and I got word from her or something that confirmed, yes, he is dead. I never seen David Young. Never seen him. Never went in there.

Mark Junge: Didn't know him when he was in the Cokeville Police Department?

Kevin Walker: No, I didn't. I think I'd just came back from school then, was workin' on the railroad, and I was drivin' to Kemmerer every day. I didn't have any idea who he was. Didn't know Doris at all. Didn't know Princess. Didn't know 'em at all..

Mark Junge: How long, Kevin, did it take you to settle down after this? I mean, gain your senses back, or gain your sanity back, so to speak? Or were you sane the whole time?

Mark Junge: So are you healed up?

Kevin Walker: Yeah. I still get tears when I think of it. Think of how close we came to losin' a whole generation. But I learned somethin' by it. I learned it's better to be prepared than not. I think that's one of the reasons Kathy put me in as Emergency Manager. We've had our drills. I have a drill every three years, and usually a table-top every two.

Mark Junge: Did you learn anything spiritually out of this?

Kevin Walker: Spiritually I learned that everything is in God's hands. Everything we do. He governs, he can change a situation in three seconds—in a second. He can change

everything that's gonna go on for the next x-amount of years. I always believed in God. I never really questioned. It was a very spiritual thing. I can remember—we'll get back to my little daughter Katy—I can remember her telling me that Rachel was bad and was sent to Bear Lake Hospital. And I went and asked the fire chief, I said, "Can I go?" And he said, "Yes, you go take care of your family." And with Glenna and I both EMTs, she went in the ambulance and I went and grabbed Jana and Shane, and I can remember my little girl sayin' that the angels saved us. I can remember sayin', "I don't doubt that. I don't at all." Because I know there's angels. But that's a whole 'nother story. But I know we have guardian angels and people who've passed on before us to watch over us help us. I know that beyond a shadow of a doubt. Now, who they were, for them, that's part of Glenna's story and that's part of Katy's story, and Rachel's story. I was there, but it's still their story.

Mark Junge: You have a good heart! You have a stout heart and a good heart. I respect that.

Kevin Walker: People have said, "Why do you do this?" I won't ever deny I didn't have some spiritual things come out of it. I won't ever deny that it didn't happen. I won't cover it up. If someone wants to talk to me about it, I'll sit down and talk to 'em about it. Because I feel if they're in the right frame of mind, that their spirit will testify to 'em that what I'm sayin' is very true. I haven't tried to elaborate on it. These were the facts. These were the facts.

Mark Junge: Thank you.

Kevin Walker: I remember one thing. I remember comin' back to the fire department, here to the town hall, and Princess comin' up to me, and sayin', "You're the only one that'll talk to me. I helped you, will you please help me?" And she said, "Is my Mom and Dad dead?" And I says, "They're not comin' back. That's all I can tell you." And I had to turn and walk away. And I feel sorry for that. I should have consoled that gal right then. Because I actually feel that without her runnin' and helpin', there could have been somebody killed other than the two that were. I've had that

guilt for a long time.

Sue Castaneda: Is she alive?

Kevin Walker: Pardon?

Sue Castaneda: She's alive now, right?

Kevin Walker: Yeah, Princess is.

Mark Junge: Oh, did she?!

Kevin Walker: I think she did.

Mark Junge: I'm surprised!

Sue Castaneda: So would you consider contacting her now to say that?

Kevin Walker: I'd have no problem I don't think, talkin' to Princess now. I think I would have that day.

Sue Castaneda: To reach out to her though, and say that, would you feel better if you did that?

Kevin Walker: Possibly, but I wouldn't know where to even start to get hold of her. I think it would be a healing experience for her, and probably myself.

Mark Junge: So nothing happened to the two fellows that were would-be accomplices?

Kevin Walker: No.

Mark Junge: People just said, I mean, they felt in their hearts that these two guys—

Kevin Walker: Oh, they were so devastated that a person would even want to do something like that. They did not know until that day—that morning, in fact—what was goin' on. And he went up around back of Big Hill—in fact there's a home, it's this hill—

Mark Junge: Oh, Big Hill, yeah.

Kevin Walker: If you go around Big Hill, there's a home that sits back in there and a little place

where the canal is, that goes back up around. He went up there and he actually had his bombs all set out, how he was gonna hook 'em up and everything. That's when he told them guys exactly what he was gonna do. And they said they wouldn't have no part of it and he handcuffed them in the van so they would not—'cause they would have come down before it ever happened, I'm almost positive, and gotten hold of somebody. But he was smart. The Police Chief was out of town. All there was was maintenance personnel here.

Mark Junge: Do you think he knew that?

Kevin Walker: I'll bet money he knew it!

Mark Junge: How would he know it? He'd have to come here and ask who's on duty.

Kevin Walker: No, because you gotta realize, we're a small town and pretty much everybody knows everybody else's business. Our police chief had a set schedule pretty much when he had to go get his car serviced, and I think he knew. I think he thought what was gonna happen to Cokeville is that Cokeville would sit here and sit here and sit here, and fret for hours and nobody'd ever come. That is my thinking of it. He didn't think we knew how to communicate out. He had no idea that Kathy Davison was in town. He had no idea that the state coordinator for emergency management was in town. He had no idea of that. And he never even knew me because he'd never seen me before.

Mark Junge: His demands were so far out that you have to think that he was on the breaking point or something.

Kevin Walker: He didn't want money. He wanted a life after death. Which I'm sure he's got his reward by now. He's livin' it. The Lord says in the scriptures, "It's better a millstone be placed around your neck than harm any of my little ones." He had every child in Cokeville, from Kindergarten to sixth grade in that building.

Mark Junge: What do you think was motivating him if it wasn't money? It wasn't money

because he couldn't take this money physically to the other world, or to the island, as somebody mentioned this morning.

Kevin Walker: I think Satan misled him from the things that I gathered from other people.

Mark Junge: This is a beautiful valley.

Kevin Walker: We're small town Wyoming. It's our heritage. And that's the way I feel.

Sue Castaneda: Besides going to church, what do you do to stay close to the line?

Kevin Walker: By keeping the Ten Commandments.

Mark Junge: Do you do any preaching or any testimonies?

Kevin Walker: I've been in the Bishopric. I'm High Priest Group Leader right now. I bear my testimony quite often. Most generally to my family. Yeah, it doesn't bother me to stand up and bear my testimony, the things that I believe. It really doesn't. And I feel release from it. I think all religions are good.

Mark Junge: See, I believe that you're part of the salt of the earth people. that most people feel the way you do. And when I hear the intolerance of some of the Tea Party people, and I'm sorry to bring that in because it's political, but when I hear the intolerance and the hatred for Muslims and the hatred for anybody that's different, it gets discouraging, and I have to remind myself that there's people out there like you that say, Hey! Whatever you want to believe is fine. Just be a good person. Let's be practical about this. We have to live, we have to live good lives, we have to take care of each other. There has to be some kind of brotherhood or we're all gonna kill each other!

Kevin Walker: Oh, exactly. Exactly. And wouldn't it be great if we could all live that way and not have to worry about who had this or who had that or who had all the money and power. Because really, it don't make no difference! It really don't. As long as we have enough to sustain our needs, who cares?

Mark Junge: Yeah, and somebody this morning said, you know, all you have to think about is today. We're alive today. This has been a revelation. Well, I'm glad you bared your soul on this, and I want to thank you for that. I think that's courageous of 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.