

COKEVILLE'S REAL MIRACLE: RECONCILING TRAUMATIC MEMORY

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Opening Vignette

As the explosion filled the classroom with smoke, third-grade student Jamie Buckley King curled up in a corner awaiting death. Suddenly, someone threw her out of the burning schoolhouse and an ambulance rushed her to a hospital. Her physical injuries consisted of a severe burn on her arm, yet her emotional injuries were much more extensive. Plagued with trust issues for nearly two decades, Jamie was unable to move past this traumatic event, until a friend pointed out that by not moving on, Jamie had died in that school all those years ago. This honesty allowed Jamie to reconcile her avoidance of the traumatic memories, inspiring her to turn to religion and begin healing.¹



George Moore carrying his son back to school a week after the bombing, permission by Bill Wilcox, Casper Star-Tribune, Casper College Western History Center



Jamie Buckley King one week after the bombing in 1986, permission by Bill Wilcox, Casper Star-Tribune, Casper College Western History Center



Jamie Buckley King in 2010, permission by Wyoming State Archives

Opening Synopsis

Jamie King was not the only student emotionally scarred by the Cokeville Elementary School Bombing of 1986. According to the *Lewiston Daily Sun*, a local newspaper, it traumatized most children in this rural, Wyoming community.² Survivors were unable to forget the events of that day, and the media's relentless interviews made them constantly relive it.³ As the news outlets celebrated that there were no hostage casualties, survivors coped with living in constant fear and mistrust by turning to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) and the community of Cokeville. **Through therapy, acceptance of the media's intrusion, and church support, survivors of the Cokeville Elementary School bombing slowly managed to reconcile their traumatic memories.**

Background

These memories stem from May 16, 1986, the day that the former town sheriff, David Young, and his wife, Doris, used a gasoline bomb to take the elementary school hostage. The couple held more than 120 children and adults captive for three hours, until the bomb accidentally detonated, filling the room with smoke and shattering the windows. Although all students escaped alive, memories of that day caused them to have nightmares, fear going out in public, and develop long lasting trust issues.⁴ The bombing caused this small, predominately LDS, town to begin nursing these traumatized children back to emotional stability.

Research Methodology and Theory

An examination of the survivor's psychological healing requires an interpretation of newspapers and oral histories through the lens of spirituality and traumatic memory. First, newspapers are essential for expanding the narrative, because they are adept at reporting events, although they have biases and agendas.⁵ Additionally, oral histories are crucial because they capture the unadulterated memories of survivors, although time can distort them.⁶ Many of these memories were traumatic, and, according to anthropologist Allan Young, traumatic memory is the recollection of an unsettling event that continues to produce fear in the memory maker.⁷ These sources and definitions expand the narrative of the survivors' healing by introducing new evidence and perspectives.

Body

The three most prevalent aspects of this reconciliation were the media's intrusion, therapy, and the LDS church, each of which significantly influenced survivors. The media's constant barrage of questions and interviews made it harder for survivors to move on by causing them to relive their traumatic memories and disrupting the closeness of the community.⁸ Conversely, psychological therapy brought the community together and gave survivors a safe outlet to discuss their traumatic memories, thus helping them cope.⁹ The LDS church emotionally and spiritually held Cokeville together by offering constant support and teaching the students about a greater meaning of this tragedy, consequently bringing healing to many of the traumatized students.¹⁰



David Young, permission by Casper Star-tribune, Casper College Western History Center



Emergency workers removing Doris Young's body after the bombing, permission by Rick Sorenson, Casper Star-Tribune, Casper College Western History Center



Students seeing their classroom again for the first time since the bombing, permission by Bill Wilcox, Casper Star-Tribune, Casper College Western History Center

Closing Synopsis

Through time, survivors learned to accept the media's intrusion, and, with the help of therapy and the LDS church, were able to recover from their traumatic memories. This was not an easy process, and some survivors remain traumatized and unable to talk about the event.¹¹ But, for the most part, the positive effects of therapy and the support of the LDS church succeeded in bringing healing to the traumatized children of Cokeville.¹² In the end, Cokeville's real miracle was the community's unified support in helping bombing survivors achieve psychological reconciliation.

Closing Vignette

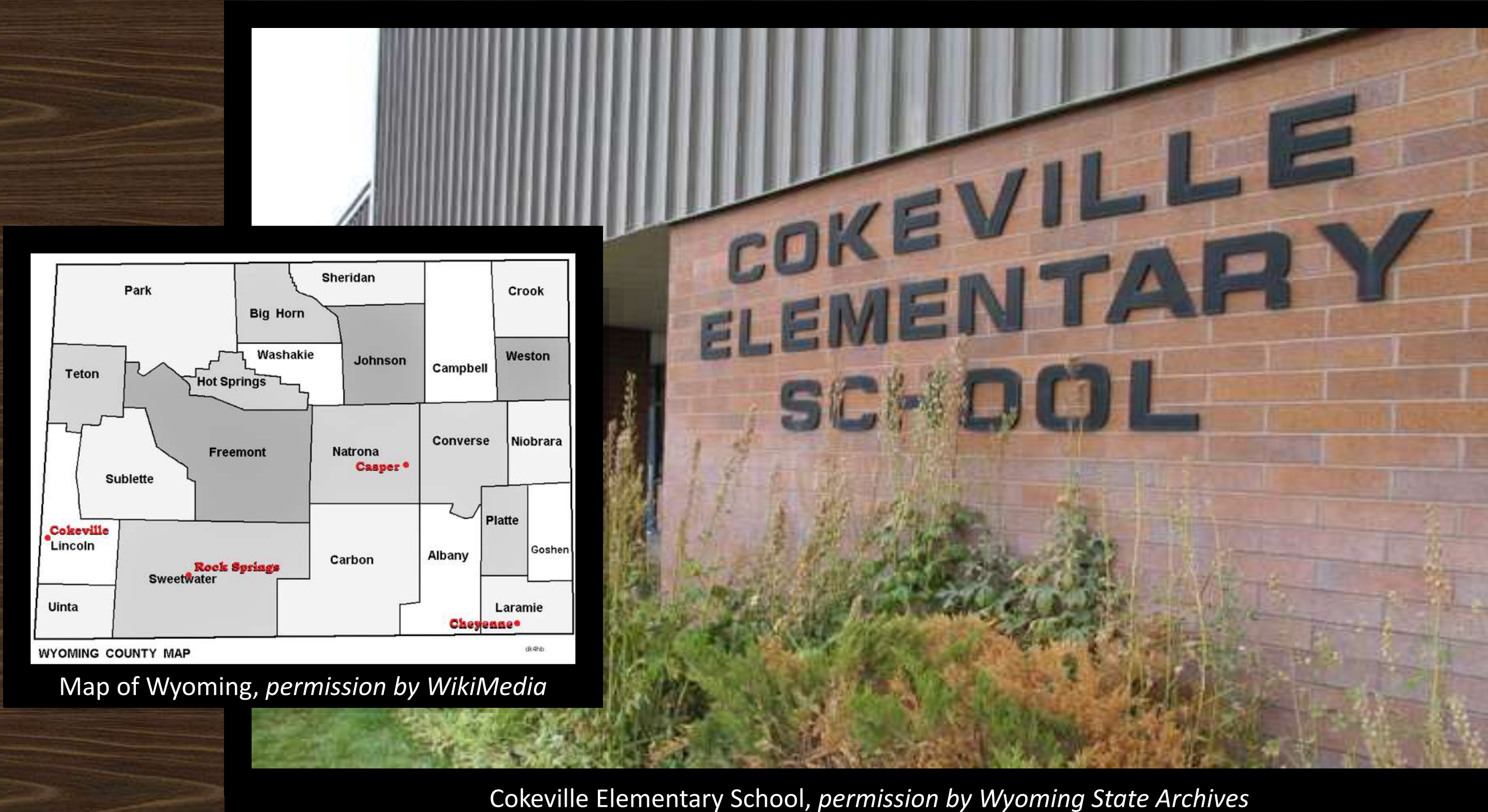
One such survivor was Rachel Hollibaugh, a third-grade student from Cokeville. The bombing scarred her with third degree burns and extensive emotional trauma. However, the community came together and offered her constant support by providing an opportunity for her to discuss her memories through group therapy. The LDS church was especially influential, as it taught her to accept this traumatic experience and appreciate its positive effect on her life. She learned that the bombing had not scarred her beyond recovery, but rather given her the opportunity to achieve greater personal development. Her path to recovery was hard, but the community's overwhelming support helped her to achieve not only healing, but personal growth.¹³

Endnotes

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13. Hollibaugh, "Survivor is my Name."

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