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Interviewee: Kathy Walter

Interviewer: Jason Stahl

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Project: Jason Stahl Interviews with Hutterites about COVID-19

JS: This is Jason Stahl interviewing Kathy Walter on the 29th of December, 2021. This recording is taking place at Spring Creek Colony at Hanover, Montana, right outside of Lewistown. This interview is being recorded for the University of Montana Archives and Special Collections Oral History Collection, looking at the effects of COVID-19 on Hutterites, a religious group with colonies throughout Montana. Kathy, thank you for doing this.

KW: And you're welcome.

JS: Can you please state your name and age?

KW: My name is Kathy Walter and I am 59 years old.

JS: What's the date of birth and where do you live?

KW: [month and date of birth redacted for privacy] [19]62. And I was born in Lewistown and we moved to Flat Willow—that's down at Roundup—in between Roundup and Winnett. We stayed there for three years and I got married. Again back up here to Spring Creek. And I have been here now for 38 years. At Lewistown and Spring Creek Colony. Yes.

JS: So you originally lived at King Colony?

KW: Yes, I lived at King Colony. Yes.

JS: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Like you said, how you came to live here, how long you've been here? You've said that. What is your occupation? What keeps you busy?

KW: Well, at first we got married and then we had four children and raising those...that's a job in itself. And there's a lot of work at the colony. You cook and clean and bake and gardening. And now that the children are gone and we've got grandkids, I babysit a lot. We've got five grandchildren and I help babysit and then I do love to knit and sew.

JS: So interests, do you read? You said knitting, that would be...

KW: Knitting. I love to read, but not as much. I...you're sewing and knitting all the time and with technology now, you don't read—you listen.

JS: True. True. I think that's about it. You said grandchildren. Your kids. Who else is in your family? Can you tell me their names?

KW: Oh, I've got...my oldest son is Mervin Walter. He's in Denver, Colorado. Married to a gal from Brazil. And we have a little Brazilian grandson. And then the next is a daughter, and she's a traveling nurse. She's been traveling all over the United States, traveling and working in the hospitals in the...through this pandemic.

JS: What's your name?

KW: Her name is Victoria Walter. And she's been working on the COVID floors, and she's seen a lot. And then we have a son that's married and he's here at the place. He has a wife and two children. And then our other daughter...

JS: What's his name?

KW: Kyle Walter, and his wife's name is Tammy. And then we have a daughter in Lewistown, she's married too. Her name is Ralie Walter. Ralie Hofer now. And she's married and they have two little girls.

JS: Okay, your husband's name?

KW: James Walter.

JS: Okay. I think that's good. I think we'll just...we'll switch over to COVID-specific questions.

KW: Okay.

JS: I'll take you back to the very beginning. This would have been 2020. How did you hear about it, Kathy?

KW: Well, we heard it on the news and you heard it from other people—from neighbors and everything. And I think everybody was skeptic a little bit. "Is this true? You know, is it true? What do you do? How do you keep yourself from not getting it? How do you stay away from people and will we get it?" Nobody knew. Nobody knew.

JS: Did it ever become really real for you? Like, I think the first time we heard about it was like January, February. Do you remember when that was when you heard about it first?

KW: Yes. It was back in February, when we heard about it. And then Victoria was working in Kalispell, Montana, at the hospital where the first person in Montana passed away from COVID—on that floor. She was on the COVID floor...patient...and it was scary.

JS: So that's when you knew this is real?

KW: Yup. It's real. It was scary. Yes.

JS: Okay. How serious of a threat and to whom do you think it was?

KW: It doesn't matter who you are. If you're...if you're...where you're at: if you're living in town, if you're living on the ranch, how old are you, how young you are. It doesn't matter. It does not look at who you are. It seems like, I don't know.

JS: Did the colony...when then...you said you heard about in February, when did the colony go into precaution mode?

KW: They went, we had school. The school shut down because schools shut down and then we had a three-week break. They had three weeks and we had set everything up at the school so the children could have homeschool. They all had a laptop...iPads, so the teacher can...could converse with them through that and have school like that.

JS: Really quick. I know you were involved with the school for years and years.

KW: I still am. I still am.

JS: What's your position?

KW: I'm a chairman...of the school. Yes. And so that was very, very good. So if somebody heard, you know, "Oh, somebody got COVID," you know,

KW: And the school shut down. And not only the school shut down...the kitchen shut down at the colony. We shut the kitchen down. It was just...the workers were there and we had takeout. You'd come in, get your food. And people wore masks...gloves. Came in...picked up their food and just ate at home.

JS: For how long and when?

KW: We uh...That was in the...towards fall, in September there. And then really, really it hit in October...in September. Because we had one of the...our one of our older people—was 91 years old—an uncle on the place...was diagnosed with COVID.

JS: What's his name?

KW: Darius Walter. And you know what? It really hit home then. And he was...they took him to the hospital on Thursday. And Saturday morning he passed away.

JS: Was anybody with him?

KW: His daughter is a registered nurse at the Lewistown hospital. And that is how she got in there. She was able to be with him. She was with him, yes.

JS: What about his wife? How was his wife, Mary?

KW: Aunt Mary? Mary had COVID too. She she got it from him too. But she never...it never affected it that bad to her. Never affected her.

JS: What were his symptoms...that he landed in the hospital?

KW: He couldn't breathe...he couldn't breathe? Yup, he needed oxygen.

JS: So in that week, where were you at and how were you feeling?

KW: In the kitchen. I was cooking in the kitchen, and so they said, "Uncle Walter is sick." So we had baked cookies in the kitchen and me decided to go to the house. So I went over to Uncle Walter's house with cookies. I wanna say...I was away from him—about five feet. And he said he doesn't feel like cookies and I just left them on the table and I left again and they took him to the hospital. And lo and behold, Uncle Walter passed away and we had a funeral. We had a wake Monday evening. No, Sunday evening and Monday we had the funeral.

JS: How is that different than you traditionally would have had it?

KW: Traditionally, we would have had two wakes and a funeral on the third day. And everybody would come. We would have people—all the colonies, all their friends, all their relatives. But nobody came. We only had about seven people that did not belong to the colony...that showed up. And that was just the immediate family that came. And I remember when we were sitting in the church—they had everything set up—everybody would sit family-wise...we would not intermingle and we all wore masks. We all wore

masks. And we sat spaced out. So nobody would sit together. And that's how...the wake was like that...we sang and what we always do. And then the funeral the next day.

JS: What was the feeling like?

KW: It was very strange. Not having anybody come. It was different. It was sad. It was very, very sad...that nobody could come. But it went over. Everything passes.

JS: Who ended up making the coffin?

KW: Our people here at the place. No, I will take that back. They had Deerfield Colony...made the coffin. Because Clarence [Deerfield's carpenter]...they would not come over because of the pandemic. And so they made the coffin there, and Tom just went and picked it up. There was nobody even there when he picked it up. He just picked it up. And then took it into the undertakers there. And that's where they put Uncle Walter in the coffin and brought him home with the coffin.

JS: Did they show him?

KW: Yes, they did show him. Yes.

JS: So Monday was the funeral...

KW: Yes.

JS: When did you get sick?

KW: The next day. So that had been Thursday...Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday.

That was six days exactly...Tuesday morning, I was so sick. I do not feel good. I had such a headache. I felt nauseated, throwing up, and the diarrhea comes with that. And Jim took me to the hospital right away...he took me in. And they took a COVID test, and she said, "You've got COVID." And that's all they said and "Go home." So they sent me home, and I was so sick for two full weeks...I never left the house.

And when they told us to go home...I was sitting in the back seat going in as it was...I never sat in the front. They said, "Do not share bedrooms. Do not share bathrooms. Try and stay apart from each other." And we did. I was sick. And then those two weeks went over. I never lifted a head off the pillow.

JS: Did they not give you anything to help? No protocol or anything?

KW: No. Nothing. Nothing. And so just Tylenol...Tylenol and Ibuprofen. So Judy called the emergency room. They said, "If you can still breathe..." Because if you can't breathe, they want you to come in...that's your lungs then.

JS: And who is Judy?

KW: My sister.

JS: She lives with you?

KW: Yes. Well, she lives on the place here. Yes. So she called the Billings emergency room, and they said, "If she's had a headache like this for two full weeks, you bring her in...immediately." So Jim put me in the car and off we went to Billings. And there they checked all my vitals and everything. Blood pressure was sky high, 199 over 84.

And I just felt awful. So they ran me through all their tests, even a scanner to see if something in your head...whatever.

And all they could come up with was I've got high blood pressure. So they put me on a high blood pressure pill. Sent me home. That's all they could do for you there.

And so for a whole week, the headaches still kept going...kept going...and I called my doctor, she said, "Call your doctor in a week" and I did.

And she said, "Kathy, try another high blood pressure pill." It was only 10 milligrams Lisinopril.

JS: So you've never had blood pressure before or anything?

KW: I've never had high blood pressure before or anything. So I took a second one. The minute I took that second pill, the headache was gone.

JS: Did you lose your sense of smell and taste?

KW: I never lost...a little bit of my scent. I never lost my taste. Maybe I did just a little bit because Ralie had come home and made something. I said, "Ralie, if you didn't burn this, I don't know."

So Judy came in and Ralie said, "You try it, Judy.

And Judy said, "There's nothing wrong with it."

Just a little bit. I never lost it. Like some people have lost it, you know, lost their taste and smell.

And so then it was another whole week until I got back on my feet cuz I was weak. To sweat just poured off'a you. I couldn't even go outside and rake leaves with Ralie. I couldn't. Sweat just poured off of me. I lost four full weeks. The whole month of October. Yes.

JS: So you have a daughter who's a nurse? Did she tell you to do anything? Or coach you? What were her thoughts or concerns?

KW: The only concern of our daughter was that if we do get that sick that she won't be able to come home and take care of us. Because from Kalispell she went to...I think she went to South Dakota. Yeah. From South Dakota to North New Jersey. So she's been all over the place.

JS: It's interesting that they didn't give you like, I've heard these infusions that they gave. They gave that to my dad cuz he had lung issues.

KW: Well, he had it in his lungs. See I never had it on mine. I just had the headache. I had the headache.

JS: Did Judy get it? Did Judy have it too?

KW: No, not while we had it. No, she never did get it, and Jim didn't get it either while I had it. Jim didn't have it. And it took a while. It did. It circled the whole place, but it took a while. It's not just gone. Every...every ten days somebody would have it. Every ten days it would circle. The whole place...it seemed like the whole place got it. But Grandma [Katie Walter] was 95 years old and did not get it. She never got it.

JS: Mei Zeit! Were you sick at all or did you get sick after the funeral?

KW: The day after the funeral. So that was six days prior that I was at the house...at Uncle Walter's. That's where I picked it up.

JS: Kathy, would you say that you've gotten everything back, yet? This has been what, a year?

KW: It's been a year...over a year. No, I lost a little memory. You lose memory cuz you just stop sometimes and "What am I doing?" You go to the kitchen, you walk in the fridge, you just stand there. "I don't know what I wanted," and you walk out again and

it'll come back and then you go in. And you lose a little bit of your memory. That's what it affected me. It lost your memory.

JS: Any other ways that you think it affected the colony? You said this was from October, for how long did it keep lingering?

KW: It kept going, because I had it. And then all of Susan's family had it. Actually, it lingered all the way into...Susanna and George had it. She's been well now for 12 weeks. So three months ago...three months ago, was when Susanna was the last one who had it.

JS: Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. So you said that Uncle Walter passed away...wasn't his son in the hospital during that time?

KW: Yes. His son [Tim Walter] he got it from...

His name? What's his name?

Yes, Tim—our minister. So he got it, and they flew him to Billings and he had it on his lungs. They treated him with that lorazepam [Remdesivir], whatever that is. Yeah. So he totally missed the funeral.

JS: And that was his dad who passed away?

KW: Yeah. That was his dad. Yes. Yes. So we had two other ministers come in from the adjoining colonies.

JS: Do you think throughout all this time, has your job been affected, like your day to day?

KW: No, no, I don't think so.

JS: You've now gone back to eating... all of that?

KW: Yes, we're all back eating at the kitchen again. And when we did go out, you'd wear masks. And then after that, we started sewing masks.

That was a big thing for the hospitals, for the nursing homes, for anybody that wanted masks. We actually started...yes, we started that in March last year...or maybe before that. We'd send masks by the hundreds to the nursing homes and donated them and it was unbelievable...unbelievable.

JS: When it was kept lingering like that...were you ever afraid that you'd get it again? Was it was there a fear factor there or did you feel like...?

KW: No, cuz they said once you've had it...but you still wore a mask. We're still wearing masks. When you go somewhere—to big cities, at the hospitals...you're still wearing a mask and disinfectant. Wash your hands.

JS: You did tell me already what you did differently, like the eating all of that...you've already talked about that. What about your relationship to outsiders? Were they impacted during this time?

KW: No, because I believe our little town of Lewistown...they had as much COVID as we did...or even more. Cuz every day you'd hear the numbers on the radio. This is another one. Numbers have gone up. Numbers have gone up. Yes. So we weren't ridiculed or anything about...with that.

JS: What about the neighboring colonies? Has it brought you together? Has anything changed at all or are you more isolated?

KW: The neighboring colonies at first...when it came, everybody stayed home. Everybody was kind of, "Should you go? Should you not go visit your neighbors?" And the neighboring colonies probably didn't want you to come either. Everybody kind of was hesitant, yes.

JS: The next question is, how did that affect you personally? You've already told me like the physical effects of it...

KW: Yes. But outside of that, no, it's...everybody's doing good.

JS: Family members? You've talked about them...did any of the children here...that did Kyle get it or Tammy...did they?

KW: They had it? If they did have it...they never went to test...they never went to test if they did have it. But the ones that went in were very, very sick. They probably just had a head cold and a cough...and that was it. Yes, that's most of them...that's all they had.

JS: What about your schedule or demands, did any of those change? Like you mentioned market earlier...did anything with the schedule?

KW: Well, then everything was shut down for that fall. There were no Christmas bazaars. There was nothing.

JS: Was there no Chokecherry Festival?

KW: Yes, there was Chokecherry Festival. But...They had everybody spaced...a space apart. Usually you have a 10-foot space...and it's side by side...side by side. So they only had it...a 10-foot space, a tent, and then you were in the next booth, everything. And then there was a lot less people. It was half the people that always came. And I'm sure people were scared...people were scared. They didn't want to come, you know? But then comes farmers market in the summertime. It was essential needs, like...

JS: So when you say summertime, do you mean summer 2020 or summer 2021?

KW: '20. Summertime of '20. That's when that came out. The only people that could have a booth at farmers market was essential. That was food—food booths—that was selling vegetables or breads and things like that.

Like the craft people could not be there. Not in the farmer's market section. So we had four vendors that qualified and that was it.

And everybody else that was selling crafts to make a living...people are there...they want to share their...and they had to have a space between us.

So people who walked through...walked through a death valley...it was really something. And then this year, in 2021, when we came back to farmers market, everybody could be there. And it was just awesome.

We had forgotten how good farmers market was. We had a fantastic year. Yes. So hopefully and prayerfully this'll continue.

JS: To get better, for sure.

KW: To get better, yes.

JS: What do you think you'll remember the most about this time, Kathy?

KW: I think what we will remember is...losing loved ones. It's touched home. We've lost...we've lost family, we've lost friends. It's touched everybody in some way, one way or another it has touched everybody. I think people have gotten a lot closer...and kinder. It says that's the only thing, you know, be kind. That's one thing you wanna to do. Even on billboards: be kind.

JS: You also had a recent loss, didn't you?

KW: Yes, we had a loss at one of our neighboring...at my home place [Flatwillow], actually. Was my cousin's husband. They contacted with somebody, I don't know how. All their men folks had COVID. And a lot of them went home...they were sick.

But one of the guys..it just hit him really hard. He just couldn't...He just couldn't get over it.

He ended up in the hospital in Roundup. He just couldn't breathe...couldn't breathe. And he was there a week. And from there they took him to Billings and he ended up on a ventilator.

JS: What's his name?

KW: Brad Stahl. And he was on a ventilator for five full weeks. And it's very, very sad. And he has a wife and two children. And they had lost a son—previous to him getting sick—three months earlier. Which the little guy had heart disease, and they knew he they'd lose him one day, but it was hard on the family. And so three months later, Brad contacts with this COVID stuff and he ends up on a ventilator and he cannot get off this ventilator. His organs just shut down. They couldn't even...there's a decision comes...to be unhooked. They didn't have to unhook him. So that's hard...that's a hard decision. His organs just shut down. That was very, very sad. He was only 46 years old. So that's been the recent one. Then that has only been like eight weeks ago...seven weeks ago. Yes. So it's still circulating. And, and who knows? Who knows?

JS: What about you mentioned like people being kind or any other delights or joys that you think came out of this?

KW: Well, hopefully they'll get to find the Lord more...everybody finds...in situations like this, the Lord lets it happen—I believe—to draw people closer to Him. That they find some peace. Yup, and another joy is we're finally getting to see family.

JS: Sorrows...any sorrows? You've already mentioned losing people...any other sorrows that come to mind?

KW: No, not really. Just that you can't cross the border...

JS: Tell me more about that, can you?

KW: Can't across the border!

JS: What was it like before?

KW: Before, any time you felt like going to Canada to visit your relatives or do anything...like go up and buy something or essential needs or whatever. We get our flour from there for the kitchen.

Well, now...you have to be vaccinated to cross the border. And if you choose not to...well, if you have relatives in Canada, you can cross. My mother is from Canada, so all I'd have to do is show a paper that my mom is from Canada. Proof and then do a COVID test and I could probably get to Canada.

But while I'm in Canada, I have to quarantine for two full weeks. And then every day you get a phone call, "Where are you?" And if you're not where you're supposed to be at, they come look for you.

So, I don't know. I don't know what this is coming to. And as I hear, as of right now, but I don't know how true this is: January the 1st, 2022, anybody crossing the border—even for essential—has to have the COVID shot.

JS: Can you say anything about what you've missed out on...not being able to go to Canada?

KW: Just relatives, mostly just relatives. Cuz all my family, my mom's family is in Canada. We've missed funerals. We've missed weddings. But thank God for the Internet. So everybody's got the Internet and we can kind of...iPads and you can FaceTime.

JS: But you said somebody, an aunt passed away at Arm River [Saskatchewan colony]?

KW: Yes. An aunt passed and we didn't get to go to the funeral. Yes. But she did not die of COVID. She died of a heart attack.

JS: But still...funerals are a time where Hutterite congregate, get together?

KW: Yes, a big family gathering. Yes.

JS: How would you say, if at all, your perspective on life has changed because of this experience?

KW: I think we become stronger.

JS: How?

KW: You become stronger. Cuz you look at life a lot differently. It makes you stronger. And family is everything to us vuz that's all you've got is your family. And believing in God...believe in God that He got you through it...all of it.

But you know, it's His calling. If your time's up, I believe your time's up, no matter what. In life's perspectives, I think I was lucky...a lot of people aren't and my heart goes out to them. And that's about it on that.

JS: When you say you've gotten stronger...does it feel like, "Okay, I've gotten through this, and if something"—I don't know what worse could happen—then this...

KW: What worse could happen to you? I guess you could say if you get stronger you're—I don't know—you beat this and it brought you closer to the Lord...A lot closer to the Lord. And being kind...be kind. It's even on big billboards..."Be kind to your neighbor." You never know what's going to happen...what life gonna throw at you.

JS: Do you feel that it's changed the relationships here in your specific colony? Like has it done anything to make people different?

KW: It has, yes, cuz our minister had it. We lost Uncle Walter. A lot of the girls had it. It has...its brought everybody closer together. Yes. I would say so. Yes.

JS: As I mentioned to you before, Hutterites also really suffered in the 1918 pandemic. They lost people...a lot of people.

KW: Yes. A lot of people. Yes.

JS: What would you want to tell your descendants about this time? What would you want them to know about how resilient you were or what helped you get through this?

KW: Well, right now, we don't know much about this. We don't know much about it...where it's from. They say it's from China...it's a man-made thing. They're doing the vaccination now. A lot of them are getting vaccinated. People are getting vaccinated so that they can cross the borders to see their families...for essential needs. And a lot of people are choosing not to...not to get vaccinated.

And the vaccination came up so quickly they developed it so quickly. They don't know much about it.

I don't believe they do. And are we going to get it? Should we take it? Should we take the vaccine? Should we not take the vaccination?

And so, time will tell. And as for right now if they're doing a study, I believe, it's good for that study. Who knows what will come up in this study.

JS: Cuz not necessarily against vaccination, are you?

KW: We're not against it but for right now we've not taken it. We have not taken the vaccination.

Here on the place we've had one person take it. And that's about all.

My daughter took it [the nurse]. My son has taken it. My sisters have taken it. And so, they've had both shots, and the booster. And they seem to be doing fine.

They were a little bit sick with the second one. But for right now, we still haven't taken it yet. We haven't decided yet.

JS: So, Kathy, as far as your descendants, your grandchildren—if they would look back and listen to this recording—what would you want to tell them?

KW: Go with your instinct...gut, I don't know. Because if you think back now, the kids are getting vaccinated right now. They're getting all kinds of vaccinations. Smallpox...for all these...polio. And it's a good thing they say. Whooping cough...whooping cough hasn't been back now in years and years and years.

And so—we talked about it the other day—look at all the vaccines they're putting into these little children. So...can this be this harmful? Why are we not taking it? I do not know. It's a hearsay, I think.

I think if they won't push that much, people would have taken it. They're just slamming it on everybody. "Here, get vaccinated."

So I don't know what's going to happen.

JS: What gave you strength during this time that you would want them to maybe draw on or know about? Your children?

KW: The children? A good thing is...strength would be...believe. You have to believe. That's the biggest, biggest strength there is. There is a God—I don't care—even though there's those scientists. I mean they can say what they want, but there is a God. And He allows this to happen.

JS: How has this experience—this is actually one of the questions—how has your faith been affected...how has this experience strengthened that?

KW: The faith has become better, stronger. You have more faith. You believe in God and you can talk to God. You can just kneel down and just talk to Him and tell Him about it. It's good to read...pull out your Bibles...read it. And there's a daily devotion.

JS: Is it because of—there's also so much uncertainty—that that gives you more...that gives you grounding? That that's the only place to go? Is that why?

KW: It is. It is cuz everybody's fighting. The whole world's fighting. Yes. So for the kids down the road, I hope they find more...I hope the scientists find more about this drug that they're doing. I hope it turns out for the best. I hope it's not what they're saying...a lot of negativity about the shot. This and this is gonna happen...in down the road time...you'll get sick. And to destroy the world. The shots gonna...people are gonna die...down the road—because they took the shot. We don't know. So I pray...scientists are smart, so...

JS: You've told me your thoughts on the vaccine. Is there anything else about this experience that you'd like to share? Anything you feel like we've missed?

KW: I don't know. I think we covered all ground...

JS: What about your parents?

KW: Both my mom and dad had COVID. They both had COVID.

JS: Was it around your time? Or now recently?

KW: No, no...it was after my time that they had it. They are both older...Mom's 83...Dad's 86. They both had COVID and survived.

JS: Did they never have to go to the hospital?

KW: Ann did take Dad in...the sister took Dad in...and they're nothing they could do about it. Just medication like for the cough and cold. They mostly just had cough and cold.

Dad had a little bit of a—cuz he's older—it affected his mind a little bit. But it seems to have really cleared out. And he has sugar diabetes, so that really affected him a little bit. But he's doing really good.

JS: If you can't think of anything else, I think this is...

KW: Nope, that'll do it.

JS: Thank you so much Kathy!

KW: You're welcome.

JS: Appreciate it.

KW: You're welcome.