

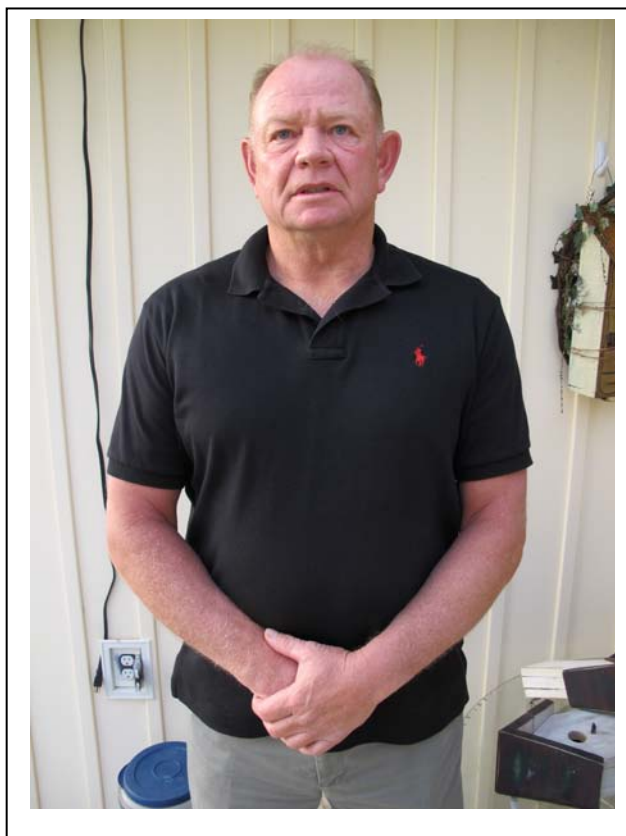
Interview of Ron Hartley

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

Transcribed and edited by Russ Sherwin, February 20, 2011, Prescott, Arizona

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- Subject: Ron Hartley
- Occupation at the time: Lead Investigator, Lincoln County Sheriff's Office; father of four student survivors.
- Interviewer: Mark Junge
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- Topic of interview: Cokeville Elementary School Bombing
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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 Ron Hartley, father and lead investigator.

Mark Junge: Today is the 22nd of September, 2010. My name is Mark Junge and I’m here in the house of Charlotte Freeman, sitting at the dining table, and around this table are seated opposite me Ron Hartley who was the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office Investigator during the Cokeville Bombing incident. To his right is Sue Castaneda who is the head of the Wyoming Oral History Project, and directly to my left and across from Sue is Claudia Hartley, the wife of Ron Hartley. She is going to be here to help him out about things that maybe he forgot about, right?

Okay, Ron. Just go ahead and give me your name and who you are and what you were and so forth.

Ron Hartley: My name is Ron Hartley. I was an investigator for the Lincoln County Sheriff’s office at the time of the bombing which was in 1986. I was assigned at that time to do the background for David Young and also find out who else was involved and the other investigator who was Earl Carroll was given the crime scene, to process it, and also to do the interviews of the other individuals along with the DEA and the ATF.

Mark Junge: DEA meaning—

Ron Hartley: Drug enforcement.

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*

Mark Junge: And the ATF?

Ron Hartley: Alcohol, tobacco and firearms. In fact, DEA wasn't there. It was the ATF and the FBI that were involved with this.

Mark Junge: Federal Bureau of Investigation?

Ron Hartley: Yes.

Mark Junge: Tell me something about the background of David Young, who he was.

Ron Hartley: David Young, when he did the bombing, he took everything with him that was important to him into the bombing. Though we never did get a testimony from him, obviously, because he killed himself, and he had never left really any information behind to state why he was doing this. He took forty-three diaries with him. He had two boxes of slides that pretty much documented his life. David Young was an absolute fanatic at record keeping. His diaries, I could tell you after reading them what he had to eat, what the weather was like, who he talked to, pretty much every day. It was really easy to find out about David through his diaries except for the fact that they were absolutely impossible to read. His handwriting was really difficult and it took me a while before I could finally figure out what he was writing.

He had a list of all the jobs that he had, all the addresses that he had throughout his lifetime. And I shouldn't say throughout his lifetime—it seemed like it started about when he was twenty-five or thirty, somewhere around there. And some of this stuff I'll be guessing because I certainly don't remember exactly. But these are the impressions in my mind of the timelines and his ages. He was very bright. And a lot of this stuff is my opinion, but he was so bright that he really had difficulty having any kind of meaningful relationship with other people. He would just talk way above their heads or talk about things that did not make sense to your average person. He had straight As in Grinnell, Iowa, where he went to school. He had taken classes in psychology, criminology, everything was straight

As. I think he had a C, if I remember right, it was just odd, but it was something to do—was it a C or a B? A B in—well I've got his grades.

He was extremely brilliant except for things that he didn't believe in. And I thought it was a philosophical class, mainly because he took their textbook and I had his textbook. I did a search warrant and went through one of his textbooks and he had written in the margins the things that were wrong with the textbook. That was the one that he got his lowest grade in was a philosophy class.

However, the philosophy class is where he psychologically did a turning point in my opinion. He had changed at that point and everything—up until that point he had planned on being wealthy. He had thought about taking a jetliner and hold it hostage for ransom. He had no intention of, I guess, having a career in anything. And this is back in the '60s he was going to take an airliner and demand ransom for it. And then in this philosophy class, there was a change. He had written on a postcard, in fact, where his philosophy—he had finally come to the conclusion, especially after reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*,² where he believed in reincarnation.

And just everything from that point on was totally focused at the next world. It was called BNW to him. It took me forever to figure out what he was talking about on these abbreviations. And he used a lot of abbreviations in his diaries, so it was really difficult to—and I remember our “War Room,” we had the entire basement of the Sheriff's Office and I just had abbreviations all over the walls and I had some of the girls helping me fill some of that documentation in. What we

²*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (ZAMM) is a 1974 philosophical novel, the first of Robert M. Pirsig's texts in which he explores his Metaphysics of Quality. The book sold 5 million copies worldwide. It was originally rejected by 121 publishers, more than any other bestselling book, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*.

The title is an incongruous play on the title of the book *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel. In its introduction, Pirsig explains that, despite its title, "it should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhist practice. It's not very factual on motorcycles, either."

found out that BNW stood for was the Brave New World. That was just a milestone. At one point, and it was really fairly soon after the bombing that we came up with that terminology, and that's why the sheriff, at that point and we thought that he was connected to the *Aryan Nations*³, because they had dialog about the Brave New World. So they were kinda thinking that this was part of their movement. So we weren't sure that David Young wasn't part of the Aryan Nation group, and had taken some of their philosophy. But in fact, he had just believed in and totally immersed himself in reincarnation and had developed this theory all of his own. It took him several years to write *Zero Equals Infinity*, which was his—

Mark Junge: Manifesto, maybe?

Ron Hartley: Yeah, exactly! That's a good word. Help me with words from now on, by the way, when you see me stumbling, because my vocabulary is getting bad because of my age—getting worse. Anyway, it was his manifesto. And I remember in that *Zero Equals Infinity* letter, I spent a lot of time on that, along with the FBI. The FBI behavior shrink. And I know what he was doing was actually watching me to keep me on the sidewalk so I wouldn't go off the deep end, 'cause they were worried about one of their officers that had—you know, when you get your own children involved, you psychologically can go sideways. And I think that's what he was doin'. S'posed to be watching me.

Anyway, I told him, "I've gone over this a thousand times, and I dream about it. I just can't understand what he's talking about." And he says, "Well, let me tell you: the day you understand what this is talking about, I'll be seeing you professionally. Forget it! It doesn't make sense." So, okay. I just turned a page

³ **Aryan Nations** is a far-right white supremacist religious organization based in the United States. Richard Girnt Butler founded the group in the 1970s, as an arm of the Christian Identity organization Church of Jesus Christ—Christian. As of December 2007, there were two main factions that claimed descent from Butler's group. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has called Aryan Nations a "terrorist threat", and the RAND Corporation has called it the "first truly nationwide terrorist network" in the US. *Wikipedia*

and it was okay. But he lived by this and he couldn't explain to anyone including his wife and the other individuals that were involved. They thought he had come up with some kind of a new energy. Because he was so bright that they thought he had developed some kind of a new energy source and that's why they gave him money periodically.

Mark Junge: This was Gerald Deppe and Doyle Mendenhall, and there was another guy in Jackson, John somebody-or-other, wasn't there? Like a Harrison or something?

Ron Hartley: Yes. Harrison. It was Harrison.

Mark Junge: Was it?

Ron Hartley: Yes, they just took him to the airport in Jackson. He was from Missouri, somewhere back there. All three of these were his friends, and they kept in touch because they wanted to invest in whatever theory or energy source he may come up with. They wanted to be on the ground level at the start of it. But anyway, often they would ask him, "What are you up to?" Or someone else that he was talking to. "What is the key to this new thing?" And he would give them a book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and say, "Read this. This is what it's all about." They couldn't read it. It's not of this planet as far as a redneck from Wyoming is concerned. I'm not that intelligent to deal with that.

Anyway, he'd give them the book and he was being truthful with 'em. That was his bible. That what he got his—everything based off. I've got places where he'd written in the margins. And I'm tryin' to think—there was one reason that I pulled, in my opinion, from the *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* where he had written in the columns of why he picked a school. And it was because he was so mad and angry with the teachers because they had this ritual naming of things. I think what it is, he had such a bad experience in school that he targeted the teachers as one of the things that he couldn't stand. Couldn't handle.

And that's why he was going to blow the school up with these very intelligent children. I found a letter that he'd answered in the newspaper where he—a lady

had advertised for a “Mr. Right” and he answered that ad. He told a little about himself and he says, “I currently am a town Marshall in the town of Cokeville of a hundred people countin’ their dogs and cats with extremely—” and this is not word for word, but basically said, “—very, very bright children. Extremely bright children.” In my mind that’s why he picked Cokeville because his intent was to take these children, blow them all up in this explosion and take them into the next world—the Brave New World—so that he could teach them the right things.

I have no doubt in my mind that he would have sent all of the adults—either released them before it blew up—and this is pure speculation on my part after spending all this time figuring out what he’s like—but I’m sure he would have sent the adults somewhere else. Either released them, shot ‘em, I don’t know what he would have done with them. But he would not have taken the competition with him to the next world. He wanted to be *the* person that was going to re-educate these children.

Mark Junge: Tina Cook said a little while ago that he expected the teachers and the other people in that room to be his, like, assistants, or to help him do things. Is that true?

Ron Hartley: Yes. His personality is, any adult is beneath him. He was very, very comfortable in what he was doing and using these other people as go-betweens because he knew he had the upper hand with where he had these children hostage. He knew the adults would do everything he asked. He was no dummy! He’d been through law school as far as criminal law enforcement school, the academy. He knew how law enforcement would react. He’d listened to all our radio traffic on a little radio, but for the most part he knew what law enforcement was going to do. So as long as he had those children around him he always had the upper hand.

Again in my opinion, there’s a spiritual side to this, at a point where he finally had lost his control. I’m putting two totally different worlds, the spiritual and the absolute facts. I’m kinda putting them together because I was experiencing the facts, the evidence and everything for about a month, month and a half, without knowing what happened on the other side, spiritually, after talking to my son,

Nathan, the six-year-old. So, I don't know how much of this stuff you want me to get into, whether I should do that, put those opinions in or not.

Mark Junge: Well, no, go ahead. Put it in.

Ron Hartley: Maybe we ought to do this later. Just jog my memory about it.

Mark Junge: Okay. Now, you already talked about the diary and how it was almost incomprehensible. You spent a month, month and a half on this? To try to decipher what he was saying? Did the FBI try to help you with this?

Ron Hartley: Yes, they had access—like I said, there were several of us working in the basement in the rooms down there, but they focused—except for the behaviorist—I think he spent more time in the diaries. And the ATF were the ones that were doing—actually assigned the investigation.

Mark Junge: Did you come up with a profile of Doris Young at all? Who she was? Where she was coming from?

Ron Hartley: Battered woman syndrome. Just low self-esteem, going to stick with her husband no matter what. As far as I'm concerned there's no real explanation for that. It just doesn't fit.

Mark Junge: Did you interview this Gerald Deppe and Doyle Mendenhall?

Ron Hartley: No. I didn't do any of the interviews at all.

Mark Junge: Did you find out anything about them? I mean, seems to me that the first thing you would have done would be to impound 'em and hold 'em.

Ron Hartley: Yes. What happened was—let me bring it up to the event. In 1968—don't quote me on the date—in that philosophy class, when he finally turned around, he then decided to do the BNW—the Brave New World. Nobody knew what was going on. He would tell Doris this was what he was going to do, but she had no idea. No comprehension of what really was going to happen. And Princess [David's daughter] was involved also. She came to Cokeville with them and I don't know

whether to get into that aspect or whether to get into trying out the bomb before he left Tucson.

Mark Junge: I think it would be nice to know something about Princess.

Ron Hartley: Okay. The thing I can tell you about her involvement, she assumed they were going to knock over a bank. She helped put the paper to white out the windows in the van. She helped build the bomb and things like that, but she had no idea what the target was. She was in the dark right up until David told all of them in the van, the day that that happened, exactly what he was going to do. She did not want to do it.

And the two, Gerald Deppe and Doyle Mendenhall, they flat-out wasn't going to cooperate with him. They had a little meeting out here on the highway when he announced what was going to happen. He ended up having to handcuff those two to the van. He made Doris drive and I think Princess was just a passenger. But he went and sat on the passenger side and held a gun. From that point on they were held at gunpoint.

They drove down to the Elementary School and it was during a recess and some of the kids were outside so they just drove past it. They came up here on this road and stopped by Ty-Tel and just gave it a few minutes and then they drove back again and there were still some kids out. So then they drove over by the big hill which is where the landfill is and then they could see the school through binoculars from there. They watched until everybody went into the school. Then they went and drove down there and backed the van up to the south entrance and started unloading everything.

Back when he told everybody else what was going on, that's when Doris said, "Yeah, I'll do it. I'll help you." She was going to go and support him. When they backed the van up, Princess was crying, she was helping them unload all the materials and was really angry with her father. After they got the van unloaded then he just threw the keys to her and he says, "If you don't want to go with me, that's fine. You're no daughter of mine!" Just chucked her the keys. She immediately drove the van over to the City Hall and reported this, the incident

that her parents were taking the school hostage. And that's what initiated the law enforcement action.

Mark Junge: Let's go into your personal story. You know, where were you when you heard about this, what was your reaction, what did you do?

Ron Hartley: Again, there's a spiritual side to that part, but I stopped—two nights before I stopped at a friend's place there in Afton. He was in the oil field business and was tryin' to do a little bit of work here and there. Where I grew up—I grew up—we manufactured dry ice, and we had a five mile long pipeline out through the desert into Wellington. The place was bought and sold and it no longer existed. But that pipeline needed to be cleaned out of the area and there was some money that he could make by doing that. And I stopped, and I said, "I know about this pipeline. Do you want to go look at it?" And he said, "Yeah, let's do." I mean, just out of the clear blue. Just stopped right in front of his house.

So we went down to Utah, down to Price, stayed overnight at my brother's house—I think we stayed at my brother's house. Then the next day we started driving back on the 16th. We didn't have the radios going, didn't know anything about it. And I guess the Highway Patrol, everybody was tryin' to find me. The Sheriff kept tryin' to get a hold of me, because I was the only one that was trained in tactical things. I shouldn't say the only one, but I was the tactical leader in hostage taker profiling, stuff like that. Anyway, he was tryin' to find me and when we were driving down here by Sage Junction I saw two ambulances with their lights on goin' down the road. And I commented to Rob, I said, "There must be a wreck right up here." They got two ambulances goin' down, we turned, headed toward Cokeville, passed a school bus, which I didn't think too much about it, then we passed another ambulance, and I thought, "Man, this must be a big wreck."

Well, we get over here by Thompson's house, which is straight across right over there, and we can see the airport. There are *huge* aircraft sitting on that airport. And a helicopter was coming in. that, I says, "There's gotta be something goin'

on here.” Then we got to Cokeville Main Street and you couldn’t even go down the main street. And I says, “What in the world is goin’ on.” And the first person that we drove up to when we got down here to the blockade was Kathy Davison. She was our Emergency Management Coordinator. And I said, “Kathy, what is goin’ on? You got some kind of a super mock-disaster going on?” She said, “No, somebody had taken the school hostage and a bomb went off, and I can’t talk to you right now. They had all the kids in the class and the bomb went off!”

My heart just sunk! From that point on, every second was an hour. I couldn’t move fast enough, I just couldn’t go anywhere. Everything was in slow motion. I just grabbed my gun out from underneath the seat of Rob’s truck, I said, “I’ve gotta go!” and I just jumped out, ran up through the crowd, and I seen the Sheriff on the other side of the tape and I went up to him and I asked him what was goin’ on and he said, “Your kids are okay.”

They’d taken the school hostage, and the bomb had went off, and all those kids were in the classroom! I said, “What do you mean they’re okay?” He said, “They’re okay.” I said, “Where are they? I need to go see them.” He said, “I can’t have you go see ‘em, they’re on their way to Kemmerer, but they’re okay. I need you to find out who did this, who else is involved.” And I says, “Are you sure they’re okay?” He says, “They’re okay. I seen ‘em! They’re okay! Get with Earl and the bomb tech and get up to speed and then you take David, the evidence and find out who it is, his background and who else may be out there.”

So I went over to the school and Rich Haskell was there, he’s the bomb tech, and Ron Norda, and they said—I’m not a religious man—but he said, “You’ve got a miracle!” He said, “If that bomb had of went off the way that it should and the way it was designed to this whole wing should be gone.” And he said, “It just didn’t go off the way it was supposed to.”

Then Earl came out and Earl says, “Come with me.” And so we went in and he says, “This is the stuff that David’s brought in. There’s boxes of diaries. We walked up the hallway and the desks and everything was all out there. Everything

was just scattered. Then we went into the classroom and I saw the pock-marks in the walls and how burned out and everything was just totally black. And the ceiling was blown through.

I couldn't believe that my kids were okay. So I got one of the guys portables and I called the Diamondville officer and I says, "I want you to go to the hospital and I want you to look at my kids. I need to have you check on 'em." And he says, "I will." It took forever for him to get back with me. But I took the boxes of diaries over to my office which was in Downtown Cokeville, in the City Hall, and then he called me on the radio and just said, "I've seen 'em, I've talked to 'em, I've talked to your wife, and they're okay." I said, "Can they see? Can they hear?" and he said, "Yeah, yeah. They're okay. They've got a little bit of a burn on the back of one of your little kids. The other one's got some slight burns, but they're all really good."

So I could finally focus. I just took the boxes in the office and I just found the newest one, the one on top and I just started diggin' into that. And the first page of that was just unbelievable with all of the numbers and abbreviations and things that are on the front of that, and I just, I couldn't take it in. I couldn't understand what he was talking about. So I flipped to the back of the pages. I wanted the last entry. I read about the last two or three and I don't remember what they say, but there's just nothin'—nothin' there to indicate that this was—he's talking about a "biggie," you know. And that's what the first of the book said. It had a little bird's feather in it and it said "The Year of the Biggie, BNW." I didn't know what they were.

So I just kept goin' page after page backward to pick up anything that had to do with the bombing, and I came to this one date that says, "*I'm often excited now. It's still too dark to do the test. Waited until daylight and performed the test which did exactly what it was supposed to. I'm excited enough to tell Doris we're going to do this.*" Then the rest of it was goin' backwards, findin' the shopping cart and stuff, but I found where he actually had tested the bomb. It had performed exactly the way it was supposed to.

Mark Junge: What did he test it on?

Ron Hartley: He had a place out there that he'd always go and shoot his guns and gather up old ammunition and brass and stuff. He was a gun nut. He called it the "blow hole." He just went out and tested it in the open air just to see if the stuff would ignite. He took the design out of the—oh, what's it called? The black book. Military. Improvising munitions. How to make a bomb out of anything book. I keep wanting to call it a black book and it may be the name of it. I can't remember right now. Anyway, it's designed to blow up—you ever heard of a grain silo igniting and blowing up just from the dust that's inside there? And coal mines? That's the way this bomb reacts only he used flash—aluminum powder.

Mark Junge: Why aluminum powder?

Ron Hartley: It flashes, extremely bright, fast.

Mark Junge: Like Napalm? Just burns right through you?

Ron Hartley: No, it's an explosive. In a dust form. You can blow flour up, put flour in the air. You can put several different kinds of real fine powders in the air. Once it gets airborne, if it has an ignition source, which was what the gasoline bottle was there for, with the blasting cap inside it also. There were three blasting caps in there.

Mark Junge: Well, can you describe what this bomb looked like? I mean, there was a shopping cart, people have told us. I've gotten several different versions of what this thing was.

Ron Hartley: What it is is a regular shopping cart, only everyone has pictured in their minds as one of the four wheeled push cart, and it's not. It's actually a two wheeled cart that is about this wide—well, it's this wide and this thick and everything is stacked on top of it. It's not your regular big shopping cart. But there's several layers. In the bottom of it was the powders, there were the aluminum powder and things that was going to ignite and blow up. Inside there there was also gunpowder, there were links of chain, there was a lot of ammunition. All this stuff was designed to blow up and then send shrapnel out also. He was also in the

process of making other bombs. He had other bomb making materials there that he was going to set for booby traps for officers responding or whatever.

Mark Junge: Was there a gallon jug of gasoline?

Ron Hartley: Yes. A gallon jug of gasoline was at the top. The thing—there's several things that kept this from going what we call "high order." Well, to function properly. The cans beneath that gasoline have to be dry. The powder has to be dry for it to go out in a dust cloud. The milk bottle that they used had developed a leak for some reason. Nobody knows why. It had dripped gasoline down inside these powder cans. So when ignited it blew out mud. Just a flammable, gas-soaked mud instead of this dust which kept that explosion from blowing up. And one—can't remember if it was one or two—blasting caps failed to go off. The failure rate on a blasting cap is—you can't even measure 'em. It just doesn't happen. But they didn't go off and they were all wired to the same ignition source.

Mark Junge: Which was—what?

Ron Hartley: The battery. There was a lantern—9 volt batteries that have wire contacts going from these electric blasting caps that are set inside—one set inside the gasoline, the others are set inside these powder cans. They're all wired to the positive terminal and then the negative line goes over to what we call the dead-man switch which is a improvised clothespin with some contacts on it.

Mark Junge: So the way it would work is if he pulled this piece of wood or part of a clothespin out from between the two ends of the clothespin that had the contacts, that would cause a circuit to be made?

Ron Hartley: That closes the circuit and causes the ignition. And that wedge that was stuck in between those contacts had a string hooked to it, a lanyard hooked to it, was around his wrist.

Mark Junge: Was it you, or Rich Haskell or somebody—might have been Haskell—was saying two of the lines were cut. And I didn't understand that. I mean, if you're describing a positive and a negative, two lines were cut? Which lines were those?

Ron Hartley: Well, I don't know whether they were the positive side, but with three blasting caps you got six wires. You've got a positive and negative on each one of 'em. And the one to the gasoline was the only one that wasn't cut.

Mark Junge: How do you figure those were cut?

Ron Hartley: Ask Rich Haskell. He don't know. Nobody knows. Don't know.

End of Part I

Mark Junge: See, the only thing I can come up with besides a miracle is that maybe David Young said, "I don't want to do the whole school, I'm going to clip—"

Ron Hartley: Not a chance!

Mark Junge: Not a chance?

Ron Hartley: Not a chance! Not a chance! This man had been planning this since 1978. He is absolutely, 100% positive in reincarnation. That is his whole—that's why he's there. He even stated in one of these little fits that he had, or moments that he had that he jots down on post cards and matchbook covers and any of this other stuff, that when he finally figured out—and it was an epic moment to him, you could tell on that postcard, because he had *Zero Equals Infinity*, *God Equals Nothing*, *Two Piss-Ants Together Equals Nothing*. I mean this guy is going out, the bottom line is, this is his life. This is what he's been built for and the whole world is a stage. Everybody else, you and I are just in his little theater.

Mark Junge: If Doris or Princess had cut these lines—nobody saw Doris cut any lines, I mean, nobody said that they saw her, right? If Princess would have cut those lines would he have noticed? Were they cut in a certain place where he would have noticed?

Ron Hartley: I don't know. You'd have to ask Rich. I didn't do the bomb scene. He and Ron Norda did.

Mark Junge: Okay, well, do you have anything else on that? Your reaction when you finally found out your kids were okay and then what did you do after that?

Ron Hartley: Well, then I started going back and when I found out that he had tested this bomb, I found out what BNW meant. I talked to the Sheriff because the Sheriff was just getting hounded by the media. You cannot even imagine the media, the pressure to stay ahead of the media. That was an eye-opener to me. The media has such a network. It's far superior to anything law enforcement could even think of. They could interview—have guys in Grinnell, Iowa, interviewing the parents before we even know who the parents [are]. I mean, it's phenomenal. And to try to stay ahead of them and try to quell some of the things that were being said, it's just unbelievable. Anyway, the Sheriff was trying to manage the media and trying to put all this together.

Mark Junge: Who was the Sheriff?

Ron Hartley: Deb Wolfley.

Mark Junge: Was he a veteran? I mean, a veteran law enforcement officer?

Ron Hartley: Yes. Yeah. He's a career—he was a career officer.

Mark Junge: Has he ever said what that pressure was like?

Ron Hartley: Oh, yeah.

Mark Junge: Okay, so then your kids eventually come home and you're not shocked by what you see?

Ron Hartley: Uh, I remember it was after dark, just right at sunset and I could see some school buses coming in and I just dropped everything and I went to try to find 'em and I finally found 'em and I just—I picked 'em all up and just hugged each one of 'em. They had little black soot-covered faces and whites of their eyes and big smiles. I just told 'em I loved 'em!

Mark Junge: Were you finally satisfied that they were okay?

Ron Hartley: Yeah.

Sue Castaneda: How many of them were there, Ron?

Ron Hartley: We had four inside of the building, and our oldest and our very youngest—our oldest daughter was in junior high at the time.

Mark Junge: Okay. So can you tell me a little bit about Nathan's angels. What—is he willing to talk about that?

Ron Hartley: No.

Mark Junge: He's not?

Ron Hartley: Huh-uh. Nope. He's had some real difficulties in his life. He's a little computer. Very bright, but he's a geek. Loves computers and that's pretty much what he talks about. We have twenty-five grandchildren and he isn't even married. He doesn't even have any kids yet. He has no interest in having children. He won't talk about it. I think it is—a lot of this has to do with the pressure of seeing angels. And I was livid when I found out. This whole thing is a two-edged sword kinda for me.

Mark Junge: In what way?

Ron Hartley: For about a month—[To Claudia] it was a month, wasn't it until we had Nathan—or was it just two weeks—

Claudia Hartley: It really wasn't very long, maybe a couple weeks max.

Ron Hartley: Alright. So couple weeks. I was thinking maybe a month, cause every day was a week! I'd go to the Sheriff's office in Kemmerer—we lived here in Cokeville—we lived in that house right over here, and I'd go to the Sheriff's office in Kemmerer and read those diaries and just live this guy's life. Try to figure out why and who else and didn't know anything about him. But the more I got into this the more I could see what the end was really going to be. At first we were okay with things just didn't go right. He just messed up, he didn't know how to work the bomb, he made mistakes, blah, blah, blah. The more you get into his diaries as absolute fanatic he is at detail, he didn't make mistakes and this is not a mistake.

But I'd go there and I started to realize he was literally going to blow those kids up. So I got more and more—scared, I guess. I don't know what it is. It's not scared, because it had already happened. Just the realization that that's what he was doing.

Mark Junge: Of what could have happened.

Ron Hartley: Yes.

Claudia Hartley: Can I break in here? See what was happening, was the rest of the town was rejoicing! The children had been saved and it was over for them. But we—and I helped read the diaries too. We were living this. We were discovering just how bad it really was. Just how close it came. It was a nightmare. It was a nightmare for us and Nathan was having nightmares. It was awful!

Ron Hartley: That's where I was going to go with that. Nathan started having nightmares, right? I'd been going for however long and learning about this stuff and then coming home. I'd cry going there, and I'd do my job, and I'd cry coming back when I was driving. This is while the FBI shrink was lookin' at me crosseyed. Anyway, Nathan started to have fevers—again. And I say again, because when he was two years old he had fevers were called febrile seizures. He'd get a hunnerd 'n six temperature and then his body would—he'd just collapse into a fetal position. And he would not breathe. I mean, you could not open his arms and he would turn black until all of a sudden he would just go limp and he'd start breathing again. His color—one time we called the hospital and they sent an ambulance. He couldn't wait for an ambulance. I started headin' there with him and he finally started breathing again. And for, in don't know, a month or so he'd get those fevers and we'd have to put him in ice water in the bathtub when he was two years old. Or else take him outside totally naked at ten below zero, try to get that temperature down, 'cause they said that's the worst thing on him. It'll fry his brain if you don't.

And so we were puttin' him through those kinds of things at two years old and this happened to him. He always seemed like a very fragile kid. He just always

looked picked on. A runt of the litter kind of thing, just very, very sensitive. And then this happened. And he'd go downtown with Claudia to the store and he would lay down on the floor in the car in the back seat so nobody could see him or he couldn't see anybody else. And he was having these fevers and he was having day-mares. Totally awake and he'd just see David. He was right at the [taped] square where the bomb was.

So Dave Ford, the shrink, he called me, he says, "How are your kids doing?" And I said, "I think our kids are doing okay except Nathan's having some fevers." And I think he talked to Claudia—

Claudia Hartley: He did call me.

Ron Hartley: Oh, that's right, called you. So he said, "Well, why don't you bring him down."

And I was working. I didn't hear any of this stuff. She calls me and said, "I took Nathan down and had Dave Ford talk to him." We'd had Nathan to the doctors a couple of times. Two different doctors giving him two different kinds of medication trying to get those fevers down.

Claudia Hartley: We were asked about tuberculosis. Has he been around dead animals? We were just sick. See, he had had hip surgery five weeks before that—

Ron Hartley: Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you about that.

Claudia Hartley: —and that's what beat him down so badly. It was so painful.

Mark Junge: Nathan had hip surgery?

Ron Hartley: He has Legg-Perthes Disease. He doesn't even have a socket in his hip. Nor did he have—you know the knuckle bone on the end of your femur? Those were rotted off. Those were eaten away. When he was two years old, again, when he would run he would be out of control and I told her we need to get him checked. So we took him to Primary Children's Hospital and there was a doctor down there that was doing a study on Legg-Perthes Disease. Nathan was his worst case. He was *the* worst. He had had surgery where they cut his hip bone and angled the socket

down a little bit, and they'd cut the femur bone and tipped the point of the stub of his femur into his femur. Just like a ball and socket, only there wasn't. There's no ball or socket, just bone. He was just barely got off crutches.

Claudia Hartley: He'd been in a body cast for weeks.

Ron Hartley: Anyway, he was just very fragile. So after taking him to the doctor—you know, I'm taking too long on this stuff—but she [Claudia] told me that she'd taken him to Doug Ford and Doug came out of the room, and—was in there for a long time—and Claudia told me he come out and he said, “Do you believe in angels?” And she says, “Well, our religion does, but I've never seen 'em.” He says, “You need to talk to Nathan.” So she talked to Nathan and Nathan told her that he had seen an angel. That an angel had came and stood by him and said that she was his great, great, great grandmother. [To Claudia] You tell them, would you?

Claudia Hartley: Yeah, he said it was my great, great, great, great grandmother who came and told me to sneak very carefully away from the bomb. I said, “What was her name?” And he didn't know. And I said, “Well, Grandma Baker?” and he says, “No, no.” And I said, “Grandma Meister?” And he said, “Yes.” Well, Grandma Meister was alive. And she was in Pinedale in a nursing home. I thought well—

Ron Hartley: Well, don't get into too much detail, because that's not what you told me. You just told me he'd seen an angel.

Claudia Hartley: Oh, okay. Well, I thought you were asking what he had told me. So where are we going?

Ron Hartley: This is what beats me up whenever I have to talk about this. So she called me on the phone and told me that Nathan had seen an angel. I just come unglued. I was just really mad because I didn't hate them—[Claudia: yes you did!] I hated psychiatrists. I hated anybody that has to do with mental evaluation of people and stuff like that. I'm a redneck! In law enforcement I've had cases where the shrink, the councilors and the doctors said there's nothing wrong with this young girl, and 30 days later I get a call from a doctor that is not their regular doctor and she'd

been sexually abused to where she has to have a hysterectomy, and the girl is twelve years old! So I just had real issues with shrinks.

So I was livid. I was really mad. I just quit what I was doing over there and I came home. And I sat Nathan down— I sat him down and did an interview with him just like I would any criminal. And I just was going to show him that he was absolutely wrong! So I says, “Okay, Nathan. What did you see?” And he says, “Well, I had this angel come and she stood right by me.” And I says, “So, who was she?” and he said, “I don’t know her name. I think it might have been Grandma Meister.” Went through pretty much the same thing Claudia did.

I finally told Claudia, “Grab the Book of Rememberance, which is our family sheet, and we were just flippin’ the pages and he put his hand down and he says, “That’s her!” There was a picture of my Grandma there, and also of Grandma Meister sitting together in this chair. And I said, “Is it this one? It’s Grandma Meister and she’s still alive.” And he said, “No, it’s the other one.” And he had seen her once when he was a year old. Sat on her lap before she passed away. And never seen her since then.

And it sat me back! I said, “Nathan, are you sure?” And he says, “Yeah, that’s my angel!” I just kinda did the interview a little further—so what did she say, and what did she do—and he said, “Well, there were angels all around. Everybody had an angel. Even David and Doris.” I said, “So, what were they doing?” and he says, “Well, Grandma told me to quick go to the window and—” He says—he used this big word—he said, “Before I recognized what she said—” I mean, this kid is six years old. Never used *recognized*. It’s not in his vocabulary. He said, “Before I *recognized* what she said, the bomb went off. But the angels were holding hands around the bomb and when the bomb went off, the angels just went up through the ceiling.”

And I said, “Nathan, you said there were angels around everybody else?” And that’s when I told Claudia, “Get him some paper and let him draw this out.” And I said, “So what was happening with David and Doris?” He said, “Well, before the

bomb went off, David's angel looked like it was leaving. That she just had been gone.”

Claudia Hartley: David didn't have an angel. It was Doris's angel that left.

Ron Hartley: No, David's angel was leaving. And that's when we went and come to the conclusion that at one point David had lost it. That's when he went and gave the cord up to Doris and went into the bathroom to wash his face and just get himself together again. Isn't that—

Claudia Hartley: Well that was the conclusion he came to; David didn't have one and Doris's was leaving. Which made sense because she was gonna die. She was gonna die within the next few minutes.

Ron Hartley: Anyway, I don't remember that part.

Mark Junge: Was—did he have diabetes?

Ron Hartley: David did.

Mark Junge: Was that one of the reasons people evidently said he was sweating and—

Ron Hartley: Yeah, everybody said he was having a reaction.

Mark Junge: A diabetic—

Ron Hartley: Yeah. This other stuff, I'm just trying to put the facts that I know, because that's the first thing when I talked to Rich Haskell and Ron Norda they said when you look at this bomb, that explosion went right through the ceiling. It never went out or else it would have hurt these kids more.

Mark Junge: Shoulda gone out?

Ron Hartley: Yeah. Yeah. And they had said this the day that it happened. And so I'm recalling all this other stuff when Nathan's telling me this thing a week or two later.

Mark Junge: Have you interviewed him since then? Have you had a family talk? Has he ever talked about it since then?

Ron Hartley: Yeah, we did when they were younger.

Mark Junge: He still sticks by his story?

Ron Hartley: He did when he was younger. Now he says, I know what happened, and that's about as much as he'll say.

Claudia Hartley: It was years later that he and I had a talk and for some reason it all came back to him. The memory came clear, and that was actually when he remembered about Doris's angel leaving and David not having an angel. He saw it so clearly at that point, only he saw it with an older person's eyes. Then he was a teenager. So he understood what he saw. He said there was one for every child. He remembered it fully then and I haven't talked to him about it since to know how he still feels about it. It's been a hard thing for him.

Mark Junge: Yeah, I can imagine. Well is it because it was hard for him that that's why he doesn't talk about it anymore? Or he just wants to put it behind him?

Ron Hartley: Probably both. I don't know.

Mark Junge: He's a sensitive kid.

Ron Hartley: He is. He is. Anyway, we got to the end of that interview when I was finding out and he took every question, I mean, he'd look right at me and tell me this is what happened with these angels. And at the end I said, "Nathan, why didn't you tell me this before?" And he looked right at me and he just said, "Dad, you would never believe me." And that's why I hate even talking about it.

Mark Junge: It's tough for you. It was tough for you.

Sue Castaneda: He didn't think you would believe him because you were a policeman?

Ron Hartley: Well, that's exactly what I told Claudia when she called me on the phone over there. I said, "It is bad enough that that kid has got to live being a cop's son. He can't go around saying he's seen angels." That's when I came home.

Mark Junge: But that's what he saw.

Ron Hartley: Yeah.

Sue Castaneda: Did he know other people had seen them too?

Claudia Hartley: Well he didn't know that for a long time after.

Ron Hartley: We never did talk to anybody about it or anything. Then I don't know what had happened. It had to be months. We started hearing just bits and pieces that other kids had seen them.

Mark Junge: He sat on Grandma Elliot's lap at the age of one. I don't see how he could have remembered what she looked like.

Claudia Hartley: No. And she died shortly after that.

Mark Junge: Did he ever see a picture of her after that?

Claudia Hartley: No, we didn't have any pictures out of her. No.

Ron Hartley: No. When he picked her picture out, that's when I knew this kid—I just had that—where do you go when you can pick something—actually pick the right Grandma with two of them, the only two great-grandmothers he's had, and he picks the one that he'd never seen.

Claudia Hartley: And he didn't even know it was a picture of his Grandma.

Ron Hartley: Yeah, that's true.

Mark Junge: So both of you believe what he says when he says he saw angels?

Ron Hartley: There's no doubt in my mind.

Claudia Hartley: Yeah, the facts even support it.

Ron Hartley: Believe me, I didn't—at that time I didn't hang with people that talked about angels and talked about this stuff. You know, I'm a cop.

Mark Junge: You say the facts bore it out?

Claudia Hartley: Well, you think about it. David has full control. He's doing fine and then all of a sudden he starts to sweat profusely. The same time that corresponds with when Nathan says the angels came in. David lost all power when those angels came in. He was on his own then. He had no support. God had taken over.

Mark Junge: Well, I'd say you're very lucky people.

Claudia Hartley: Luck had nothing to do with it.

Mark Junge: Okay, but I didn't mean it that way. I'm just saying you're very—blessed! Let's put it that way.

Ron Hartley: Well, we've heard that a thousand times, you know, how lucky we were and stuff, and just to us, it's not a question of luck. There's too many things.

Mark Junge: Has this strengthened your faith? This whole incident?

Ron Hartley: Do I believe that there's a life after death? Yes. Absolutely. Before, I really didn't care. You know, I'm a type A personality. I just—if it's dangerous, that's gonna be fun! And I wonder where my son gets what he gets what he gets. It's just a genetic thing. I'm a cop because of the adrenalin.

Mark Junge: You studied the diary, you were personally involved, your son was personally involved and was traumatized. How do you look at this whole incident? Is it worthy of being called a historical event? Or is it a personal trauma, more or less.

Ron Hartley: It is absolutely a historic event because it occurred. It affected so many people's lives. It's against the law. It's unthinkable to attack an elementary school. It is the most insane thing that I've ever seen. And that's one thing that law enforcement teaches you is if you think you've seen it all, you just haven't. There's no end to this. But when that happened, there's no limits. There's no conscience in some people. I don't know even how to explain it. How do you take that many innocent children and kill 'em all. Traumatize 'em.

Mark Junge: So nothing has come close since this event occurred in your profession to the magnitude of this thing?

Ron Hartley: No. No. There's one thing that's close, and that's the 9-11.

Mark Junge: That bothered you?

Ron Hartley: It made me very angry. But it didn't—is it a tragedy? I guess you've got to be in one of 'em to really feel for other people that are in 'em.

Mark Junge: I believe that. You don't have any dreams of this? Do you dream about it?

Ron Hartley: No. No. Only when people call us and want us to talk about it.

Mark Junge: Then this bothers you? (Laughter)

Ron Hartley: Yeah, I don't like crying. I don't like this part of me.

Mark Junge: I don't see anything wrong with it. There isn't anything wrong with it.

Ron Hartley: Well, I do it because it happened. I can't change that. And I'll get through it and I'll be okay. I haven't died from it yet.

Mark Junge: Well, you know how much we appreciate this, you guys talking about this.

Ron Hartley: Thank you. But that's why it is very important to anybody that's involved with this that it's not—we've been trying—you know, they've tried to get us on talk shows and TV and everything over there. And one time, one time, just like talking to Tina out there, we all kinda talked to 'em on *Unsolved Mysteries*. And they reported what we said, which is a rarity, but they put it between cattle mutilations and aliens, and that will never happen again!

Sue Castaneda: What do you think about this—what message could you give or maybe instruction, or—well, just a couple of years ago just in Bailey, Colorado, they had the same thing, or sort of the same thing, where the guys took the high school hostage, and I think he raped one of the girls and killed one, if not the same girl. Do you remember this?

Ron Hartley: Yeah.

Sue Castaneda: Okay. So, I would suppose things have changed somewhat since then in schools, but do you think about writing maybe articles or books or anything to help other schools? What can you do now? What would you say? I know they do lockdowns and stuff like that.

Ron Hartley: All of these school lockdowns and security levels now just went through the roof after the Cokeville thing. That was the one thing that all of our law enforcement seminars, whenever we was asked to give presentations to other schools and stuff like that, how can we stop this. And you can't stop it. You can't turn your schools into a prison. The greatest thing they did was like some of the ideas that Claudia's come up with for their schools. People check in. Mandatory check in. Mandatory having a window so you can see who's coming, who's going. Locking all the other doors. Just basic things. And I shudder to even think that we have to do that.

Mark Junge: What do you think the difference is between modern days and old days when nobody would have done anything like this. This is like a first, right?

Ron Hartley: Yes, absolutely the first.

Mark Junge: Is there a history of this before you guys?

Ron Hartley: There was one situation where a school bus was taken⁴. And I only heard this through the grapevine. I can't remember the case but I know it happened in California and they actually buried the school bus with the kids in it until they got their ransom money or something like that. And as I say, I don't know for a fact that that's what happened, but—

Mark Junge: This was a twisted, twisted person, a dysfunctional person at least. Why do things like that happen today and maybe didn't happen in the past? What's the change.

⁴ Chowchilla, California was launched into national headlines on July 15, 1976 when an entire school bus of children was kidnapped. Twenty-six children and the adult bus driver were taken from the bus, which the kidnapers eventually concealed under brush in a wash, and driven around in two vans for 11 hours before being forced, one by one, to climb into a hole in the ground. After passing through the hole the children and their driver found themselves trapped in the interior of a buried moving van. Although they did not know it, their place of confinement was itself concealed inside a quarry located in Livermore, California. *Wikipedia*

Ron Hartley: There's a different criminality in these high schools versus what was going on with him. There is nothing more dangerous than a religious fanatic. Because—well, I'm going to say something, it will probably going to be—it's the Muslims. And I'm not going to classify 'em all into it, but the ones that are terrorists, the ones that are fighting amongst themselves in Iraq, in Pakistan, those are the deadliest, the most dangerous criminals and thought processes, because just like David Young, they don't make a differentiation about death as being a punishment, or they have no fear of dying. And they have no fear of taking somebody else with them. These other incidents you're talking about, these schools, you know, that's an act of criminal—either he's angry, or frustrated, it's just a different profile.

Mark Junge: You said you were sort of—I take it an agnostic, a person who didn't think much about the afterlife. Have you changed? Has your spirituality changed?

Ron Hartley: Well, I've always been LDS. I was born and raised in the church. But did I have doubts? Yeah. Because I haven't seen it. I'm a—like I said, I'm a cop. I'm a type A personality. And I've learned that in court, if you can't bring the evidence there, it didn't happen. If I don't see it, if I don't touch it, if I don't document it or something, it doesn't happen. I can only—I have faith. I had faith in the hereafter, let's put it that way. But now I know. Has it made me a better person? No! I'm still a weak shit! (Laughter) But you know, that's a personal problem.

Mark Junge: All these records you have. What are you going to do with these?

Ron Hartley: Well, we store 'em. Save 'em for posterity. It actually happened. This is the document—like I said, I'm a tangible person. If I don't have the records, if my posterity doesn't have the records, who's to say. You guys are doing the right thing—

Mark Junge: You think?

Ron Hartley: —by documenting this stuff. Because we do forget. And technically it's good for you guys and for others to ask us to talk about this, because, yeah, it does. It brings it back, but it brings me back to what I should be instead of what I am.

Mark Junge: Well spoken. Well, this was Sue's idea. I didn't think too much of the idea. I thought, well, it's interesting. But then when I read this, I got freaked out. I had to read it when I was not doing well. I was sick. So I thought about it whenever I'd wake up at night I'd think about this stuff. And yet after talking to—you're the tenth person we've talked to—after talking to all these people I feel much better about it. I feel we've been talking to human beings who went through an experience, and it was a bad experience, yes, and this guy was wacko and his wife was a slave to him, and all that. But on the other hand, just hearing the testimony from you people is uplifting. I mean, it just makes me feel good.

Ron Hartley: Well and that's—after we get through this, like I said—and I never thought about it until just now, but it helps us. It helps me to come back to the reality of what this earth—what we're doing right now it's not the reality of really what's to come. I know this. If you can't get any more physical evidence and to see the spiritual side, that's the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I mean, I can read about all the things that happened in the Bible, the parting of the waters and stuff, you know. They're stories. This ain't a story. Not to me.

Mark Junge: This is an event. This is a historical event.

Ron Hartley: And I have a flip side of that is—and other people said this when we were talking about why are your kids so special that God stepped in and saved your kids. How come he didn't do it to ours. Try to answer that question. I don't know.

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.