

## A Mysterious Fire at Muir School

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On the early morning of April 26, 1935 an explosion rocked the Hayward area. John Muir School near downtown Hayward erupted in flames at 3:15am. The fire was spotted by two Hayward police officers patrolling the area. The loud explosions heard by local residents were caused by what was believed to be gasoline vapors and superheated fire extinguishers inside the grammar school building.



*John Muir School as it appeared in 1934, just about a year before it was destroyed by fire.*

The Hayward Fire Department was quickly on the scene, but there was one big problem—there was no fire hydrant near the school on Soto Street. The nearest hydrant was several blocks away on Jackson Street. As firefighters fought the flames they saw “huge columns of heavy black smoke mushroom into the sky after each explosion”. After a few hours the fire was out, but Muir School was a total loss. Luckily, no one was in the building at the time of the disaster and no injuries were reported.

An investigation into the cause of the explosion led Hayward Fire Chief Manual Riggs to conclude “there is no doubt that...the blaze was of incendiary origin”. In other words, it was arson. Manual Riggs also told the newspaper that he believed a small fire set several minutes before at the Oakland Speedway (now the site of Bayfair Mall) was set by the same arsonist in an attempt to draw Hayward’s Fire Department out of town before setting Muir School ablaze.

In the coming days several people were questioned, but an arsonist was never found. Riggs' theory was never proven.



***Hayward Fire Chief Riggs pictured here in uniform. Riggs' believed the Muir School fire to be arson.***

At the time of the Muir School explosion, the Great Depression made it difficult for the school district to hire workers. To clean up the rubble the district turned to California's State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA). More than 20 SERA workers took down the charred remains of the 1922 schoolhouse to clear the way for the school's rebuilding.

The district cobbled together the \$75,000 to rebuild Muir School from several resources. Most of the funding came from the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The district knew they could not expect residents, many out of work, to contribute more tax dollars to rebuild the school so the WPA was petitioned to fund the project. The new John Muir School was designed by E.P. Whitman, who had designed several schools in the area as well as Hayward's City Hall on Mission Boulevard. Perhaps the most important feature of the new school was a new 4-inch, high-pressure fire hydrant installed just a short distance from the entrance.

Finally in November 1936 the new John Muir School opened, welcoming students and the community alike. Even in the depths of the Great Depression, Hayward residents took pride in the new school—turning a tragedy into a celebration of civic achievement.



*A postcard of John Muir School as it appeared after being rebuilt, c.1940.*