

BATH SCHOOL MUSEUM PRESENTATION

JULY 29, 2022

Susan: Well, thank you for coming. We love to give tours of our museum. We're very proud of it. My name is **Susan Hagerman**. I'm the chairperson of our museum committee and just a little bit about the museum. It started in the 1980's when Mr. **Jim Hixson** was the principal at the elementary school, which is right up there. One day he noticed, as somebody was cleaning storage areas out, he found a whole bunch of our artifacts in the trash and he rescued them. He says, "You can't throw these away!" So from that, he created a museum committee. At that time they would meet in the all-purpose room up in the elementary building and being an all-purpose room, it was used for cafeteria, gym class, programs. I think they had elections up there, all-purpose.

So every time the museum committee wanted to do any kind of a program or presentation, they had to carry all the boxes out and set everything up, and then when they were done, had to pack it all away and store it away again. In 1994, I think it was, when the auditorium here was built, the school board allowed us to use the lobby for the museum. For all of these years, it has worked very well. People that come in for concerts, programs, whatever, in the auditorium or even in the gymnasium, they can come and walk through and see everything. We are outgrowing it though. That's a little bit of a history of our museum. We have currently, I believe, 12 people now on our committee and we just kind of do our thing.

To start, I'm gonna read it because I always leave little details out and then jump back so I'm going back and forth. It's easier for me just to read something.

Bath's first simple schoolhouse was founded in 1840 to accommodate the dozen or more children in the area. Bath Township was officially founded in 1843. By the early 1900's, many more one room schools were established. By then Bath Township was flourishing with businesses. There was a post office, a railroad, an elevator, and a hotel, but what they lacked was a central school system. The subject of approving bonds for the construction of the consolidated school worked its way across rural Michigan in the twenties. The first time the bond issued to fund and construct a consolidated school was placed before the voters of Bath, the proposal failed. On a second vote in 1921, it passed by only 68 votes. People were worried about taxes even back then. Communities that approved the bond issue and constructed larger and impressive schools, such as Bath and St. Johns, were eligible for state aid for maintenance, salaries, and buses to transport students. A consolidated school would be the cheapest and best way for education. Also teachers of a consolidated school were required to have a higher education than those teachers that taught in one room school buildings so the children would get a better education.

In November of 1921, construction started on a new consolidated school up there where the park is. A former school building that had housed grades one through ten was salvageable and could be used as the basis of the new building. There's a picture of that school right over there, the top one with the brown frame. When the school opened in the fall of 1922, the new consolidated school, there were 236 students, grades K through twelve.

Andrew Kehoe was born February 11, 1872, one of 13 children. He attended Michigan State College, which is now known as MSU, studying a course in electrical engineering. That's where he met **Nellie Price** whom he later married. The Price family was originally from around the Bath-Lansing area. People in Kehoe's hometown would say he was sociable while he was in school but as he grew older, he became distant and always wanted his own way.

Andrew and Nellie attended a Catholic church when they lived in Tecumseh until a new church was built and they were assessed \$400, which Andrew made no effort to pay. After that, he never attended church again nor did he allow Nellie to attend. When Andrew was quite young, his biological mother died. In later years, his father remarried. Andrew did not get along very well with his stepmother. One day she went into town, then returned to prepare a meal. When she lit the oil stove it exploded, covering her with oil and set her on fire. Andrew, who was, they believe 40 at the time, stood and watched her burn for a while before getting a pail of water to throw on her, which only made the flames worse. He did go to a neighbor, however, to ask for the doctor to be called, saying only that his stepmother had been burned. She died from her wounds. Although nothing ever came of it at that time, it wasn't until after the Bath School disaster that people began questioning Kehoe's involvement in that incident.

In 1919, Kehoe bought a farm with 80 acres from his father-in-law, which was located on Clark Road in Bath. The home, having been built by his father-in-law, was one of the largest and most up to date homes in the village. In fact, it was a showcase of sorts. He was more of a gentleman farmer in that he would change his clothes as soon as they got dirty and unlike no average person, he would drive into town in the mornings and have breakfast served to him at the diner. He was also cruel to his horses. He would work them in the fields until they were exhausted and on one occasion, when one had gotten as far as he could do, he beat it.

The Kehoe home was located across the road from **David Harte** and it's about a mile on Clark Road west of here. The two neighbors were friendly for about a year until Kehoe killed the Harte's dog for barking in his yard. Mr. Harte would remember that Kehoe acted very strangely after that, plus he was dishonest in his business doings. In 1922, Kehoe began to complain about his taxes being so high. In 1923, the school board bought five acres of land for an athletic field and then they had to buy and install a lighting plant of their own, which made taxes even higher. While most people were not pleased about the tax hike, Kehoe was enraged, feeling that he was hurt the most. During the next couple of years, he insinuated to some of the neighbors that he would cut down expenses if he got voted onto the school board. At the July 14, 1924, annual board meeting, Kehoe was, in fact, nominated to fill the expired term of **Enos Peacock**. He was sworn in by **Alonzo Webster**, a notary public, for a three-year term. Kehoe was then appointed treasurer for one year by the school board. He was then reappointed the following two years. Kehoe's books were always posted up to date and in good order. He was the treasurer of the school board.

He began having trouble with the school board because he always wanted things his way and if that didn't happen, he would make a motion to adjourn the meeting. He seemed to have no use for Mr. **Emory Huyck**, the school superintendent. So as soon as he was on the board, Kehoe

started trying to get rid of him. In 1925, swarms of bees somehow got into the walls of the school building. That same winter, when the building would get warm, the bees would fall down on the children. So Mr. Huyck and the principal, Mr. **[Floyd] Huggett** tried killing the bees, but were unsuccessful. So the matter was turned over to Andrew Kehoe, who successfully got rid of them. After demonstrating his ability with the bees, Kehoe was asked if he would mind doing some much needed work on the electrical system. The board also authorized him to oversee other maintenance issues. He was given unlimited access to the building day or night as needed. He learned every nook and cranny of the building, every unused space.

In October 1925, Kehoe purchased 500 pounds of pyrotol in Jackson and stored it at his farm buildings. In late 1926, he purchased two boxes of dynamite in Lansing, saying that he needed it for farm blasting and that he would sell any he didn't use for his neighbors. Back at that time, they used the dynamite to blow the stumps out of the field to clear the fields. Shortly thereafter, he began placing 30-pound bags of pyrotol and dynamite under the crawl space and basement of the school below the elementary classes. The explosives were connected by electric wires to alarm clocks and two Hot Shot batteries. The neighbors did not recall Kehoe ever using the dynamite at the farm until New Year's Eve, 1926, when they heard an explosion. When he was asked about it, he told them that he set up a time clock to go off at midnight to celebrate the new year.

In the fall of 1926, **Frank Smith**, the school janitor thought that there was a leak in one of the basement pipes so Superintendent Huyck shined a flashlight along the ceiling as Smith followed along the length of pipe. He noticed no leaks, no rust, no loose joints, but he also did not notice something else that was in the ceiling that was out of place.

As janitor, Mr. Smith's job was to make sure that all the doors were closed each night. In the spring of May 1927, he noticed the back door was split around the lock, an odd break he thought, but he was able to close the door and didn't think anything more about it. Then in early May, the lock stopped working completely so Kehoe was consulted, since he did the repairs and he couldn't fix it so he sent it to Lansing to be fixed. In May, Frank Smith was making rounds of the school basement when he noticed something funny. There were a couple of 18" square trap doors and one was open. He remembered seeing both of those doors open two or three other times. Well, that was strange, he thought, 'cause he hadn't left them that way, but then he didn't do anything about it. He just thought, you know-- In the meantime, on Monday evening, May 16th, 1927, one of the grade schoolteachers called Mr. Kehoe on the phone to see if she could take her class on a picnic in the woods behind his house on Thursday, May 19th. He often let the classes do that. He said "Yes, but you should change the day to Tuesday, May 17th, 'cause it might rain on Thursday, the 19th." He wanted to make sure the kids were all in school on the 18th.

The morning of May 18, 1927, dawned like any other spring day with a sweet scent of lilacs in the air. Families were rising from bed, doing chores, eating breakfast. The school buses would soon be on their way to pick up students for their last real day of school. It was exam day for all the classes except the senior class. They had written exams the week before and would be

practicing for commencement ceremony that morning in the Methodist church next to the school building, which is still standing over there. Also the students that had a very high grade average were not required to take the exam. The children were excited and anxious to begin summer vacation.

Kehoe's neighbor, **Lulu Harte**, noticed him driving out about 7:00 AM on the morning of the 18th. At 8:45 AM, she was in her hen house when she heard a thump on her roof. She went out to investigate and heard what sounded like gunshots from Kehoe's property. She saw smoke in flames coming from his buildings. Her husband said, "Don't go over there for certainly he started that himself."

At the same time at 8:45 AM, as children were being read to, writing exams, or wiggled in their seats dreaming of summer vacation, a small spark would change the lives of the people of Bath forever. It was a wire in the basement igniting the dynamite. The Bath Consolidated School was a building meant to last for generations. The explosion sent the walls of the north wing up in the air. They fell back down collapsing outward with a crash of wood, glass, plaster, and iron. The roof of the building slammed down on the crumbling walls; dust was everywhere.

There was an eerie silence and then the screaming started and a man screamed the house, "The schoolhouse has blown up and the whole north wing is gone." At the same time, the school exploded, Kehoe's neighbors went running to his farm to help him. They didn't yet know about the school explosion. As they went through his house to see if anything could be saved, they found dynamite planted in some of the drawers and in a box and all the rescue efforts immediately came to a halt and everybody ran from the property and just let it burn.

Back at the school, the parents were frantically running around trying to locate their children, praying their child would be among the living. There were bodies everywhere mixed with dust and debris and some children confused and screaming. Some were missing limbs and far too many were dead. A temporary morgue was set up on the schoolyard. Injured were lying wherever a safe place could be found. The janitor, Frank Smith, finally got his bearings, ran up a staircase to the south where he could see a hallway still fairly intact and relatively safe. He could see first and second graders lined up as if in a fire drill just as they were trained to do for in an emergency. Smith led them safely out to safety. Superintendent Huyck noticed older students were jumping from the roof to safety so he called for ladders so that they could climb down safely. He told someone to them to go to neighboring houses to gather sheets and blankets and cloths for the wounded and to cover the bodies. In the telephone office one and a half blocks away from the schoolhouse, **Lenore Babcock**, the phone operator, was putting a call out for help. "The school has blown up. We need help. People are dead and injured, many trapped in the wreckage."

People came from miles around, some to help, some just to look. Families as far away as four miles heard the blast and hurried up to the school. Governor **Fred Green** was there that afternoon clearing away debris. Windows of nearby homes were blown out, including those of the Methodist church. The blast sounded throughout the farmlands of Bath Township and continued to echo for miles beyond. On several farms, horses terrified by the explosion, broke

loose from their plows. While digging through the carnage and rubble of the school, the discovery of unexploded dynamite was made. For everyone's safety, the state police called a sudden halt to the search and rescue. It was a difficult decision to make, to leave the injured and the dead children lying where they were and to step back. The parents were very upset, but they couldn't take a chance of more explosions and more deaths. In all another 504 pounds of unexploded dynamite was found in the basement of the still standing portion of the building. By some miracle, it had not gone off. Had it exploded, it's said that the whole town of Bath would have been leveled and it was later brought out at the inquest that the remaining dynamite did not discharge because the wiring to the timer was dislodged by the explosion.

When Kehoe realized the whole building had not gone up as planned and that Superintendent, Huyck was still alive, he was livid. He filled the back of his truck with all sorts of junk and sharp objects and drove over to Main Street in front of the school wreckage. He called Huyck over to his vehicle, shot his rifle into the back of the truck, blowing the truck up, killing himself, Superintendent Huyck, **Nelson McFarren**, and fatally wounding, **Glenn Smith**, the postmaster. In all, of the 236 students enrolled and teachers, 146 were assumed to have safely evacuated or not present that day at the time of the blast. Of the 44 killed, 38 were children. Two were teachers, the superintendent, and the postmaster, and the bystander. One boy, who had escaped the explosion of the school, was killed when the car blew up. The ones that were counted as the being killed, they counted Nellie Kehoe, but Andrew Kehoe was not in any of the counts. They didn't want anything to do with him. Another 58 children and adults were injured in various degrees.

By 2:00 PM, the roads of Bath became nearly impassable. Emergency vehicles had difficulty getting in and out. All area hospitals were alerted in the disaster. They were filled to capacity with wounded and dying. For two miles in every direction, automobiles were parked bumper to bumper along the roads, making it difficult for emergency vehicles. One police officer counted 2,750 machines pass in the course of just two hours. At daybreak the following Sunday, the traffic was so clogged, it was at a standstill. One estimation was 85,000 vehicles passed through town on that day.

That Saturday the funerals began. Sightseer vehicles would get in the way of funeral processions. Some curious goers even had the audacity to look into the windows of homes. Others would take a picnic lunch and sit on a blanket on the school lawn watching and collecting souvenirs from the rubble as the cleanup was going on. Some even tried to go into the temporary morgue set up in the town hall down on Main Street.

Back at the Kehoe farm, authorities found all the buildings except the chicken coop destroyed either by fire or by explosion. All the farm equipment was destroyed. The burned bodies of the horses were found with their legs wired together so they could not escape. Kehoe had cut into all of his trees and grape vines so that they could never be used again and a sign was found wired to a fence, "Criminals are made, not born." Nellie's body was found the next day wired to a wagon wheel burned beyond recognition. Her cause of death could not be determined as her body was so badly burned. Her skull showed a blunt force trauma or a crack. However, the

inquest stated that could have been caused by the extreme heat of the fire. So it still remains unsure what actually caused her death.

Donations came from all over the United States. A statue of a little girl holding a kitten was commissioned with the proceeds to honor the deceased. The artist, **Carleton Angell**, from Ann Arbor felt that the little girl depicted a time of innocence. She stood in an alcove in the hallway of the new James Couzens [School] building after it was built, watching over her charges as if to say, "It's okay. You're safe now." She now has a permanent spot in the museum. She's right down here around the corner. Contrary to what some believe, the little girl was not made from the pennies collected. The money collected was used to pay the sculptor.

The sun rose Thursday morning, May 19th, over a valley of tears, a morning so different from the sweet morning of before. The people of Bath would gather their strength, care for their wounded, bury their dead, and move on. Some would never get over the carnage of that day. Most would not speak of it openly for many, many years to come. At the time of the explosion, there were no grief counselors, no support groups. Back then people didn't talk about their problems or their worries. They suffered in silence.

The school was rebuilt and the following year the students returned for their education. Life moved on. Parents were fearful but knew the importance of an education. The site has since become the James Couzens Memorial park, which is across the road here. The cupola that stood at top of the school the day of explosion sits proudly in the park, watching over the park as a reminder of what once was.

We don't know what makes some people do the sick, horrific things that they do, but whatever evil they bring upon us, it has been proven time and time again, that love and goodness in the hearts of those preyed upon pull us even closer together in strength as survivors. That's just what the people of Bath did after that life altering day and all the days that followed. Bath Township is again a thriving town, but we all remember back when the valley of the shadow of death came to town.

There's a lot of little details that went on. I just kind of covered the main facts so do you have any questions, I'll be glad--

Audience 1: I don't have a question, but I just have a remark. My maternal grandfather was an embalmer in St. John's and he told me when I was a very little girl about the Bath School disaster, because he came over here and helped pick up all the parts of the bodies and everything. He said that was something that was the worst possible thing that ever happened in his life. He was in World War I, and he said nothing was anywheres near the agonies of the picking up pieces of bodies.

Susan: When parents came up looking for their children, if they couldn't find them, they had to go through the bodies that were covered and look under the sheet to see if that was their child and sometimes it was so mangled that they had to just-- maybe something they had worn that day or their shoes and so that was really bad.

Audience 2: My half-sister's mother survived that.

Susan: Oh, what was her name?

Audience: Name was Cathy Rudder(?) She was about 12 years old. She survived it.

Susan: She was probably a sixth grader then. The first through sixth grades was the major focus of the kids that were killed and injured. My dad, two of my aunts, and an uncle were all in the school that day. My dad was third grade. He was in Miss Weatherby's [Hazel I. Weatherby] class. It was her first year teaching. She looked like just a little girl herself. She was so pretty. She taught the third and fourth overflow grade and was reading to the children when it happened. They said, when they found her, uncovered her, she had a child, a dead child in each arm. She was actually still alive when they found her but then she died right away.

My dad was buried. He said he looked up and all he could see was a little keyhole of light and he kept calling out for the janitor. Nobody seemed to hear him so then he just kind of closed his eyes and thought back to that morning to what he'd done. He said, "Okay, we got up, did the chores, ate breakfast, got ready for school, walked to school." They lived in the one mile from the school so they didn't get to ride the bus. They had to walk. By that time, he had been found and they carried him out to the front yard and set him against a tree. He was covered, dust and debris, and everything. His eyes, his nose, everything was filled with dust and plaster; his hair, his eyebrows were all singed; he had a broken leg.

My aunt--I had two aunts. One, I think, was fifth. I think they were like 11 and 12. One aunt broke an arm. Another aunt, I think, broke a leg and she was pinned against a radiator. After that, her daughter, my cousin, said, "Aunt Marion was always claustrophobic the rest of her life because of that, 'cause she was pinned against the radiator." My uncle, who was either kindergarten or first grade, I believe kindergarten--that end of the school was not damaged and he got out safely. I had another aunt who was in the class of '27. She was in this church practicing for commencement and I don't believe anybody was injured over there. The windows were just blown out.

I also recently have just learned one of my uncles was not in school that day, but he was up there helping and he stood out front with Mr. Huyck when he said, "Go get some blankets and sheets." You know, to bring for the bodies and right after Uncle Frank left is when Kehoe blew his car up. So it's just by the grace of God that I have that whole branch of family today. I never learned that before. Others have their own family stories. There's a lot of stories. Anybody else have any questions or anything they wanna share?

Audience 3: Did they ever figure out why he was so mad?

Susan: The taxes is what aggravated him because his house was one of the best and most up to date properties in Bath. That was from the Price family. They were very well to do people and he and Nellie purchased the house from the estate of the Prices so they started out with a really nice house. Because his was so much more advanced, he had to pay higher taxes. Well,

then the school, they wanted the school to be built and then they wanted the football field and then they had to have a lighting plant. He didn't like Mr. Huyck at all. There was also one other theory that when Kehoe was younger--I don't know what age it was--he was an adult, I believe. He either fell off a roof or fell off a ladder, hit his head and was in a coma for two weeks. One of the theories is maybe that's what caused his brain to be altered. There's no way to know. We don't know.

Anyone else? I thank you for listening and feel free to walk around the museum. If you want, I can go around with you and point out some things out or you can just peruse at your own liberty.

Clinton County Historical Society

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