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## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

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In 2007, when I interviewed Harold Burnett, a survivor of the Bath School bombing, he was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Remembering what he'd eaten for lunch was impossible. But when asked about May 18, 1927, Harold recalled everything with clarity. He remembered the chaos, the bloodshed, the horror that played out on that day. The memories, forged when Harold was eight years old, were indelible. With a little coaxing from his daughter Michelle Allen and me, the stories flowed. Mostly Harold remembered his big brother Floyd, an eleven-year-old gifted with an innate talent for baseball. Had he not been killed in the bombing, Harold told us, Floyd could have made it to the major leagues. He was that good.

*Bath Massacre: America's First School Bombing* is not just a book about the first mass school killing in our nation's history. It is also about memory and the importance of bearing witness. I was fortunate enough to interview four survivors during my research: Harold Burnett, Willis Cressman, Lee Mast, and Josephine Cushman Vail. After the book published in 2009, I was contacted by two other survivors: Myrna (Gates) Coulter and Ralph Witchell, whose stories have been added to this updated edition. Our conversations were filled with vivid reminiscences spanning eight decades.

Bath is a quintessential small Midwestern town, about seven miles from Michigan's state capital of Lansing. May 18, 1927 is part of the town's essential character. The site of the former Bath Consolidated School, torn down in the late 1970s, is now James Couzens Memorial Park. Anchoring the park center is the cupola that stood atop the old building. Cement posts of the school's original foundation poke out on the lawn. A boulder, bearing a plaque with the names of those killed in the bombing, sits on the edge of the park. Across the street in a dedicated wing of the middle school is the Bath School Museum. Cases lining the museum hold books, papers, and other artifacts of the crime. The American flag that flew in front of the school on May 18, 1927, hangs framed on the wall. The school clock, permanently fixed at the exact time the dynamite hidden beneath the school ignited, looks over the hallways. Old photographs, yellowing with age, show firsthand images of the bombing and its aftermath. The memorial statue "Girl with Cat" is on display. The museum is overseen by a committee of Bath residents, most of whom have familial connections to the crime. Children and grandchildren of survivors. Nieces and nephews of the thirty-eight children who were killed. Descendants of rescuers and first responders. The museum committee is a caretaker of memory.

On December 14, 2012, I flipped open my laptop to check the morning news. What came up was monstrous. In Newtown, Connecticut, a gunman, armed with a Bushmaster AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, was unleashing his firepower throughout the Sandy Hook Elementary School. When it was all over, twenty schoolchildren, ages six and seven, were slain. Six school staff members, including the Sandy Hook principal, were murdered. The killer's mother was found shot dead in her home. The gunman committed suicide.

My first thought, like so many people across the country, was "omigod, not again." Memories of other mass school killings flashed in the collective consciousness of the world. The Columbine shooting of April 20, 1999. The Virginia Tech shooting of April 16, 2007. The Northern Illinois University shooting of February 14, 2008. And so many more.

My second thought was "I think I'm going to be busy." I was right. Within a couple of hours, emails started coming in. As author of the book on America's deadliest school killing, people wanted my thoughts on this new mass murder of elementary schoolchildren. I was interviewed by media throughout the United States and even a network radio program in Australia. It was an awesome responsibility being the

spokesperson for two generations of murdered children separated by almost 86 years.

One question was repeated in every interview: how did the Bath School bombing connect with modern school killings? That is a question I wrestled with throughout the writing of *Bath Massacre* and one inevitably asked during my presentations on the book. It would be easy for any writer to conjure up some sort of answer that links dark underlying forces between the perpetrator of the 1927 bombing with the actions of modern-day mass murderers. This is all too simplistic. From Bath to Columbine to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, each of these crimes was the result of unhinged minds driven by their inner demons. We want a rational explanation to the question “why does this happen?” The tragic reality is that the definitive answer does not exist, at least within the rational mind. Psychopathic murder, as detailed later in these pages, is an individualistic force of human nature that cannot be reckoned. Mass murder is existential, a horror that stretches across eons of history.

Still, there is a connective emotional tissue that unites the Bath School bombing and modern-day school killings. From an act of evil emerges communal solicitude. Survivors, family, and friends gather to mourn and comfort. People from around the world who have no connection to the victims offer prayers. Lives brutally ripped away are honored and remembered. Their memories are held close. The dead are not forgotten.

Another profound similarity between Sandy Hook and Bath unites two teachers of different generations. Their stories mirror each other across the decades. During the Sandy Hook massacre, Vicki Soto, a 27-year-old first-grade teacher, was gunned down as she stood protecting her students from the gunman. Soto had a counterpart in Bath. Hazel Weatherby, just 21 years old, was in her first year of teaching elementary school. Weatherby was found in the wreckage of bombed building, barely alive, tightly holding close two of her students. She handed the children over to rescuers and then succumbed to her massive injuries. Vicki Soto and Hazel Weatherby were both young, dedicated teachers, well regarded by their colleagues and beloved by children throughout their respective schools. And in their final moments of life Ms. Soto and Miss Weatherby instinctively gave their last full measure of devotion to their students.

The night of the Newtown shooting I emailed a friend of mine, a pastor who lived in Connecticut. Did she know what was going on? Yes, she responded. I live five miles from Sandy Hook. I was in the firehouse

when parents were told that their children weren't coming home. I am ministering families.

After reading her email, I took a breath. It was May 18, 1927, all over again. For whatever reason, I was now a fulcrum between Bath and Newtown, two American towns in anguish over the massacre of their innocents. The words of Albert Einstein came to mind: "God does not play dice with the universe."

I called Michelle Allen, who is a member of the Bath School Museum committee. Michelle, I said, if anyone knows how Newton feels, it's Bath. Maybe the committee could send condolences? Michelle, as gentle a soul as I've ever known, embraced the idea. An eloquent letter was written and forwarded on to my friend. It was published in Newtown's local newspaper. My friend sent back a note, thanking the people of Bath for their kindness and prayers. People united by epic heartbreak were connected in solace and sympathy.

Every May in Bath there is a high school reunion, held on the Saturday closest to May 18. Former students gather in the school gym, sharing memories over lunch as they salute the class celebrating their fiftieth year of graduation from Bath High School. At the 2013 luncheon, Sandy Hook weighed heavy on everyone's mind. A few survivors of the 1927 bombing were in attendance, Bath School graduates now in their in their late nineties. One of them, Irene Dunham, was well over one hundred years old. After lunch, the letters between Bath and Newtown were read aloud. Throughout the room, tears flowed for two generations of martyred children.

The persistence of memory remains fresh. When I interviewed Josephine Cushman for this book, she was in her mid-nineties. In 1927 she was fourteen. Her little brother Ralph, who was killed in the bombing, was just seven years old. She recalled everything with grisly detail. Some of the most graphic sections of this book came from my two interviews with her. When Josephine told me what Ralph looked like when his broken body was laid out in the morgue, I felt terrible. These were such gruesome memories. I just couldn't allow myself to risk upsetting her. "Josephine," I said, "you don't have to tell me this." "No," she responded, voice strong and firm. "I'm not going to be here much longer. I want people to know what happened."

Bearing witness to the victims of the Bath Consolidated School bombing is a duty taken on with love. Memories are handed down to children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and beyond. The story of Bath is

Bath Massacre: Updated and Expanded Edition

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[https://www.press.umich.edu/12277500/bath\\_massacre\\_new\\_edition](https://www.press.umich.edu/12277500/bath_massacre_new_edition)

University of Michigan Press, 2022

one of resiliency, a town with deep scars but always united to hold close the souls of dear ones whose lives were cut short.

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Chicago, Illinois

March 1, 2022

Author's Note: Any dialogue or internal thoughts in this book are culled from quoted statements from a wealth of resources, including newspaper accounts, legal documents, other books, unpublished memoirs, documentaries, and interviews by the author or other interviewers.