

= Bath School disaster =

The Bath School disaster , sometimes known as the Bath School massacre , was a series of violent attacks perpetrated by Andrew Kehoe on May 18 , 1927 , in Bath Township , Michigan , that killed 38 elementary schoolchildren and 6 adults and injured at least 58 other people . Kehoe killed his wife and firebombed his farm , then detonated an explosion in the Bath Consolidated School , before committing suicide by detonating a final device in his truck . It is the deadliest mass murder to take place at a school in United States history .

Andrew Kehoe , the 55 @-@ year @-@ old school board treasurer , was angered by increased taxes and his defeat in the Spring 1926 election for township clerk . He was thought to have planned his " murderous revenge " after that public defeat . He had a reputation for difficulty on the school board and in personal dealings . In addition , in June 1926 , he was notified that his mortgage was going to be foreclosed . For much of the next year , a neighbor noticed Kehoe had stopped working on his farm and thought he might be planning suicide . During that period , Kehoe purchased explosives and discreetly planted them on his property and under the school .

Kehoe 's wife was ill with tuberculosis , he had stopped making mortgage payments , and he was under pressure for foreclosure . Some time between May 16 and the morning of May 18 , 1927 , Kehoe murdered his wife . Then on the morning of May 18 at about 8 : 45 a.m. , he set off various incendiary devices on his homestead that caused the house and other farm buildings to be destroyed by the explosives ' blasts and their subsequent fires .

Almost simultaneously , an explosion devastated the north wing of the school building , killing 36 schoolchildren and two teachers . Kehoe had used a timed detonator to ignite hundreds of pounds of dynamite and incendiary pyrotol , which he had secretly planted inside the school over the course of many months . As rescuers began working at the school , Kehoe drove up , stopped , and used a rifle to detonate dynamite inside his shrapnel @-@ filled truck , killing himself , the school superintendent , and several others nearby , as well as injuring more bystanders . During rescue efforts at the school , searchers discovered an additional 500 pounds ( 230 kg ) of unexploded dynamite and pyrotol connected to a timing device set to detonate at the same time as the first explosions ; the material was hidden throughout the basement of the south wing . Kehoe had apparently intended to blow up and destroy the entire school .

= = Background = =

= = = Bath Township = = =

Bath Township is a small community located ten miles ( 16 km ) northeast of Lansing , Michigan , and contains the unincorporated village of Bath . In the early 1920s , the area was primarily agricultural . In the early part of the 20th century , many small one @-@ room schools , where different grades shared the same classroom and teacher , were closed . Educators of the era believed that children would receive a better and more complete education if students could attend a single school at one location . The grades could be age @-@ divided into classes , and the facilities could be of a higher quality .

After years of debate , in 1922 Bath Township voters approved creation of the consolidated school district , and the increase in property taxes to pay for the new school . When the school opened , it had 236 students enrolled in grades 1 @-@ 12 . All area landowners had to pay higher property taxes . At the time of the bombing , the village had about 300 residents .

= = = Andrew Kehoe = = =

Andrew Philip Kehoe was born in Tecumseh , Michigan , on February 1 , 1872 . Kehoe 's mother died when he was young , and his father married a much younger widow . Reportedly , Kehoe often quarreled with his stepmother . When he was fourteen , the family 's oil stove exploded and set his

stepmother on fire . Kehoe threw a bucket of water on her , but because the fire was oil @-@ based , his action spread the flames more rapidly over her body . She died from her injuries . Some of his neighbors believed that Kehoe had caused the stove explosion .

He studied electrical engineering at Michigan State College in East Lansing . After that , he moved to St. Louis , Missouri , where he worked as an electrician . After several years in Missouri , Kehoe returned to Michigan . At the age of 40 , he married Ellen " Nellie " Price in 1912 . Seven years later they moved to a farm they bought outside the village of Bath . Even though Kehoe was said to be dependable , doing favors and volunteer work for his neighbors , they also described him as being impatient with all who disagreed with him . They recounted that Kehoe had shot and killed a neighbor 's dog that had come on his property and annoyed him by barking . He was known to have beaten one of his horses to death when it did not perform as well as he wanted .

With a reputation for frugality , Kehoe was elected in 1924 as a trustee for three years and treasurer for one year on the school board . He argued endlessly for lower taxes The later superintendent of the board , M. W. Keys , said that Kehoe " fought the expenditure of money for the most necessary equipment . " He was considered extremely difficult to work with , often voting against the rest of the board and wanting his own way . Kehoe repeatedly accused Superintendent Emory Huyck of financial mismanagement .

He argued with township financial authorities , trying to get the valuation of his property reduced , and claimed that he had paid too much for the farm . He also tried to get the mortgage taken off but was not successful . In June 1926 , he was notified that the company was going to foreclose on his property . Kehoe was appointed in 1925 to temporarily fill the position of town clerk but , several months later , he was defeated in the regular spring 1926 election for the position . This public rejection by the community angered him . In his eyewitness account , The Bath School Disaster , Monty J. Ellsworth said he thought this rejection was the reason Kehoe had planned his " murderous revenge " of the bombings , to destroy the school and kill the community 's children and many of its members .

A. McMullen , another neighbor , noted that Kehoe had stopped working on his farm altogether for most of the preceding year , and thought he might be planning suicide . For this reason , when Kehoe gave him one of his horses about April 1927 , McMullen returned it .

It was discovered later that , as part of Kehoe 's preparations to destroy his farm , he had cut all his wire fences , girdled young shade trees to kill them , and cut off his grapevine plants before putting them back on their stumps to hide the damage . He gathered lumber and other materials and put them in the tool shed , which he later exploded with an incendiary bomb .

By the time of the bombing , Nellie Kehoe had become chronically ill with tuberculosis , for which there was no effective treatment or cure . Her frequent hospital stays may have contributed to the family 's debt . Kehoe had ceased making mortgage and homeowner 's insurance payments months earlier .

= = = Purchase and planting of explosives = = =

There is no clear indication when Kehoe conceived and planned the steps leading to the ultimate events , but his neighbor , M. J. Ellsworth , thought that Kehoe conceived his plan after being defeated in early 1926 for the election as town clerk . The general consensus of the townspeople was that Kehoe had worked on his plan at least since August of the previous year .

M.W. Keyes , a member of the Bath School Board was quoted by the New York Times as saying

I have no doubt that he made his plans last Fall [ 1926 ] to blow up the school ... He was an experienced electrician and the board employed him in November to make some repairs on the school lighting system . He had ample opportunity then to plant the explosives and lay the wires for touching it off .

Kehoe had free access to the building during the summer vacation of 1926 .

From mid @-@ 1926 , Kehoe began buying more than a ton of pyrotol , an incendiary explosive used by farmers during the era for excavation and burning of debris . In November 1926 , he drove to Lansing and bought two boxes of dynamite at a sporting goods store . As dynamite was also

commonly used on farms , Kehoe 's purchase of small amounts of explosives at different stores and on different dates did not raise any suspicions . Neighbors reported hearing explosions set off on the farm , with one even calling him " the dynamite farmer " .

In December 1926 , according to the testimony of Lieutenant Lyle Morse , a Michigan State Police investigator with the Department of Public Safety , Kehoe purchased a .30 @-@ caliber Winchester bolt @-@ action rifle .

= = Day of the disaster = =

= = = Prior to the disaster = = =

Prior to May 18 , Kehoe had loaded the back seat of his truck with all sorts of metal debris capable of producing shrapnel during an explosion . He also bought a new set of tires for his truck so it wouldn 't break down when transporting the explosives . He didn 't want it to look suspicious that his truck was full of dangerous products . He made many trips to Lansing for more explosives , as well as the school , town , and his house . Many of his neighbors noticed how busy he was driving around , but never thought to make any comment about it . Multiple times , a neighbor to the school saw a man carrying objects into the building at night , but never thought to mention it to anyone .

Nellie Kehoe had been discharged on May 16 from Lansing 's St. Lawrence Hospital . Between her release and the bombings two days later , Kehoe killed his wife . He put her body in a wheelbarrow located in the rear of the farm 's chicken coop , where it was found after the farm explosions and fire in a heavily charred state . Piled around the cart were silverware and a metal cash box . Ashes of several bank notes could be seen through a slit in the cash box . Kehoe had placed and wired homemade pyrotol firebombs in the house and all the buildings of the farm . The burned remains of his two horses were found tied in their enclosures with their legs wired together , to prevent their rescue during the fire .

= = = Farm bombs = = =

At approximately 8 : 45 a.m. , Kehoe detonated the firebombs in his house and farm buildings , causing some debris to fly into a neighbor 's poultry brooding house . Neighbors noticed the fire , and volunteers rushed to the scene .

O. H. Bush , a fireman , and several other men crawled through a broken window of the farmhouse in search of survivors . When they determined no one was in the farmhouse , they salvaged what furniture they could before the fire spread into the living room . Discovering dynamite in the corner , Bush picked up an armful of explosives and handed it to one of the men . As Kehoe left his burning farm and house in his Ford truck , he stopped to tell those fighting the fire , " Boys , you 're my friends . You better get out of here . You better head down to the school " , and drove off .

= = = Explosion in north wing of school = = =

Classes began at 8 : 30 a.m. that morning . At about 8 : 45 a.m. , in the basement of the north wing of the school , an alarm clock set by Kehoe detonated the dynamite and pyrotol he had hidden there .

Rescuers heading to the scene of the Kehoe farm fire heard the explosion at the school building , turned back and headed toward the school . Parents within the rural community also began rushing to the school . The school building had turned into a war zone with thirty @-@ eight people , mostly children , being killed in the initial explosion .

First @-@ grade teacher Bernice Sterling told an Associated Press reporter that the explosion was like an earthquake :

" It seemed as though the floor went up several feet , " she said . " After the first shock I thought for a moment I was blind . When it came the air seemed to be full of children and flying desks and

books . Children were tossed high in the air ; some were catapulted out of the building .

The north wing of the school had collapsed . Parts of the walls had crumbled , and the edge of the roof had fallen to the ground . Monty Ellsworth , a neighbor of the Kehoes , recounted ,

" There was a pile of children of about five or six under the roof and some of them had arms sticking out , some had legs , and some just their heads sticking out . They were unrecognizable because they were covered with dust , plaster , and blood . There were not enough of us to move the roof . "

Ellsworth volunteered to drive back to his farm and get a rope heavy enough to pull the school roof off the children 's bodies . Returning to his farm , Ellsworth saw Kehoe in the opposite direction heading toward the school . " He grinned and waved his hand ; when he grinned , I could see both rows of his teeth " , said Ellsworth .

The scene at the school building was chaotic . Robert Gates , a witness , said

" ... mother after mother came running into the school yard , and demanded information about her child and , on seeing the lifeless form lying on the lawn , sobbed and swooned ... In no time more than 100 men were at work tearing away the debris of the school , and nearly as many women were frantically pawing over the timber and broken bricks for traces of their children . "

= = = Truck explosion = = =

About a half hour after the explosion , Kehoe drove up to the school and saw Superintendent Huyck . Kehoe summoned the superintendent over to his truck . Charles Hawson testified at the Inquest that he saw the two men struggle over some type of long gun and that the car then went up in an explosion , killing Superintendent Huyck , Kehoe , Nelson McFarren ( a retired farmer ) and Cleo Clayton , an eight @-@ year @-@ old second grader . Clayton , a survivor of the first blast , had wandered out of the school building debris and was killed by the fragmentation from the exploding vehicle . The explosion also mortally wounded postmaster Glenn O. Smith ( who lost a leg and died later that day of his wounds ) and injured several others .

After Kehoe 's truck exploded , Ellsworth recounted ,

I saw one mother , Mrs. Eugene Hart , sitting on the bank a short distance from the school with a little dead girl on each side of her and holding a little boy , Percy , who died a short time after they got him to the hospital . This was about the time Kehoe blew his car up in the street , severely wounding Perry , the oldest child of Mr. and Mrs. Hart .

O. H. Bush , foreman of the road crew , recalled the scene after the final explosion :

I began to feel as though the world was coming to an end . I guess I was a bit hazy . Anyway , the next thing I remember I was out on the street . One of our men was binding up the wounds of Glenn Smith , the postmaster . His leg had been blown off . I went back to the building and helped with the rescue work until we were ordered to stop while a search was made for dynamite .

= = = Recovery and rescue = = =

Telephone operators stayed at their stations for hours to summon doctors , undertakers , area hospitals and anyone else who might help . The Lansing Fire Department sent several firefighters and its chief .

The local physician , Dr. J. A. Crum and his wife , a nurse , had both served in World War I , and had returned to Bath to open a pharmacy . After the explosion the Crums turned their drugstore into a triage center with the dead bodies being taken to the town hall , which was being used as a morgue .

Hundreds of people worked in the wreckage all day and into the night in an effort to find and rescue any children pinned underneath . Area contractors had sent all their men to assist , and many other people came to the scene in response to the pleas for help . Eventually , 34 firefighters and the Chief of the Lansing Fire Department arrived on the scene , as did several Michigan State Police officers , who managed traffic to and from the scene . The injured and dying were transported to Sparrow Hospital and St. Lawrence Hospital in Lansing . The construction of the latter facility had been financed in large part by Lawrence Price , Nellie Kehoe 's uncle and formerly an executive in

charge of Oldsmobile 's Lansing Car Assembly .

Michigan Governor Fred W. Green arrived during the afternoon of the disaster and assisted in the relief work , carting bricks away from the scene . The Lawrence Baking Company of Lansing sent a truck filled with pies and sandwiches , which were served to rescuers in the township 's community hall .

The bombing had destroyed the north wing of the school . During the search , rescuers found an additional 500 pounds ( 230 kg ) of dynamite , which had failed to detonate , in the south wing . The search was halted to allow the Michigan State Police to disarm the devices . The State Police found an alarm clock timed to go off at 8 : 45 a.m. Investigators speculated that the initial explosion may have caused a short circuit in the second set of bombs , preventing them from detonating . They searched the building and then returned to the recovery work .

Police and fire officials gathered at the Kehoe farm to investigate the fires . State troopers had searched for Nellie Kehoe throughout Michigan , thinking she was at a tuberculosis sanatorium , but her charred body was found the following day , May 19 , among the ruins of the farm . All the Kehoe farm buildings were destroyed , and the two horses trapped inside the barn died . Investigators found a wooden sign wired to the farm 's fence with Kehoe 's last message , " Criminals are made , not born " , stenciled on it .

= = Aftermath = =

The American Red Cross , setting up operations at the Crum drugstore , took the lead in providing aid and comfort to the victims . The Lansing Red Cross headquarters stayed open until 11 : 30 that night to answer telephone calls , update the list of dead and injured and provide information and planning services for the following day .

The local community responded generously , as reported at the time by the Associated Press : " ... a sympathetic public assured the rehabilitation of the stricken community . Aid was tendered freely in the hope that the grief of those who lost loved ones might be even slightly mitigated . " The Red Cross managed donations sent to pay for both the medical expenses of the survivors and the burial costs of the dead . In a few weeks , \$ 5 @, @ 284 @. @ 15 ( about \$ 71 @, @ 984 today ) was raised through donations , including \$ 2 @, @ 500 from the Clinton County board of supervisors and \$ 2 @, @ 000 from the Michigan legislature . In addition to monetary donations , the Red Cross Headquarters received extensive donations of flowers from strangers .

The disaster received nationwide coverage in the days following , sharing headlines with Charles Lindbergh 's trans @-@ Atlantic crossing , though Lindbergh 's crossing received much more attention , and eliciting a national outpouring of grief . Newspaper headlines from Washington , D.C. to Los Angeles characterized Kehoe as a maniac , madman , and fiend .

People from all around the world provided sympathy to the families and the community of Bath , Michigan , including letters from some Italian schoolchildren . One 5th grader wrote : " Even though we are small , we understand all the sorrow and misfortune that has struck our dear brothers ... " And another : " We are praying to God to give to the unfortunate mothers and fathers , the strength to bear the great sorrow that has descent on them , we are near to you in spirit ... "

Andrew Kehoe 's body was eventually claimed by one of his sisters . Without ceremony , she had him buried in an unmarked grave in an initially unnamed cemetery . Later it was revealed that Kehoe was buried in the paupers ' section of Mount Rest Cemetery , St. Johns , Clinton County , Michigan . The Price family buried Nellie Price Kehoe in Lansing 's Mount Hope Cemetery under her maiden name .

Vehicles from outlying areas and surrounding states descended upon Bath by the thousands . Over 100 @, @ 000 vehicles passed through on Saturday alone , an enormous amount of traffic for the area . Some Bath citizens regarded this armada as an unwarranted intrusion into their time of grief , but most accepted it as a show of sympathy and support from surrounding communities . Many of the victims were buried starting Friday , May 20 .

= = = Coroner 's inquest = = =

The coroner arrived at the scene on the day of the disaster and swore in six community leaders to serve as a jury investigating the death of Superintendent Huyck . A coroner 's inquest into the matter was held the following week , starting on May 23 . The Clinton County Prosecutor conducted the examination , and more than 50 people testified before the jury . During his testimony , David Hart testified that Kehoe had told him that Kehoe had " killed a horse " . and the New York Times reported people as saying that Kehoe had " an ungovernable temper " and " seemed to have a mania for killing things . " Neighbors had seen him wiring his house in early April 1927 .

Kehoe 's neighbor Sidney J. Howell testified that after the fire began , Kehoe warned him and three boys to leave the farm , saying " Boys , you are my friends , you better get out of here , you better go down to the school . " Three telephone linemen working near Bath testified that Kehoe passed them on the road toward the school , and they saw him arrive there . He swerved his truck and stopped in front of the building . In the next instant , according to the linemen , the truck blew up , and one of them was struck by shrapnel . Other witnesses testified that Kehoe paused after stopping and called Superintendent Huyck over before blowing up his truck .

Although there was never any doubt that Kehoe was the perpetrator , the jury was asked to determine if the school board or its employees were guilty of criminal negligence . After more than a week of testimony , the jury exonerated the school board and its employees . In its verdict , the jury concluded that Kehoe " conducted himself sanely and so concealed his operations that there was no cause to suspect any of his actions ; and we further find that the school board , and Frank Smith , janitor of the school building , were not negligent in and about their duties , and were not guilty of any negligence in not discovering Kehoe 's plan . "

The inquest determined that Kehoe murdered Superintendent Emory Huyck on the morning of May 18 . It was also the jury 's verdict that the school was blown up as part of a plan and that Kehoe alone , without the aid of conspirators , murdered 43 people in total , including his wife Nellie . Suicide was determined to be the cause of Andrew Kehoe 's death , which brought the total number of dead to 44 at the time of the inquest .

On August 22 , three months after the bombing , fourth @-@ grader Beatrice Gibbs died following hip surgery . Hers was the 45th and final death directly attributable to the Bath School disaster , which made it the most deadly attack to ever occur in an American school . Richard Fritz , brother of Marjorie Fritz , was injured in the explosion and died almost one year later of myocarditis . Though Fritz is not included on many lists of the victims , his death from myocarditis is thought to have been brought on by an infection because of his injuries .

= = = Rebuilding = = =

Governor Fred Green quickly called for donations to aid the townspeople and created the Bath Relief Fund with the money supplied by donors , the state , and local governments . People from around the country donated to the fund .

School resumed on September 5 , 1927 , and , for the 1927 ? 1928 school year , was held in the community hall , township hall , and two retail buildings . Most of the students returned . The board appointed O. M. Brant of Luther , Michigan , to succeed Huyck as superintendent . The Lansing architect Warren Holmes donated construction plans , and the school board approved the contracts for the new building on September 14 . On September 15 , Michigan 's Republican U.S. Senator James J. Couzens presented his personal check for \$ 75 @,@ 000 ( roughly \$ 1 @,@ 022 @,@ 000 in today 's money ) to the Bath construction fund to build the new school .

The board demolished the damaged portion of the school and constructed a new wing with the donated funds . The " James Couzens Agricultural School , " named for the senator , was dedicated on August 18 , 1928 . The Kehoe farm was completely plowed to ensure that no explosives were hidden in the ground and was sold at auction to pay the mortgage .

= = = Legacy = = =

In 1928 , artist Carlton W. Angell presented the board with a memorial statue titled Girl With a Cat . The statue is presently in the Bath School Museum located within the school district 's middle school .

In 1975 , the Couzens building was demolished and the site was redeveloped as the James Couzens Memorial Park , dedicated to the victims . At the center of the park is the original Bath Consolidated School 's cupola , which survived the disaster and remained on the school until the building was torn down .

In 1991 , a Michigan Historical Marker was installed at the park , a bronze plaque bearing the names of those killed and a brief description of events .

On November 3 , 2008 , the town announced that tombstones had been donated for Amelia and Robert Bromund , the last two bombing victims whose graves were still unmarked . A grant from a foundation paid for the grave markers .