

Today is May 17, 2007, and this is Adam Groves from the Illinois Fire Service Institute talking to Kurt Snow from the Streator Fire Department. We are discussing Charles Marx and John Norris who died in the line of duty in 1928.

AG: Can you tell me about the history of the Streator Fire Department?

KS: The Streator Fire Department became full-time in 1887, when Streator was a very growing town. And they started out with probably, I believe there was, twelve full-time firefighters at that time. And they had one fire station that was located on the west side of town and then in 1910 another station was built more toward the central part of town and both stations operated until 1919.

AG: Okay. Do you have any details, do you know what the department was like at the time of John Norris' and Charles Marx's line of duty deaths?

KS: I believe that during then they had only one fire station. The central station was the main station, located on Main Street in 1929. And they did have, I believe, two motorized fire apparatus, with twelve full-time firefighters.

AG: Okay. What can you tell me about Charles Marx and John Norris and their careers?

KS: Charles Marx was a veteran firefighter for nineteen years. He was fifty-four years old on that day in 1929. And John Norris was fifty years old and he was a volunteer firefighter for Streator in the years prior to 1929, before they had disbanded the volunteer firemen.

AG: Okay. Can you please describe the incident in which Charles Marx and John Norris died?

KS: There was a fire at a manufacturing plant on August 28, and it was considered one of the worst fires in Streator's history. The fire started at approximately 6 PM and it was noticed by the plant owner. [It] was traced to a pile of shavings in the mill room by the blacksmith's shop, which started on fire. The fire department was called and John Norris and Charles Marx were handling a hose line on the northwest corner of the building. They also were backed against the south side of the wall of the Malloy home, which was directly across to the west, on the alley. They thought they were safe and suddenly without warning a two-story brick wall buckled and fell outward, and Marx and Norris were trapped without a chance to flee. They were buried under tons of bricks and they were not able to get out alive.

AG: Okay. What effect did their deaths immediately have on the emergency response operations at the incident?

KS: According to the eyewitnesses that were there, who, the eyewitnesses narrowly escaped, they tried to get the two men out, but the dust from the bricks that had fallen and the smoke from the fire, they couldn't see very well, and it made it almost impossible,

they claimed, to see for a couple of minutes. They also said that the bricks were very hot, and they were red hot, and many of the people who tried-- the rescue workers and firefighters who tried-- to remove the bricks from the two men actually suffered burns to their hands.

AG: Okay. Do you know how the line of duty deaths affected individuals within the Streator Fire Department, or just within Streator as a community?

KS: I don't know for sure. I'd imagine that it probably affected the men that were working here, because this was the first and only time that there had been a line of duty death in the history of the department.

AG: And, how has the Streator Fire Department memorialized Charles Marx and John Norris?

KS: When we moved to our new fire station in October of 2005, our international union [IAFF] decided to, or our local union decided to purchase one large plaque, a wooden plaque, a Maltese Cross, that's about the two firefighters that have made the ultimate sacrifice, and then two small plaques, one for each firefighter that had died that day, with their name, and the date of the fire, and the day that they passed away.

AG: And, just within your organization today, how are the firefighters remembered, just on a day-to-day basis, or how do they come up in conversation, or how did you learn about them?

KS: I learned about it when I first started about four and a half years ago. We have a lot of the retirees still come around everyday. They sit down, they come for coffee, we sit and tell stories. They tell us stories about when they were here, stories that they had heard when they were working, and even though most of them weren't here at the time of this particular fire, but they had stories passed down to them and they pass them down to us now. So we can continue on the stories to everybody else so everyone, all the others, everyone else that works here can learn about it. And we do have the plaques in the lobby in the tower, so most of the time anyone goes up there we can see them. They're up there and it's lit up all the time, so anybody who comes in can see the plaques and we can remember the two guys that we lost.