

7-1-2019

The Evolution of Firefighter Funeral Ritual

Kylie Johnson

University of Nebraska at Kearney, Johnsonkl7@lopers.unk.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal>



Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Kylie (2019) "The Evolution of Firefighter Funeral Ritual," *Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 23 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal/vol23/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activity at OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. For more information, please contact weissell@unk.edu.

The Evolution of Firefighter Funeral Ritual

Kylie Johnson

INTRODUCTION

The American Fire System has a rich history that has been shaped by a number of American subcultures. Traditions that were influenced by its origins on the east coast spread across the country, creating a unique community that has maintained its rituals despite influences from the various regions across the country. One such ritual that has been consistent even as the fire system changes cultural hands is the firefighter funeral. Due to the private insider nature of the firefighter community, the firefighter funeral is one of the few rituals that can be experienced by outsiders. The consistency of this ritual across the country helps to connect individuals to other firefighters in their area, but also to the larger national group identity. Due to the public nature of their work, and at times their on-duty deaths, media coverage of the death of a firefighter is not uncommon. In addition to traditional media outlets, the rise of social media allows firefighters to honor their dead in new more public ways while maintaining their old rituals. This paper documents the importance of the shared ritual and history of the firefighting community, as well as the use of honoring the dead through media outlets.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION FOR GROUP IDENTITY

The American Fire Service is a unique subculture in the United States due to the extreme shared culture, history, and story despite the dispersed nature of departments and the variety of cultures and communities they are immersed in. An essential portion of such a strong shared culture is shared rituals such as the funeral rituals. As defined by Collins in a 2004 article, rituals are defined as repetitive, synchronized collective behaviors that focus the attention of group

members through the use of shared symbols and verbal/nonverbal expressions that help to strengthen group identity and cohesion (Collins, 2004). The formalization of funeral procedures for firefighters across the country, in the context of this definition, helps to strengthen a collective group identity. Characteristics of rituals as compiled by Luminet and Curci are as follows (Luminet & Curci, 2009):

Group Assembly

The gathering of large numbers of people which helps to intensify the group interaction.

Common Focus

The collective focusing on a singular event and feel, facilitated by the use of verbal and non-verbal communication.

Emotional Contagion

Emotional non-verbal displays that help to create a collective mood.

Reinforcement of Collective Representations and of Respect for Symbols

The idea that the occurrence of emotional gatherings and group expression of emotion helps to strengthen symbolic significance, group values and beliefs, and shared knowledge resulting in a deeper understanding of group icons and tradition.

Induction of Similarity

Even individuals without the shared belief will have feelings of unity.

Reinforcement of Interpersonal Attraction and Social Support

Helps to strengthen social identification with the group.

Creation of a Positive Emotional Atmosphere and Enhancement of Social Cohesion

Helps to convert negative feelings into positive ones.

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON THE AMERICAN FIRE SYSTEM

The American Fire System originated as voluntarily staffed. The pre-Civil War volunteer system was declining in prestige as many of the companies became gang-like as they competed for work (Collins, 2012). The regimentation exhibited in the fire system familiar to us today is a result of the strict military style many firefighters learned in the Civil War. A combination of habits learned in the military, the restructuring of the old volunteer-based system to include more full-time paid departments, and public demand for better safety and more firefighter training led to more professionalism within the entire field in both paid and volunteer departments alike (Collins, 2012). The military experience many volunteers brought back to their departments across the country also set the stage for a strong shared culture within the American Fire System despite departments being spread across the country.

Along with the regimentation that can be tied to military tradition, there is a notable Irish/Scottish influence in both the American Fire and Police systems. In the mid-1800's, Ireland was suffering from the Potato Famine resulting in the immigration of over a million Irish men, women, and children. Facing discrimination, many of the recently immigrated Irishmen could only find work in dangerous positions, such as firefighting and police work, positions that were not being filled by others (Watts, 2017). As this immigrant population became settled in America and in the fire service, they embedded several cultural traditions in the fire service that have withstood other cultural influences and have spread across the country. Most notably is the use of Highland bagpipes at firefighter funerals. Highland bagpipes, traditionally, are Scottish but the Irish people have their own traditional pipe instrument called uilleann pipes. The use of the Scottish pipes instead of the Irish ones in the Irish dominated industry was a practical

decision as Highland bagpipes are louder and easier to play in an outdoor setting. Uilleann pipes are played while seated (Watts, 2017).

FIREFIGHTER FUNERAL TRADITIONS

Firefighters are one type of first responder with strong culture and tradition. Their strong culture has yielded unique funeral traditions. According to the National Volunteer Fire Council's Funeral Procedures for Firefighters, there are four types of services: formal funeral service, semi-formal funeral service, non-formal funeral service, and private service (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2009). Not every death meets the criteria for a fire service funeral. There are six types of deaths described in the Funeral Procedures for Firefighters that qualify for a fire service funeral. They are as follows (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2009):

Type I: Line-of-Duty Death

Any fire personnel that is on duty and receives trauma or suffers from a series of events that leads a firefighter moving from a state of health to death.

Type II: Line-of-Duty Death

When on-duty personnel are involved in a series of events that cause their health to gradually decline resulting in death.

Type III: Off-Duty Incident Death

When off-duty personnel receive a trauma or are involved in a series of events that cause them to move from a state of health to death.

Type IV: Current or Past Member's Death

When a member/honorary member of the department who is active or retired in good standing dies.

Type V: Affiliate of the Department:

When an individual who has served with the department in some capacity dies.

Type VI: Non-Fire Fighting Individual Honored by the Department:

When a non-firefighting individual with close ties to the department dies.

Members of a department can decide what type of service is appropriate for each individual situation, with the exception of private services that are done at the request of the family. Formal services utilize an apparatus (fire truck), pallbearers, an optional color guard, and fire personnel in Class A uniforms (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2009). Other details are optional and may include the use of bagpipers, crossed ladders, honor guard, etc. (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2009). A semi-formal service utilizes all the same elements as the formal service but without the use of an apparatus ((National Volunteer Fire Council, 2009). A non-formal service only includes fire personnel in Class A uniforms, with other details being optional (National Volunteer Fire Council, 2009).

In addition to various service types, firefighters are honored with a final call and several monuments. A final call is an announcement made across the county a firefighter served in. It shares information like the type of responders the person who passed was, what department they were affiliated with, and their years of service. In the state of Nebraska, firefighters are honored by several monuments and new social media pages to memorialize both those that passed long ago and deaths that are much more recent (Nebraska Firefighters Museum and Education Center, 2017).

LINE-OF-DUTY VS. OFF-DUTY DEATHS

Information on firefighter deaths in the state of Nebraska was found utilizing departmental, state, and federal databases. Specific information regarding the methods of remembrance was obtained by searching the first responder's name, year of death, and

department served in the search engine Google. This search method was chosen to attempt to obtain the widest range of information regarding these men and women.

For the purpose of this research, only Line-of-Duty Deaths were analyzed, but due to the nature of their work, firefighters are exposed to a great number of variables that put them at risk of dying from several causes even after they retire from their duties as a firefighter. One such cause of death is cancer. House fires release a wide range of carcinogens into the air, to which first responders are exposed. The dangerous particles embed themselves into the fabric of the firefighters' protective gear, or the firefighter may breathe them. As a result, the washing of protective gear after use in a fire has become standard protocol in many departments. To explore the impact these harmful chemicals have on firefighters the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (2016) began a multi-year study from 2010 to 2015 that involved about 30,000 firefighters from departments in Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. Although this study did not release specific statistics, it did indicate there were higher rates of certain cancers among firefighters than found in the general population. Firefighters presented with a rate of malignant mesothelioma twice as high as the general population, possibly due to exposure to asbestos from fires in older homes and buildings (The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2016). The report also found that the chance a firefighter is diagnosed with lung cancer had a positive relationship with the amount of time spent at fires. Similarly, the chance of dying from leukemia had a positive relationship with the number of fire runs a firefighter worked in their career (The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health,2016). This report highlighted cancer as one of the many hidden dangers firefighters encounter that would not receive the same amount of attention as a more obvious occupational hazard.

Utilizing the state of Nebraska Line-of-Duty Death Memorial, 95 Line-of-Duty deaths from 1878-2007 were identified (Nebraska Firefighters Museum and Education Center, 2017). Twelve different general causes of Line-of-Duty death were identified (figure 1). Most deaths occurred either as random isolated accidents or as mass-casualty incidents were two or more deaths occurred at a single event (figure 2).

Over the 129 years of data many safety features have been implemented in the firefighting industry. One such safety feature has been modification of the fire engine. With motor vehicle accidents being the second highest cause of Line-of-Duty death in Nebraska with 19 deaths, motor vehicle safety has been, and continues to be a major issue. The start of industry-wide safety measure implementation began in 1987 with the passing of the Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program (National Fire Protection Association, 2017). This program required, for the first time ever, that fire trucks have seat belts and that firefighters are required to use them (National Fire Protection Association, 2017). This was an important reform considering many of the early motor vehicle deaths were caused by firefighters falling off or out of the truck and getting run over. Although apparatus safety was not the only measure the Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program implemented, motor vehicle accidents are one of the more preventable causes of Line-of-Duty death.

One cause of death that is far less preventable is heart attacks. Although the Line-of-Duty death statistics show it being the fourth leading cause of death in on-duty firefighters in Nebraska, the National Fire Protection Association stated in their 2015 report that heart attacks were the leading cause of on-duty firefighter deaths nationally (Fire Rescue 1, 2016). With stress being a major risk factor in increasing a person's chances of having a heart attack, it is no surprise that first responders, who are constantly placed in stressful situations their entire career,

are dying from heart attacks more than anything else on a national level (Mayo Clinic Staff, n.d.). Age is also a risk factor as volunteer firefighters tend to be older than their paid counterparts. This is illustrated by 62% of on-duty volunteer firefighter deaths occurring in those over the age of 55. Due to their age, they are at a greater risk of having a heart attack (Mayo Clinic Staff, n.d.) (Fire Rescue 1, 2016). This information is important in Nebraska where we have 449 volunteer departments and only 6 all-paid departments, with another 23 being a combination of both paid and volunteer (Nebraska State Fire Marshal, n.d.). Nebraska relies heavily on their volunteers, as 15,419 firefighters do not get paid for their service versus the 1,491 that get paid a regular salary, and the 308 and that get paid per call (Nebraska State Fire Marshal, n.d.). With rural communities shrinking and their populations aging, there are fewer young people in rural Nebraska to step up and serve, leaving volunteer firefighting duties to aging men and women resulting in higher of heart attacks for those people both on and off duty.

This paper identified 10 different methods of remembrance that were used in various combinations for each death. Those tools of remembrance are shown in figure 3. All 95 of the Line-of-Duty deaths were accounted for in the state-sponsored memorial category as a way of recognizing that the data base utilized to obtain the names and dates of death was the official list of firefighters honored in that specific memorial (Nebraska Firefighters Museum and Education Center).

As exemplified in Figure 4, there is some variation in the number of remembrance tools utilized to commemorate those that pass due to various causes, but overall the variation is extremely small. The large difference seen in the graph in the number of remembrances used is due to the difference in number of deaths linked to a cause. But, when examined on an individual level, most deaths are memorialized utilizing about three different methods.

SOCIAL MEDIA

One of the most interesting findings of this research was the growing use of social media to honor those that have passed. Many departments use it to honor both those that have recently passed, but more interestingly they also utilize social media to honor those that died long ago. The best example was the Omaha Firefighters Historical Society page on Facebook. This page is used to bring deaths that occurred long ago into a modern context so Omaha's heroes can continue to be remembered for years to come. Social media is an incredible tool in helping remember our heroes, as it is free and makes information easily accessible to all that use that specific social media platform. Physical memorials are a great way to give people a place to go to honor the dead, but they are expensive to build and maintain. Social media is so powerful because it allows people to not only remember those that have passed but learn more about them as well depending on the amount of information the supporting organization wants to include on the post. The posting of names, dates of death, and department served that are on the state's memorial is convenient for residents of Nebraska but does not provide enough resources to learn more about our state's firefighters. On the site, many names are links to obituaries and biographical information that is not complete. Other names are missing the links entirely. If someone wanted to learn about these brave men and women, as I did, they would have to do some very serious hunting on other sites.

It would be beneficial if the state updated its website to include either more information on these heroes, or to include links to other posts or pages where more information can be found. It is hard to truly appreciate the sacrifice of these firefighters when you are not given the opportunity to easily learn about them. There were many deaths represented in this state memorial that were connected to extremely important events, some of which had huge impacts

on the communities. It would be interesting if the state could do a better job of connecting the deaths of our fallen firefighters and the interesting stories surrounding their deaths that some communities still remember and memorialize.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the history of traditions and rituals utilized by firefighters in the state of Nebraska and across the country helps us to understand the bond this close-knit group forms between members of a single department. These rituals help to create a shared identity and a sense of comradery in the high stress environment that these men and women serve. Despite their history of exclusivity, this group is opening up through the use of social media as many departments use it honor their dead and to share their stories with the public.

REFERENCES

- Collins, C. (2012). *The Heritage and Evolution of America's Volunteer Fire Service*. National Volunteer Fire Council. Retrieved from https://www.nvfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Anniversary_Publication.pdf
- Collins, R. (2004). *Rituals of Solidarity and Security in the Wake of Terrorist Attacks*. *Sociological Theory*, 22,53-87.
- Fire Rescue 1. (2016). *Heart attacks leading cause of firefighter deaths in 2015*. Fire Rescue 1. Retrieved from <https://www.firerescue1.com/firefighter-safety/articles/98586018-Heart-attacks-leading-cause-of-firefighter-deaths-in-2015/>
- Luminet, O., Curci, A. (2009). *Flashbulb Memories: New Issues and New Perspectives*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Mayo Clinic Staff. (n.d.). Heart attack. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/heart-attack/symptoms-causes/syc-20373106>
- National Fire Protection Association. (2017). We Drove Like We Were Crazy. Retrieved from <https://www.nfpa.org/News-and-Research/Publications/NFPA-Journal/2017/January-February-2017/Features/NFPA-1500>
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). (2016). Fire Fighter Cancer Registry: Questions and Answers. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/firefighters/health.html>
- National Volunteer Fire Council. (2009). Funeral Procedures for Firefighters. Retrieved from https://www.nvfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Funeral_Procedures_Guide.pdf

Nebraska Firefighters Museum and Education Center. (2017). LODD Memorial. Retrieved from <https://nebraskafirefightersmuseum.org/final-alarm>

Nebraska fire loss/fire department profile. (2018, April 26). Retrieved October 26, 2018, from <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/data/statistics/states/nebraska.html>

Nebraska State Fire Marshal. (n.d.). General Information. Nebraska State Fire Marshal's Office. Retrieved from <https://sfm.nebraska.gov/fire-departments/general-information>

Roll Call. (2017, April 06). Retrieved from <https://www.neresponseteam.org/roll-call/>

Watts, S. (2017). *The History of Bagpipes in the Fire Service*. FireRescue 1. Retrieved from <https://www.firerescue1.com/evergreen/articles/318680018-The-history-of-bagpipes-in-the-fire-service/>

Figure 1. Firefighter Cause of Death

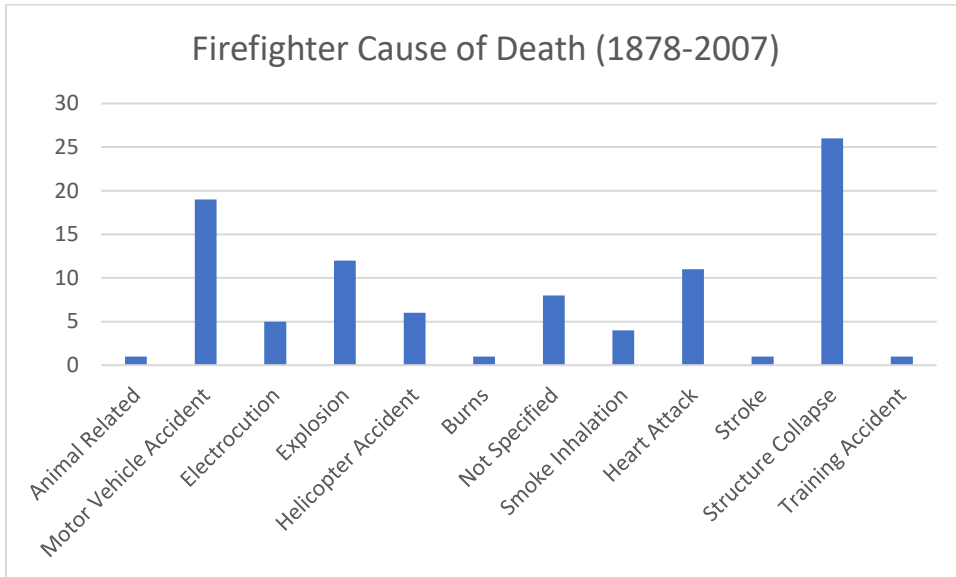


Figure 2. Number of Deaths per Year

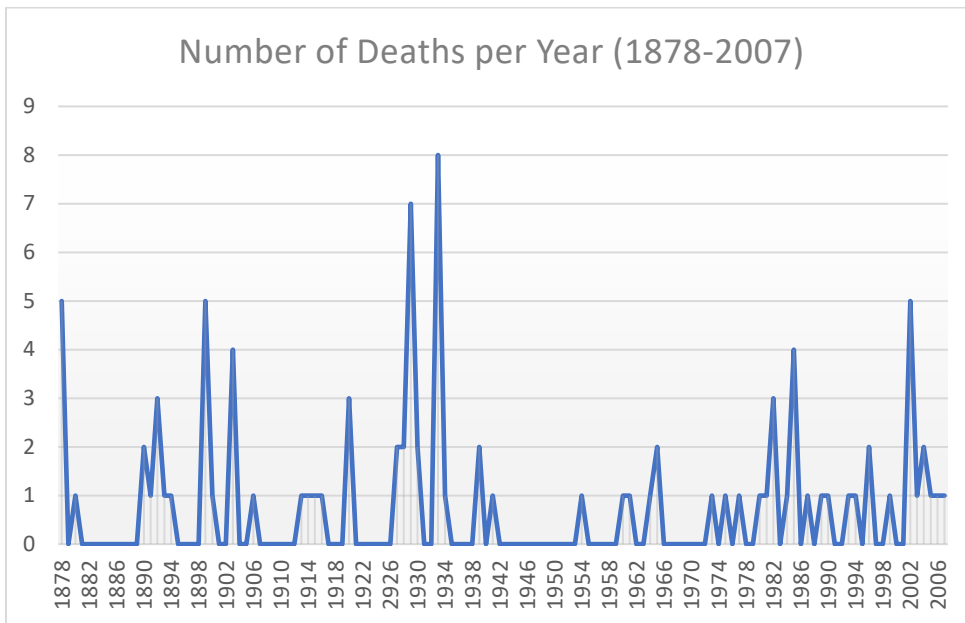


Figure 3. Identified Methods of Remembrance

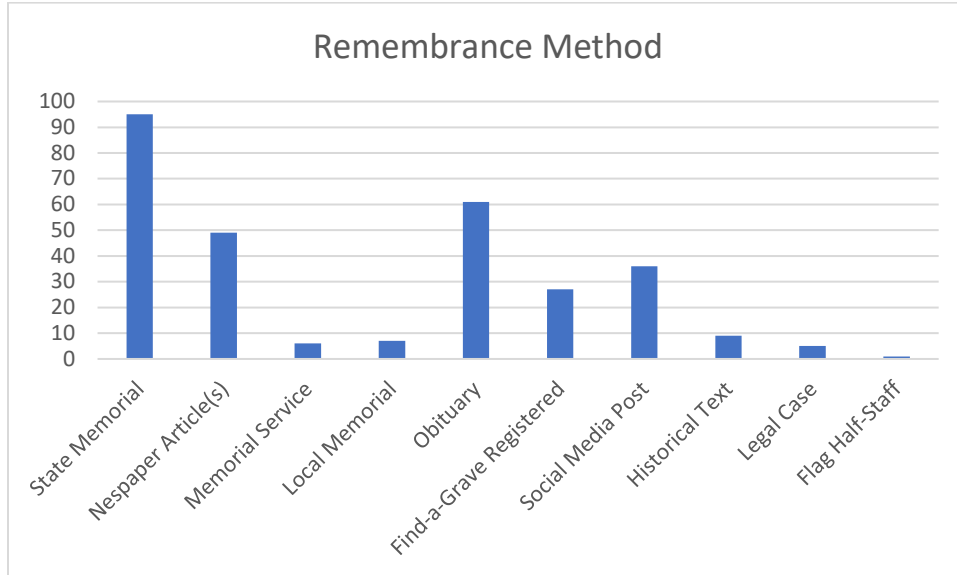


Figure 4. Cause of Death Related to Remembrances Utilized

