

**MARY
ELIZABETH
EDENS
1921-1924**



**MYSTERY
AT THE
SCHOOL
FIRE**

On Christmas Eve 1924, the one-room schoolhouse at Babb's Switch near Hobart was jammed with more than 200 people for the children's Christmas program. The 24x36 room became the site of an unspeakable tragedy – and a mystery that would last 75 years!

The Christmas tree in the corner was trimmed with cotton and candles. Teenager Dow Bolding, playing Santa, was distributing candy sacks as the program concluded. When he reached for the top of the tree, his sleeve pulled a candle over. A ball of cotton caught fire, igniting the branch.

As Dow tried to smother the fire, he knocked over the tree, scattering blazing twigs. Soon, the curtains ignited, and Dow was engulfed in flames. The fire raced across the stage and up the walls. When the blaze reached the recently-painted ceiling, the fire was out of control – and the entire school was ablaze.

The panicked crowd headed for the one exit door, which only opened inward. They broke out the only window, but wire netting outside had been bolted over the windows to prevent vandalism. Most of the people still inside were trapped.

The entire Coffey family was killed as blazing rafters fell. Teacher Florence Hill's body was discovered, clutching two children. Childhood sweethearts Gladys Clements and Claude Bolding were to be married on Christmas morning. Gladys was trampled to death and Claude was severely burned. Andrew Jackson rescued twelve children, but not his sister Vera who was trapped behind the window. Only half of the children survived.

There were 37 reported missing, but only 36 bodies were found. Where was three-year-old Mary Edens? Her Aunt Alice Noah, who died several days later, said she handed her to a stranger outside. Over the years, Louis Edens spent a fortune searching for his missing daughter.

In 1955, Grace Reynolds of Barstow claimed to be the long-lost child, showing a small scar on the arch of her foot – just like Mary's. The overjoyed Edens were reunited in February 1957, appearing together on Art Linkletter's television show "House Party".

At the same time, Hobart newspaper editor Ransom Hancock, was told by Stockton Record's Mel Bennet that Grace was an imposter. Bennet sent him a notarized statement from Grace's real sister Dorothy Link verifying her birth in Arkansas.

When Hancock showed Louis Edens this irrefutable proof, his request was simple: withhold the story until his wife's death because "she believes the woman is Grace." For the next 42 years, Ransom and his son Joe Hancock kept the secret. Finally, in 1999, with Mary's parents dead, Joe revealed the truth in an editorial. "Mary Edens did not escape but was probably burned beyond recognition." Grace Reynolds, aka Mary Edens Grossnickle, claimed she was their daughter until her death.

The story of Mary Edens is so tragic – losing a young child, searching years for the truth, and never finding it. The promise by Ransom Hancock shows how ordinary people can become heroes in an unspeakable tragedy.