
PROLOGUE: APRIL 16, 2007

The morning of April 16, 2007, dawned clear and bright over central Michigan. In Dewitt, a small town about twenty miles from the state capital of Lansing, ninety-six-year-old Willis Cressman woke at his usual time, ate breakfast, then puttered around the house. A lifelong resident of the area, Cressman lived a good long life. Born in 1911, he'd grown up in the nearby town of Bath. Before retiring, he was a jack-of-all-trades. In various phases of life, he'd worked on road crews, farmed, and operated an excavation business. A veteran of World War II, he was one of the many brave soldiers who hit Anzio Beach on January 22, 1944. He never forgot that day and all the shells exploding around him. Yet Anzio wasn't the first time Cressman was in the midst of deadly explosions.¹

In her home on the outskirts of nearby Bath, not far from Dewitt, Josephine Cushman Vail, a woman just a few months shy of her ninety-fourth birthday, was beginning her morning as well. Vail and Cressman were old schoolmates, first as students in a one-room schoolhouse during the 1910s and then in a larger, consolidated school in the 1920s. Those days held fond memories of classroom accomplishments, athletic and social events, friends, and a sense of community.²

Cressman and Vail had other recollections of the Bath Consolidated

School: the events that unfolded on May 18, 1927. That day was something they never wanted anyone else to experience.

About the time Cressman and Vail began their mornings, Seung-Hui Cho, a twenty-three-year-old student at Virginia Tech, located in Blacksburg, Virginia, started his day. At 7:15 a.m., he entered West Ambler Johnston Hall, an on-campus dormitory, barged into the room of Emily Hilscher, a nineteen-year-old freshman, then shot her and twenty-two-year-old senior Ryan C. Clark, the resident adviser for the floor, who happened to be in Hilscher's room. Both were dead at the scene.

Cho returned to his room in another dorm, changed clothes, deleted his campus e-mail, and removed the hard drive from his computer. As he walked through campus, another student saw Cho hurl what looked like a hard drive and a mobile phone into a pond.

Just before nine, one hour and forty-five minutes after murdering Hilscher and Clark, Cho went to the local post office to mail a package addressed to NBC News in New York City. He was lugging a hefty backpack filled with chains and locks, a knife and hammer, and two pistols. Cho had also stowed nineteen ten- and fifteen-round magazines and nearly four hundred bullets in the backpack.

He returned to campus and entered Norris Hall, where several classrooms and the university's Engineering Science and Mechanics program were located. Cho methodically removed the chains and locks from his backpack and fastened them to the building's three main doors, effectively cutting off any attempt to enter or exit Norris. Once the entrances were sealed tight, Cho left a note. It said any attempt to break the chains would result in an explosion.

Cho walked up to the second floor, then poked his head inside a classroom. One person who saw him, Erin Sheehan, believed Cho was a student who didn't know what room his class was in. Strange, Sheehan thought, that someone should be lost on campus so late in the semester.

Downstairs a faculty member discovered Cho's handiwork on the doors. He read the note. Although he didn't know about the earlier shootings, the teacher instantly realized something terrible was unfolding at Virginia Tech.

Cho entered room 206 and unleashed his firepower. The shooting spree continued in rooms 207, 204, and 211. There was gunfire. Screams. Students fleeing, knocking into each other, desperate. Blood,

bodies, and bullet shells littered the classrooms. In just nine minutes, Cho fired at least 174 rounds.

He then pointed one of the guns at his head and pulled the trigger.

The package he sent to NBC contained a videotape prepared a few weeks earlier. It was Cho's last message to the world. Killers, he declared, are made, forced into desperate acts by others, not born.

The news of the Virginia Tech massacre quickly spread. Cable stations broke into regular coverage, filling television screens across the country with stumbling facts, scraps of information, and some speculation as to what was going on at Virginia Tech. In total, Cho murdered twenty-seven students and five teachers before killing himself.³

His actions were declared one of the worst acts of school violence in recent years. It was bigger than the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado, where two students killed twelve peers, one teacher, and themselves.

In Dewitt, Cressman felt something ache deep inside his soul.⁴ Vail's thoughts turned to her long-dead sibling, Ralph. Had he lived, her baby brother would now be eighty-seven years old.⁵

Across the nation people shook their heads and wondered what was becoming of their country. Since the Columbine shootings of April 20, 1999 (almost eight years to the day), there had been unease about safety in schools. Just six months earlier a disturbed individual walked into an Amish one-room schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania, murdered five little girls, and shot himself. That same week there were school shootings at Platte Canyon High School in Bailey, Colorado, and Weston High School in Cazenovia, Wisconsin. Virginia Tech was the twenty-fifth school shooting in the United States since 2006.⁶

Comparisons between Virginia Tech and Columbine were inevitable. These horrors were described as the two deadliest school shootings in American history.

There was a minor footnote to some news stories about the Virginia Tech massacre. Newspapers, Internet sites, and television reports provided painfully long lists of the "worst school massacres." At the bottom of these rolls was a brief mention of a 1927 incident at a school in Bath, Michigan.

To Cressman and Vail, Virginia Tech replayed a pattern so terribly familiar. A carefully laid out plan. The mailing of a package. A mass killing of students. A spectacular suicide. Here it was April 2007, yet the scenario was so similar.

It was like what William Faulkner once wrote about history, that the past isn't dead. It isn't even the past. Cho was merely repeating something Cressman and Vail had borne witness to decades before. On May 18, 2007, just a month away, it would be eighty years since the "incident" now considered a footnote. Cressman and Vail were survivors of that day, the first school massacre in modern American history.



At first glance, Cressman and Vail's childhood home of Bath, Michigan, looks like a place where nothing bad could happen. Located about twelve miles from the state capital of Lansing, Bath has that All-American feeling to it—a quintessential small town steeped in good midwestern values. Bath itself has physically changed over the years, but its essential character has prevailed throughout the decades. In the spring it is alive with green. The town was founded as a farming community with corn and soybeans being the major crops. Sugar beets, which dwindled in popularity through the years, are making a comeback. There's also a dairy farm in the area, home to a large herd of Holsteins. In recent years farmlands have been transformed into housing subdivisions and condominium complexes. The old Kehoe place, west of the town center, was at one point being developed for condos, though these plans fell through. The land ceased to be a farm in 1927 and lay fallow for years. No one wanted to touch it.

There are two main roads in Bath, Webster and Clark (formerly known as Gunnisonville), which intersect at the town's center. An elementary school and middle school are located near the crossroads; the high school is a short walk from these facilities. Schools in the Bath region were originally old-fashioned one-room schoolhouses. In 1922 the district school system brought together this diffuse network in a single building for kindergartners through high school seniors. Today's trio of school buildings was constructed in the post-World War II years after the James Couzens Agricultural School—originally dedicated in 1928 and named after the senator who helped fund the building—finally outlived its usefulness.

Across the street from the elementary and middle schools is a public park built on the site of the old school. The James Couzens Memorial Park is sort of a community catchall. It's a wonderful place to relax, play with the kids, read a book, walk the dog.

At the center of the park is a white wooden tower, the original cupola



Fig. 1. Couzens Memorial Park. (*Photograph by the author.*)

from the roof of the Bath Consolidated School. It rises from the greens with sad elegance, a wooden vestige of what once stood on this land. A sign posted on the cupola tells the structure's history. At the foot of the cupola is a brick pathway with names etched into forty-two of the stones—many of them Cressman's and Vail's childhood friends. Vail's kid brother, "Ralph A. Cushman," is honored with a brick. Just beyond this is a marker, erected by the state of Michigan in 1992, explaining the park's significance. Kitty-corner from this marker is a boulder with a large plaque bolted to the stone face. The plaque lists the names of thirty-eight children and four adults. The names of two other adults are conspicuous by their absence.

South of the park is more greenery, the grounds and trees of Pleasant Hill Cemetery. The graveyard dates back to the late nineteenth century and pretty much everyone in town is related to someone buried there. Mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, grandparents and grandchildren—generations bound by silence—rest together under family headstones. Pleasant Hill is well named. Its meditative stillness is broken only

by the occasional sound of a passing car, the call of birds, or the noise of children wafting along the wind from the schools down Webster Road.

Wandering through the cemetery one sees a pattern emerging from the headstones. Emilie Marian Bromandt, 1916–1927. Robert F. Bromandt, 1914–1927. Floyd E. Burnett, 1914–1927. Russell J. Chapman, 1918–1927. Ralph A. Cushman, 1919–1927. Katherine Foote, 1916–1927. Galen Lyle Harte, 1914–1927. LaVere Robert Harte, 1917–1927. Stanley Harte, 1915–1927. Doris Elaine Johns, 1918–1927. James Emerson Medcoff, 1918–1927. Emma Nickols, 1914–1927. Richard Dibble Richardson, 1914–1927. Pauline M. Shirts, 1916–1927. Harold LeMoyné Woodman, 1918–1927. They are scattered like delicate leaves throughout the cemetery, these headstones of children, all sharing the 1927 date. These childhoods, so abruptly ended, still whisper through Bath like the muted song of a mournful choir.

May 18, 1927, started out as a perfect spring day, the air freshly scrubbed by the night's rain and fragrant with flowers. Within a few hours the smell of lilacs in bloom was overtaken by the stench of smoke and dynamite, flame and blood. The north wing of the Bath Consolidated School was in ruins, destroyed from beneath by carefully planted explosives. A second blast left the hulking remains of a Ford truck at the school entrance. Thirty-six children and two teachers died in the initial blast; the Ford explosion killed two adult bystanders and another child, as well as the school superintendent. One child hung on for three months before dying from her injuries. Fifty-eight children and adults were injured.

To the west of the school, a farmhouse and surrounding buildings on the property were reduced to smoking embers. The next day, tied to a cart near the henhouse, authorities found the charred remains of a body, too badly burned to determine its gender but assumed by the overall circumstances to be a woman. A stenciled sign posted on a fence at the edge of the farm read "Criminals Are Made, Not Born."

Another man died when the Ford truck exploded. He was the owner of the burned farm. His final moments of life were a spectacular act of murder-suicide that capped his destruction of the school and farm. Andrew P. Kehoe was the dead man's name, and everyone in Bath knew who he was.