

Interview of Lea Kae Roberts Weston

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

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

Version: V-1 First Draft for review

- Subject: Lea Kae Roberts Weston, an absent fourth-grader at the Cokeville Elementary School at the time of the bombing.
- Interviewer: Mark Junge
- Interview date: September 22, 2010
- Place of Interview: Cokeville, Wyoming
- Topic of interview: Cokeville Elementary School bombing in May, 1986



- Source recording for transcription: CD audio recording from Wyoming Dept of State Parks and Cultural Resources:

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 Lea Kae Roberts Weston, who was an absentee fourth grader on the day of the bombing.

Mark Junge: Today is the 22nd of September, 2010, my name is Mark Junge and I’m in the house of Charlotte Freeman, in her dining room. Facing me is Lea Kae Roberts Weston who’s going to tell us something about the Cokeville bombing, or her experience during that time, and immediately to her right is Sue Castaneda who is the head of the Wyoming Oral History Project. So, Lea, go ahead.

Lea Kae Weston: Okay. I’m Lea Kae Roberts Weston, I was an absentee fourth grader on May 16, 1986 when the bombing took place.

Mark Junge: Now, I read your account in the book – are you a writer?

Lea Kae Weston: No.

Mark Junge: Because it’s almost poetic. You have almost a poetic style to your writing.

Lea Kae Weston: Thank you.

Mark Junge: Have you ever been told that before?

Lea Kae Weston: No.

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: Oh, yeah. Well, okay, can you talk about, from start to end, summarize what happened that day in your eyes? Because you weren't there, necessarily.

Lea Kae Weston: It was like any other day. I remember going to school and getting ready. It was actually my mother and father's anniversary. My father was working out of town and my mother had planned on me babysitting my younger brother who has Cerebral Palsy, for just an hour or two. She had planned on checking me out of school that day. And what I remember, it was after lunch, and I remember after lunch her checking me out, and I vividly remember walking out of the building and a man with a cart smiled at me and there was a woman by his side. So we passed them on the way out, and he was coming into the building. So minutes later I would have been in there along with my mother.

So she immediately took me home. I went about watching my brother and watching movies with him and making him lunch and stuff like that. I remember my neighbor calling me, telling me, "Have you heard?" And I thought she was acting very strange, but she would never tell me what I was supposed to hear. I said, "What? What's going on?" So she would never tell me. Then I remember—I don't remember how I got to my grandmother's house, if I walked or—I don't remember—someone took me. I just remember we all went to my grandmother's house which was a house right below main street. Then that is when I found out that my friends and my two brothers were in the Cokeville Elementary School and being held hostage.

Mark Junge: What was your reaction?

Lea Kae Weston: Complete shock! And then I felt guilty that I wasn't in there. There was just this intense guilt like I should be there and I should be helping my younger brother. He was only first grade, and then my older brother was in sixth grade at the time. And I wasn't sure exactly what that word 'hostage' meant. They didn't go into detail. I just knew it was bad, because we had helicopter—I remember a helicopter landing on the football field. My grandmother's house is right across that. I remember seeing a lot of police cars and they'd evacuated the whole main

street so people were lined up on the streets. [I remember] seeing cop cars—it was just kind of a blur, but that’s what I remember.

Mark Junge: Do you remember writing that you said time sort of stood still for you?

Lea Kae Weston: It did. It did. I remember standing by a tree outside my grandmother’s house and looking at the—in the direction of the school. I couldn’t see the school. But it was almost like my heart had stopped beating and everything just stood still for a while.

Mark Junge: So what happened to your two brothers?

Lea Kae Weston: My two brothers? It didn’t seem very long and then I heard a big boom and smoke filled the air. I mean, you could see smoke and I heard screaming. And I remember—of course, you weren’t supposed to leave the yard, but wanting to run, and I couldn’t run to help them or see what was going on. But then I remember looking in the direction of the football field and there’s a road that leads directly to my house and I remember seeing my older brother—I think he was on a bike—pedaling really, really fast and my younger brother was hanging on the back of the bike. And then we hollered that we were over here. Over here! They were kinda black with the smoke.

Mark Junge: I was gonna say, what did they look like?

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah. Their hair wasn’t fringed or anything, but just complete terror on their face. Complete horror! And I just remember my little brother going into my grandma’s house and huddling up in a corner and just shaking. I don’t remember what my older brother did.

Mark Junge: Your younger brother is Colin?

Lea Kae Weston: Colin.

Mark Junge: And the older brother is—?

Lea Kae Weston: Cameron. Yeah. And then of course, my cousins were there too. We had some first cousins there and then they had a couple, I think two, in the bombing as well, and so it was very chaotic at my grandmother's house.

Mark Junge: What was your grandmother's reaction? How did she manage?

Lea Kae Weston: She was actually calm from what I remember. I just remember her praying a lot and telling me everything would be okay. Heavenly Father would take care of 'em. He would be fine. Just a lot of comfort. But I did want my mom, or my father, you know, at the time. Not having them there—and then my oldest brother, Denton, and Sheree were in high school, and I remember him, and her especially, feeling responsible for us and my brothers, you know, trying to help them.

Mark Junge: What grade would you have been in, had you been in school that day?

Lea Kae Weston: Fourth. Fourth grade.

Mark Junge: What have been the long term effects of this incident on your mind, the way you think about life?

Lea Kae Weston: I remember instantly, all my trust was gone, of everybody. I was always looking over my shoulder at grocery stores. Before that time, because living in a small community like this you trusted everybody. Everybody was nice. But after that it was—there was no trust. It was really hard to look at people. Like even at football games, I remember thinking somebody gonna come get us? Is somebody going to come with a gun? I remember too, it kinda disrupted my whole family. My little brother had to move in with my parents, in their room, because he was having such bad nightmares. My oldest brother, Cameron, didn't really talk too much about it, but I remember the nightmares my younger brother had and how he'd scream out. And the confusion for me, having not been there, was very difficult and I had to visit with the school psychologist and he had to walk me through exactly—I needed to know everything that happened, where everybody was, and he had to take me through the room. He had to show me where

everybody was and how they escaped and how the band teacher got shot, I mean, I just needed to make sense of the story because I wasn't there.

Mark Junge: What's the significance of this event to you? I mean, what's the long term significance, or is there any?

Lea Kae Weston: There is. I remember—before, you know, my parents had taught me about that there is a god, and there is our Heavenly Father and savior, and after this I really believed that they had protected all the children in there, my siblings and my friends. It was just a testimony-builder for me that there were angels here that could help us. And there is a god that does watch over us and does care for us in time of need.

Mark Junge: Do you dream about this incident?

Lea Kae Weston: Not anymore. I used to, but not anymore.

Mark Junge: So it's worn off?

Lea Kae Weston: It has. Yeah.

Mark Junge: Have you given an interview before?

Lea Kae Weston: No.

Mark Junge: This is the first time?

Lea Kae Weston: This is the first time.

Mark Junge: Really?

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah.

Mark Junge: Wow! You also said that one of the things you learned out of this was that life was precious. Is that true?

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah. Very much so. That in an instant it can be gone at the hands of an evil person. Just a twisted mind. So I—after that point I remember thinking, I've got

to do everything I can with my life because I don't know when I'll be gone. I don't know when it'll be over.

Mark Junge: Are you still concerned about your brothers?

Lea Kae Weston: I am. I think it has affected them long term. They will never admit it. My oldest brother still carries guns and stuff, so [??] Colin.

Mark Junge: Cameron?

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah, Cameron. As far as I know. Now maybe it has nothing to do with this, but I think they have been affected. They just haven't talked about it.

Mark Junge: Didn't they get counseling?

Lea Kae Weston: I believe they did. I'm not sure actually. I know I did, but I wasn't aware of them. They might have talked to the school psychologist, but I don't know.

Mark Junge: Did this strengthen your spirituality or your belief, or did it weaken you?

Lea Kae Weston: It strengthened me tremendously.

Mark Junge: In what way?

Lea Kae Weston: To have faith, and that prayers are really answered. I remember my grandmother praying, and I remember praying as well, in my heart. And not knowing—that sometimes we're out of control of things and we have to turn our faith over to the lord to take care of things and know it's in his best interest, whatever happens.

Mark Junge: Do you still feel that guilt that you felt before?

Lea Kae Weston: No, I don't. It's a good thing! (Laughs)

Mark Junge: That's a good thing! Sue, do you have any other questions for her?

Sue Castaneda: Did you wish you'd been in there?

Lea Kae Weston: Oh, a part of me did, yeah. That I wanted to experience it. I think your mind makes things a lot worse than what it could have been. Or maybe my perspective wasn't the right perspective. Make sense? Yeah. But then I was relieved as well, that I wasn't, so—

Mark Junge: Do you ever think about these two that perpetrated the crime? Do you ever think about those two?

Lea Kae Weston: Um, I did occasionally, and especially when I was writing this paper. I did a couple of essays for college as well on it, and I always contemplate their way of thinking and their diary entries and just how they got that way. How did that happen.

Mark Junge: What is your opinion of how they got that way?

Lea Kae Weston: Mm. I don't really have an opinion, actually!

Mark Junge: Don't you?

Lea Kae Weston: No. As far as—you mean how—?

Mark Junge: But you wrote about this?

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah, I did. I did. But not about them. I left them out. Just bad guys.

Mark Junge: Not give them any more thought.

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah, well, I didn't want to go there because their ideas were so twisted. I mean, I started reading some of his journal entries and I remember thinking, this all is psychotic, that I didn't want to—I just had a horrible feeling. I didn't even want to—

Sue Castaneda: Where did you get to read it at? Where did you see it?

Lea Kae Weston: The journal entries? Well, there was a—I think Wixom, Hartt Wixom had a book out that—*Trial by Terror*, I think it was called. Yeah, so there was just

brief, little, I mean, not like pages, but just brief little insights into what he was thinking and why he did it.

Mark Junge: What are you studying in Graduate School?

Lea Kae Weston: I'm going to be a mental health counselor.

Mark Junge: And did this event have any impact on that decision?

Lea Kae Weston: It definitely did. You know, I think—it was a while ago. There's been a lot of other events in my life that have led to that point, but that was the beginning, I think, for me.

Mark Junge: Any significant events that were more traumatic than this was?

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah. My first husband molested my daughter. So I had to put him in prison. So that trust again, just as I rebuilt trust in others, someone betrayed me again in that way.

Mark Junge: How do you pull out of something like that?

Lea Kae Weston: Oh, faith, prayer. Knowing that our Heavenly Father loves us and we can make it through anything.

Mark Junge: You must be a strong person if you can go into counseling, people who have gone through this?

Lea Kae Weston: Well, I fell like, after having had to help my daughter and myself cope with that, that I have a lot to share. And ever since that time I've had a lot of phone calls and people curious, and questions that need to be answered, mothers in the same situation that have come to me needing help, so I think I have a lot to give where I've been through it. It's a lot different when you walk through it.

Mark Junge: Was your family pretty stable? Were you raised in a stable family?

Lea Kae Weston: I had a very stable home. Very loving home. Yes.

Mark Junge: How would you describe your home, and this community and how people are here?

Lea Kae Weston: My home—my parents never fought, never yelled. It was always a happy place, always secure, knowing there would be food on the table, and clean sheets to sleep in, games to play, puzzles, you know. We had a great childhood. As far as the community, I could go to anybody's home. I remember thinking if someone were chasing me and wanted to kidnap me, I'd know every person and where I'd feel safe to run to. And everyone cares about everyone else. After my divorce, I had a lot of outpouring of love and help from the community.

Mark Junge: Did you remarry?

Lea Kae Weston: Yes, I have remarried.

Mark Junge: Is that working out?

Lea Kae Weston: It is! Yep! I think I got a good guy this time!

Sue Castaneda: Baby in January?

Lea Kae Weston: Yep! Baby in January!

Mark Junge: Oh, really?

Lea Kae Weston: Yeah, little baby, yeah.

Mark Junge: I didn't know that. Good for you! Do you feel like maybe you're going to be in my position, interviewing people, asking them what happened in their lives?

Lea Kae Weston: Mm hm. Yeah. Yeah. If they'll want to share with me, yeah. I think talking about it really does help. I'm a strong believer in writing in journals and keeping your thoughts open.

Mark Junge: Do you write every day?

Lea Kae Weston: Not every day. Once a week I try. I used to write every day. I'm not that good anymore about every day, but at least once a week I try.

Mark Junge: (To Sue: her response unintelligible) You probably read her entry. I read it, and like I say, it starts out very poetic. It's beautiful, what you've written here.

"Nervous anticipation filled the air", was your first statement. "It seemed as though every living creature knew of the difficult circumstances. I glanced up toward the clear sky. Pillars of sunlight faintly made their way through the leaves of the tree that stood in front of my grandma, Ginny Robert's white house".

*From **Witness to Miracles**, Published by the Cokeville Miracle Foundation, 2006.*

Mark Junge: I mean, that's almost like poetry!

Lea Kae Weston: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

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.