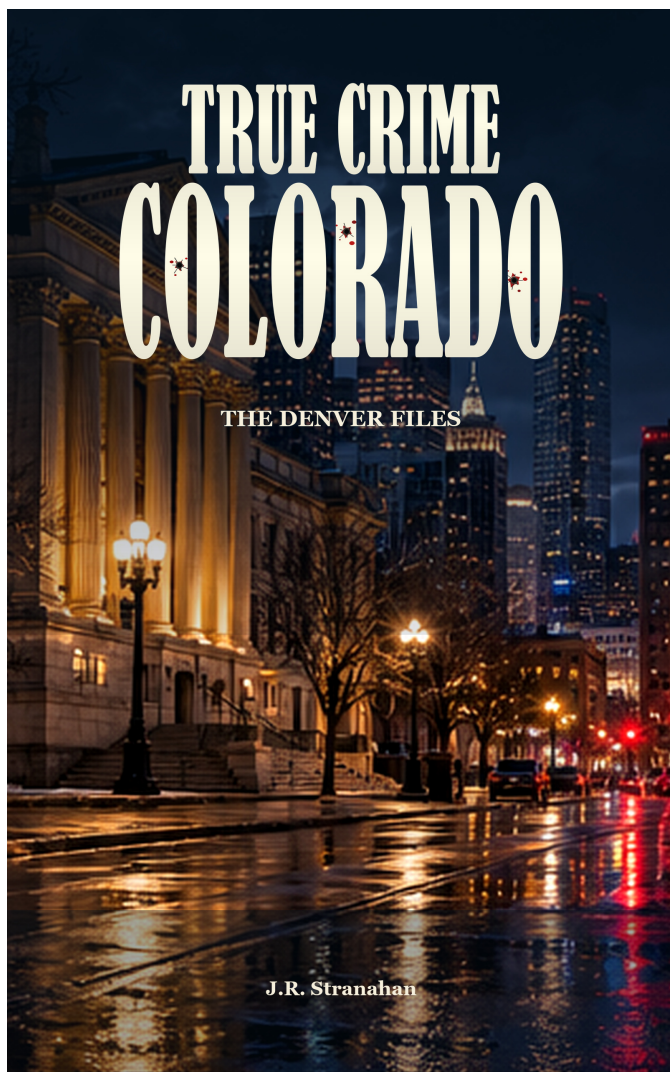




True Crime Colorado: The Denver Files

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The Luggage at Stapleton

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File 1: The Luggage at Stapleton

Daisie King had arranged to leave her car at the Denver Motor Hotel while she visited her daughter in Alaska. On November 1, 1955, she drove there with her daughter-in-law, Gloria Graham, and a young grandson. Her son, John Gilbert Graham, would follow with the luggage. The family could then travel together to Stapleton Airport, where King had a reservation on United Air Lines Flight 629. [F2]

The separation gave Graham time alone with his mother's suitcases. He later admitted placing a bomb in the larger one. He then joined the others at the hotel and drove them to the airport. King checked the luggage and boarded the plane. Graham, his wife and their child remained in Denver. [F2]

Eleven minutes after takeoff, the aircraft came apart over Weld County, near Longmont. All thirty-nine passengers and five crew members died. The murder had begun in Denver, with a son handling his mother's bags. Its victims came from far beyond the city, and the search for an explanation would lead from the farms where the wreckage fell back to a warehouse at Stapleton. [F2][F3]

King had business interests in Colorado and a home in Florida. Her husband, John Earl King, had died in October 1954. The following winter she spent time at her Florida property, then returned to Denver after Gloria gave birth. During 1955, she moved between the Graham household and her business affairs elsewhere in the state. Her son managed the drive-in restaurant she had established on South Federal Boulevard. [F1]

Travel was part of that life. So was a hobby involving seashells, which she polished and fashioned into decorative objects. In the investigation that followed, agents would hear conflicting accounts of a set of small tools Graham supposedly intended to give her for Christmas. The supposed gift became a way to examine his access to the luggage.

Before it was evidence, however, the hobby belonged to the woman making the trip. [F1][F2]

Flight 629 had started its day's journey at LaGuardia Field in New York. After a stop in Chicago, it reached Denver at 6:11 p.m., eleven minutes behind schedule. The Douglas DC-6B was refueled and checked. No maintenance work was needed or performed at Denver, according to the Civil Aeronautics Board's subsequent investigation. A new crew took responsibility for the remainder of the flight to Portland and Seattle. [F3]

Captain Lee H. Hall had worked for United since December 1941 and had accumulated more than ten thousand flying hours. First Officer Donald A. White had been with the company since 1951. Flight Engineer Samuel F. Arthur was qualified both as an engineer and as a first officer. Their work would be supported in the cabin by Peggy Lou Peddicord and Jacqueline L. Hinds. Peddicord had joined regular airline service that March; Hinds had been employed since 1951 and assigned to Seattle since 1952. [F3]

Hall and White arrived well before departure. They received the current weather reports and forecasts. Denver was overcast, with ten miles of visibility, and nothing in the weather briefing prevented the planned flight. The airplane's load was within its permitted weight and properly distributed. At 6:44 p.m., the crew was in the runway run-up position and received clearance for Portland. The aircraft left the ground at 6:52. [F3]

Among the passengers was Dr. Harold R. Sandstead, a Public Health Service physician traveling to Corvallis to speak at Oregon State College. He had joined the service in 1934 and had devoted much of his career to nutrition. His work had taken him to the Netherlands after the Second World War and to South Korea. In 1955, he was directing an interdepartmental nutrition committee while continuing research at the National Institutes of Health. [F7][F8]

The Netherlands government had honored Sandstead for his work on hunger and malnutrition after liberation. He had also received military recognition for his service. His death would prompt a tribute in *Public*

Health Reports and a memorial fund for medical students at Vanderbilt, where he had taught. Flight 629 interrupted a working life whose effects had reached people far from Colorado. [F8]

Other passengers were traveling for family reunions and vacations. Helen Fitzpatrick had her infant son, James, with her, on a journey to introduce him to his father, who was stationed in Japan. Virgil and Goldie Herman were returning from a vacation that had included a visit to Goldie's sister. Gerald and Patricia Lipke were traveling to see her sister in Portland; their three sons remained at home. [F5][F6]

At 6:56 p.m., Flight 629 reported passing the Denver navigation beacon. It was the last radio message received from the aircraft. Seven minutes later, controllers at Stapleton saw two white lights appear north-northwest of the airport. The lights fell for roughly half a minute, followed by a bright flash near the ground. Controllers began calling the aircraft in their area. Every flight was accounted for except United 629. [F3]

The Fields and the Warehouse

The wreckage lay across approximately six square miles. The tail had separated before the wings and forward fuselage. Heavy pieces struck the earth in different places; light material traveled much farther. Paper and cabin insulation were recovered as far as nine miles from the main wreckage. The Civil Aeronautics Board eventually used that distribution to reconstruct the sequence of the breakup. [F3]

Local residents, firefighters and police responded first to the disaster on the farms. They were followed by investigators, airline employees and specialists. The task included searching the land, recovering the people aboard, accounting for the aircraft's parts and protecting what could be learned from them. Fires fed by the airplane's fuel continued to burn for three days despite attempts to put them out. [F3][F4]

The bodies were taken to a temporary morgue in the National Guard Armory at Greeley. FBI fingerprint specialists arrived on November 2. By

then, nine victims had already been identified by relatives, acquaintances or personal effects. The specialists fingerprinted the remaining thirty-five and compared the prints with records already held by the bureau. Twenty-one identifications resulted from that work. [F1]

Those records reflected the lives people had led before boarding. Some had been fingerprinted during military service; others while working in wartime defense plants or for the government. United supplied prints for its crew. A Canadian couple could be identified because of fingerprints taken during an application for American naturalization. Where prints did not produce a match, relatives and personal belongings provided the remaining identifications. [F1]

The aircraft investigation began alongside this work. The Civil Aeronautics Board, United and Douglas Aircraft Corporation brought expertise about how the plane had been built, maintained and flown. An FBI laboratory specialist arrived to assist with examinations of the wreckage. The first question was what had happened to a serviceable aircraft on an otherwise routine climb away from Denver. [F1][F3]

The largest pieces gave an initial answer. The aircraft had broken apart before striking the ground. The wings and engines had fallen into two craters, while the forward fuselage had landed separately. Its condition indicated a nearly vertical descent. Investigators could distinguish damage caused by the fall from damage that had begun while the airplane was still in the air. [F3]

The fires complicated the scene, but they did not explain the initial destruction. Their patterns showed that the large fires had started after impact. The violent fragmentation farther back in the fuselage required its own explanation. Pieces from that area carried dark marks and an odor associated with explosives. Similar signs appeared on baggage, clothing and mail sacks from the rear compartment. [F3]

Recovery had to preserve the relationship between a piece of wreckage and the place where it had fallen. A surveyor established a baseline through the area, roughly following the direction of flight. Searchers

worked within a marked grid. Each recovered item was identified, and its position was measured and recorded. A fragment found far behind the tail could matter as much as a larger section lying closer to the engines. [F1]

The search extended as people continued to find material beyond the original area. Hunters and other residents reported pieces of mail and insulation. On November 13, another team of FBI agents and United employees searched additional ground behind the tail's resting place. Meanwhile, agents reexamined material already recovered, looking for objects that might explain the explosion. [F1]

Much of the work moved back to Denver. Recovered aircraft sections, baggage, cargo and personal possessions were stored under guard in a warehouse at Stapleton. Postal inspectors took custody of the mail but made it available for further examination. The arrangements allowed specialists to study the same collection without losing track of its origin. [F1]

Inside the warehouse, investigators built a full-size framework of the damaged fuselage using wood and wire mesh. They attached recovered fragments in the places those fragments had occupied before the crash. What had been scattered over the fields could now be examined as parts of one structure. The rebuilding did not restore the plane. It exposed the pattern of its destruction. [F1][F3]

As the pieces were fitted together, they became progressively smaller toward a concentrated area in the number four baggage compartment. Some pieces there had been reduced to fragments; others were missing. The cabin floor above the compartment had been driven upward. Other surfaces had been forced outward or away from the same small area. The deformation pointed back toward an explosion inside the compartment. [F3]

No aircraft system in that location could account for such a blast. Examiners found no evidence of earlier structural failure, fatigue cracking or malfunctioning controls. The engines and propellers

provided no indication of a problem preceding the breakup. Maintenance records showed the airplane had been properly maintained, with reported problems corrected. [F3]

The baggage records narrowed the next stage of the inquiry. At Denver, the rear compartment had been emptied and reloaded with mail, freight and passenger luggage originating there. Investigators obtained freight waybills and compared them with recovered shipments. They could identify at least part of every shipment, and none supplied an ordinary commercial explanation for the explosive damage. Attention therefore turned increasingly to what had entered the aircraft at Stapleton. [F1][F3]

Small fragments also resisted identification as parts of the airplane or its legitimate cargo. Laboratory examination connected some of them with a battery unlike the emergency batteries carried aboard United aircraft. Residue on other recovered pieces was consistent with the explosion of dynamite. The structural reconstruction and the laboratory results supported the same conclusion from different directions. [F1][F2][F3]

On November 7, the Civil Aeronautics Board notified the FBI that its findings indicated an apparent crime. The following day, the bureau undertook the criminal investigation. Aviation specialists continued their technical work while agents pursued the people, baggage and events connected with the flight. [F1][F3]

Daisie King's Bags

The FBI sought background information on all forty-four people aboard. Agents also examined the circumstances of people who had held reservations and then canceled or failed to appear. They needed descriptions of luggage and its contents, accounts of the victims' lives, and any reason someone might have intended to kill one of them. The field of inquiry was initially much wider than a single family in Denver. [F1]

Relatives' descriptions helped associate personal objects with particular travelers. Those associations could then be compared with the severity

of the damage. If a bag had been near the blast, its remains might look different from belongings stored elsewhere. Identifying possessions was part of both the effort to return names to the victims and the attempt to locate the bomb. [F1]

Daisy King's personal effects included letters, a checkbook, travelers' checks, an address list and papers relating to safe-deposit boxes. They gave investigators a documentary outline of her affairs. Among the papers were newspaper clippings about her family. One referred to her son's earlier forgery case in Denver. [F1]

The condition and location of these effects suggested she had carried them in her handbags. Her checked luggage presented a different picture. Very little of its contents could be recovered, and only small fragments of the suitcases believed to be hers were found. In the warehouse, that absence had significance alongside the things that survived. [F1]

Flight insurance created another set of records to examine. Several passengers had purchased substantial coverage, so insurance alone could not isolate a suspect. The bureau sought information from the companies selling the policies. A holiday weekend slowed a complete accounting. As the records came together, agents found policies on King's life as well as information that her son stood to receive an inheritance. [F1]

Graham was twenty-three and had already been convicted of forgery. The Denver probation records showed that he had stolen blank checks from an employer in 1951, filled them out and cashed them. He had left Colorado and was later arrested in Texas. After his return to Denver, he received a suspended sentence and five years of probation, conditioned in part on restitution. [F1]

The repayment history was specific. Graham had continued making monthly payments and had almost cleared the remaining balance by November 1955. He had also held regular work as a mechanic before managing his mother's restaurant. The records gave agents something

firmer than general neighborhood impressions about his character: dates, employment, a conviction and financial obligations. [F1]

Associates described arguments between mother and son over the restaurant. They also raised suspicions about an earlier explosion at the business and a collision in which Graham's pickup had been left on railroad tracks. At this stage, those accounts were leads. Agents needed to establish what had occurred and what Graham himself would say about it. [F1]

When first interviewed on November 10, he supplied family and business history. He said his mother had purchased the Denver home in which he lived. He described her restaurant investment and her other travel. He also discussed the damage to the restaurant and the loss involving his truck, presenting himself as someone who had experienced a run of misfortune. [F1]

His description of the luggage was more guarded. He said King was particular about packing and would not permit others to help. He denied assisting with the packing or placing anything in her bags. He told agents that she had taken rifle and shotgun ammunition intended for hunting during the Alaska visit. That explanation offered a possible source of an explosion while placing responsibility for the bags' contents with his mother. [F1][F2]

Gloria Graham agreed that King generally packed for herself. But she also described a package her husband had brought into the house on the day of departure. She understood it to be a Christmas gift, the tool set he had discussed buying for his mother's seashell work. She did not establish what was actually inside it. Her account nevertheless conflicted with his claim that he had put nothing into the luggage. [F1][F2]

On November 12, agents called the couple and asked them to look at recovered suitcase fragments. They arrived at the Denver FBI office the following afternoon. Both recognized pieces resembling King's smaller brown suitcase. A fragment of plaid canvas might have belonged to

another of her bags. When that examination ended, Graham agreed to stay for further questions. Gloria returned to their children. [F1][F2]

The Interview That Continued Past Midnight

The interview began with familiar subjects: the ammunition, the gift and the trip to the airport. Graham said he had considered buying the tools but had decided against it when he learned they would not suit his mother's purpose. His wife, he suggested, had mistakenly assumed that he had completed the purchase. [F1][F2]

By the middle of the afternoon, agents told him that some of his statements did not agree with information they had obtained. They asked him to remain while they checked the differences. The later court record described a break for food and a resumption of the interview. At about 6:30 p.m., an agent told Graham directly that he was suspected of causing the explosion. [F2]

According to the testimony accepted by the Colorado Supreme Court, the agent told Graham he did not have to answer questions and could consult an attorney. The interview-room door would remain open, and he could leave. The agent also said there would be no threats or promises. Graham signed permissions allowing searches of his property, including his residence, vehicles and workplace toolbox. [F2]

His account then changed. There had been a tool set, he said. He had bought it from a man he knew only as Karl, who had appeared at the garage where Graham worked. Graham now described having the purchase wrapped as a Christmas gift and secretly placing it in his mother's luggage before departure. That admission reversed the earlier denial of any package. It also shifted its supposed origin to a man investigators had not identified. [F2]

Agents checked the new story while the questioning continued. Others interviewed Gloria again. Her written statements described her husband's insistence that she should not tell anyone about the present because he suspected it had been stolen. She had not seen the object

itself or watched him put it into the suitcase. The distinction was important: her evidence concerned what Graham had said and asked her to conceal. It did not identify a bomb. [F2]

The searches produced more direct contradictions. An insurance policy making Graham the beneficiary of \$37,500 on his mother's life was found in a small cedar chest at his home. He had earlier suggested that the policy had been mailed or mistakenly discarded at the airport. Agents also found some of the ammunition he had said King took with her. [F1][F2]

Around midnight, an agent returned with information from Graham's fellow workers that contradicted his account of Karl's appearances at the garage. Confronted with the accumulated differences, Graham admitted that he had lied. He acknowledged causing the earlier restaurant explosion and deliberately leaving his insured truck where a train would strike it. Then he began describing his responsibility for the death of his mother. [F2]

He still invoked Karl, now claiming that this man had helped with the plan and expected a share of the insurance money. That part of the account remained Graham's claim. His own admissions were direct: he had obtained explosives, made a bomb and put it in the suitcase that accompanied King onto the plane. [F2]

The oral account was completed at about 12:30 a.m. on November 14. A stenographer then took down a statement, which was transcribed for Graham to read. He initialed and signed it at approximately 3:30 a.m. A physician who examined him testified later that he appeared to be in good physical and mental condition. The agents placed him under arrest. [F2]

In that signed statement, Graham described the interval after his mother, wife and child left for the hotel. He admitted using the opportunity to place the bomb in King's packed suitcase. He had taken the luggage to the airport, handed it over to his mother at the counter, and watched her board. His account continued through dinner in the terminal coffee shop

and the later announcement of an airplane wreck. [F2]

The confession returned the investigation to the ordinary arrangements with which the day had begun. King had organized the storage of her car, packed for her trip and traveled to the terminal with her family. Graham had used his role in those preparations to carry the bomb as part of her baggage. The people who checked and loaded it were handling a passenger's suitcase. [F2]

Investigators then tested the account against purchases and witnesses outside the family. A Denver electrical supplier remembered Graham's repeated visits for a timing device. He had represented himself as an employee buying equipment for a pump job. The order, delays and exchanges gave the supplier reasons to remember him and provided a chronology extending back into October. [F2]

A storekeeper in Kremmling identified Graham as a customer who had bought explosives that month. These witnesses supplied evidence of preparation independent of anything Graham had said in the FBI office. Their accounts also gave prosecutors a response to his attempt to attribute the purchases to Karl. [F1][F2]

The laboratory and the household search added another connection. A small piece of wire found among Graham's work clothes matched the kind associated with an explosive detonator. The significance was its consistency with the other evidence, rather than a claim that such wire could belong only to him. The jury would hear that comparison alongside the wreckage analysis, the purchase evidence and his confession. [F1]

The Case in Denver

The state murder information was filed on November 15, 1955. It charged Graham with killing Daisy King. Forty-three other people had died with her, but the criminal case that produced his conviction concerned his mother's murder. The prosecution could prove his intent through the planning, his access to her baggage and his own statements. [F2]

Graham initially pleaded not guilty and not guilty by reason of insanity. He was examined by psychiatrists. The Colorado Supreme Court's account states that six reported him sane before, during and after the offense. He subsequently withdrew the insanity plea, leaving the case to proceed on his plea of not guilty. [F2]

He also asked to be tried by a judge alone. Judge Joseph M. McDonald denied that request. Colorado's murder statute then assigned the jury responsibility for determining the degree of murder and, in a first-degree case, choosing between life imprisonment and death. A trial without a jury would have removed the body the statute required to make those decisions. [F2]

When the trial began in April 1956, public interest extended into the courthouse corridors. According to the FBI's later account, people waited for seats and brought lunches so they would not have to leave their places. The pilot's widow attended regularly and was given a reserved seat near the front. She sat only a short distance from the man accused of placing the bomb aboard her husband's aircraft. [F1]

The trial was also being watched through cameras. The judge permitted limited filming and photography under conditions intended to keep them from disrupting the proceedings. A booth housed camera equipment at the back of the courtroom, and the judge could interrupt filming from the bench. A witness or the defendant could object to being photographed. Graham exercised that option. [F1]

Selecting the jury required the examination of 231 prospective jurors. Fixed opinions about the defendant and opposition to capital punishment were recurring obstacles. Once selected, the jurors faced a case assembled from many kinds of work: airline operations, surveying, recovery, chemistry, family interviews, sales records and the defendant's admissions. [F1]

The prosecution first established that King and her luggage had been aboard Flight 629. Ground personnel described an aircraft functioning normally when it left Denver. Witnesses from the area of the crash

recounted the explosion. The aviation specialists explained how the distribution and condition of the wreckage located its origin in the rear baggage compartment. [F1][F2]

Dr. J. William Magee of the FBI Laboratory described the material recovered from the wreckage and the tests indicating a dynamite explosion. United's engineering manager, William C. Mentzer, explained the structural evidence. Their testimony carried the warehouse reconstruction into court, where the jury could consider the physical basis for the conclusion that the aircraft had been bombed. [F2]

The confession was contested. Defense lawyers challenged the conditions of the interview and the searches. The evidence of warnings, written permissions and the circumstances in which Graham gave his statement became part of the legal record. The courts allowed the confession and the challenged evidence to be used. [F1][F2]

The state also presented the witnesses who could place Graham in the shops before November 1. Their recollections did more than repeat his signed account. They established separate events against which it could be measured. The same was true of the insurance policy recovered from his home and the suitcase fragments identified by him and Gloria. [F1][F2]

Graham did not testify before the jury. He also opposed having his wife or a psychiatrist testify on his behalf. The defense called eight witnesses. In its later review, the Supreme Court found that their evidence did not contradict the material facts presented by the prosecution. That conclusion belonged to the court's review of the complete record, which included more than seventy witnesses and more than 175 admitted exhibits. [F2]

On May 5, 1956, the jury returned a first-degree murder verdict after sixty-nine minutes of deliberation. It fixed the punishment at death. The motion for a new trial was denied ten days later. Graham said he did not want another trial or appellate review, but two of his lawyers continued the effort to challenge the judgment. [F1]

The accident investigators completed their own formal account at almost the same time. The Civil Aeronautics Board adopted its report on May 10 and released it on May 14. Publication had been delayed at the request of the Colorado prosecutor because of the criminal case. The board's conclusion was specific: a dynamite bomb had exploded in the number four baggage compartment and destroyed the aircraft. It found no evidence of a preceding failure of the plane or its equipment. [F3]

A Judgment and a Much Later Gathering

The Colorado Supreme Court affirmed Graham's conviction on October 22, 1956. One issue gave the case an unusually direct connection to Denver's boundaries. Graham argued that the city's district court lacked jurisdiction because the deaths occurred in Weld County. The justices examined where the lethal act had been set in motion. [F2]

Under the governing statutes, an offense could be tried where the cause of death was administered even if death occurred elsewhere. The court held that Graham had administered that cause in Denver when he sent the bomb onto the aircraft with his mother's baggage, beyond his custody and control. The location of the crash therefore did not require the murder trial to be moved to Weld County. [F2]

The court also upheld the requirement that a jury hear the case and rejected the challenge to the confessions. It treated Graham's oral and written admissions as direct evidence supporting the first-degree murder instruction. His references to other offenses were admissible as parts of the complete statements. The jury had been entitled to hear the account he gave, including both its admissions and its attempts to introduce someone else's involvement. [F2]

Karl remained a claim within that account. The justices did not need to resolve the existence of this alleged participant to determine Graham's responsibility. Even if his statements about another man's role were true, they would not remove his own culpability for preparing the crime and putting the bomb aboard. The appeal did not establish Karl as a

convicted accomplice or as a substitute for the defendant already before the court. [F2]

A separate opinion addressed Graham's insistence that he did not want an appeal. Justice Moore believed the proceedings should have been dismissed because Graham had repeatedly rejected them in writing. The majority found no sufficient formal waiver in the certified record and decided the merits. Moore nevertheless agreed that, if the court reviewed the judgment, it should affirm it. [F2]

The difference did not alter the outcome. Graham was executed at the Colorado State Penitentiary on January 11, 1957. The person who had placed the bomb in King's suitcase was dead a little more than fourteen months after Flight 629 left Stapleton. [F1]

Seventy years later, relatives gathered in Denver to meet other families whose lives had been changed by the flight. [F5]

On November 1, 2025, a memorial was dedicated at the former Stapleton control tower, now part of the FlyteCo Tower site. The Denver Police Museum helped organize the commemoration. [F5][F9]

At the gathering, Susan Morgan spoke about losing both parents when she was twelve and about finding a shared history among the other families. The ceremony included accounts of the people behind the passenger and crew names. Their destinations and occupations restored something of the separate lives that had briefly converged on the airplane. [F5]

Congress had entered the forty-four victims' names in the record a few days before the anniversary. Among them were the five working crew members, the physician traveling to deliver a speech, the mother carrying her infant toward a reunion, and Daisy King, whose trip to Alaska had begun with a family drive to the airport. The memorial brought those names back to Denver, to the place they had passed through on their way elsewhere. [F2][F3][F4][F5][F7]

Sources from the edition

File 1: The Luggage at Stapleton

[F1] Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Jack Gilbert Graham". [Source](#)

[F2] Graham v. People, 134 Colo. 290, 302 P.2d 737 (Colorado Supreme Court, October 22, 1956), No. 18058. [Source](#)

[F3] Civil Aeronautics Board, Accident Investigation Report 1-0143, United Air Lines, Inc., Douglas DC-6B, N37559, near Longmont, Colorado, November 1, 1955. [Source](#) [Additional source location](#)
[Additional source location](#)

[F4] Congressional Record, October 28, 2025, page E1008. Honoring the Victims and First Responders of United Airlines Flight 629, remarks of Representative Gabe Evans. [Source](#)

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[F6] Joe Rassenfoss, The Colorado Sun, October 26, 2025, updated November 7, 2025. 70 years ago, a Colorado man plotted to kill his mother. How he carried it out shocked the nation. [Source](#)

[F7] NIH Record, November 21, 1955, volume VII, number 22, page 1. Dr. H. R. Sandstead Dies in Plane Crash. [Source](#)

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