

## Bath School Disaster

One of the worst school tragedies happened on May 18, 1927, in Bath, Michigan.

Wanting to give their children a better education, Bath and eight neighboring one-room schools voted to join together and build a new modern K-12 school building in Bath. The new building opened in 1922.

For the first time in Clinton County, country students were bused to and from school. Most came in six motorized buses, but some arrived in a horse drawn wagon.



**Bath School Opened in 1922**

One person, however, didn't like the new school. Andrew Kehoe was the school board treasurer and had opposed the new building and the higher taxes he had to pay. Kehoe was also having lots of problems. His wife, Nellie, was ill with costly medical care. He was not able to pay his bills and learned he was going to lose his home and farm. Also, Kehoe had recently run for township clerk and lost.

He decided to get revenge on the town that he blamed for his troubles. Kehoe bought dynamite and hid it in his house, car, and under the school.

On May 18<sup>th</sup> after murdering his wife, he blew up his house and farm buildings. He then set off the explosives under the school. Only half of the

dynamite exploded destroying the north half of the building. Had the other half ignited the death toll would have been much worse.



**Info: Kehoe used an alarm clock to set off the dynamite.**

Kehoe next drove to the schoolyard and exploded his car killing himself and four others including the school superintendent, Emory Huyck.



Kehoe's Car

In all, 45 people were killed and 58 injured. Thirty-eight of the dead were elementary children and two were teachers.

Hearing the blast, local people rushed to the school to help. They were followed by news reporters and people from neighboring areas who came hoping to help or look at the destruction. Everyone was sad and many people gave money to help with funerals and hospital care.

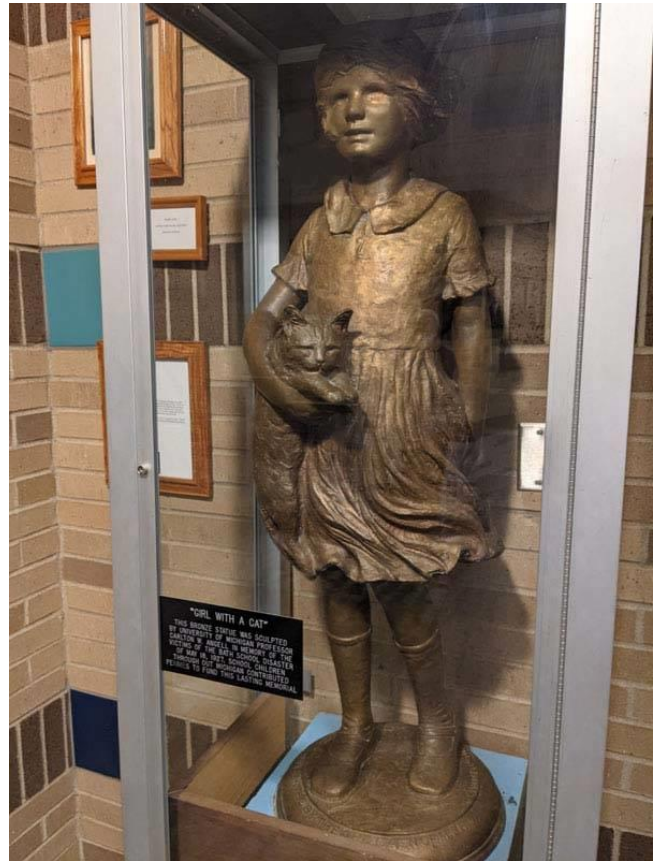
That fall school was held in community buildings while the school was being rebuilt. U.S. Senator James J. Couzens gave \$75,000 (over 1 million in

today's dollars) to help pay for the rebuilding costs. The rebuilt building opened the next year and was named the James Couzens Agricultural School.

Children from all over Michigan gave pennies for a special memorial. An artist, Carleton W. Angell, used the money to make a memorial statue called *Girl with a Cat*. The statue is currently in a display case in the Bath School Museum. Why do you think the sculptor chose this as a memorial? What do you think it means?

**Info: Girl with a Cat statue – People have differing interpretations, some see it as a memorial showing what the children's carefree lives should have been that was stolen from them. Others see the resilience of the human spirit. As with any art work there is no one right answer.**

After the James Couzens School building was demolished in 1975, the cupola from the building was placed in the center of the James



Girl with a Cat

Couzens Memorial Park created on the school site. The park also has a Michigan Historical Marker and plaque with the names of all of those killed.

The last survivor of the disaster was Irene Dunham who died in 2022 at the age of 114.



Rebuilt School 1928



Cupola

### **Other Resources:**

CCHS Oral Histories – Audio and Transcripts

[James Church Interview](#)

[Dean Sweat and Sue Hagerman Interview](#)

Books –

Bath School Disaster by M. J. Ellsworth (1927)

Mayday by Grant Parker (1980)

Life is Fragile: One Girl's Story of the Bath School Disaster by Betty Spencer (2007)

Bath Massacre by Arnie Bernstein (2009, 2022)

Maniac: The Bath School Disaster by Harold Schechter (2021)

The Forgotten Children of Bath by Amie Marsh Jones (2021)

Video –

[Interview with Irene Dunham](#)