

04-09-1968 Fort Atkinson WI – David A McKee – LEO Attempted Flood Rescue

Fort Policeman Tries To Rescue Boy; Both Drown

<https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/11783418/>

APRIL 9, 1968 By ELEANOR LILLESAND - JANESVILLE DAILY GAZETTE



JANESVILLE, WISCONSIN - FORT ATKINSON

A valiant rescue attempt ended today in the drowning of a Fort Atkinson Police officer and a 16-year-old youth in the waters of the Rock River here. The body of David A. McKee, the father of six children, was recovered at 11:03 a.m., more than an hour and a half after he plunged into the muddy waters in an effort to rescue Keith Nielsen, who had fallen into the river from a railroad bridge near his home.

The youth was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Nielsen of 214 Sherman Ave. Officer McKee was on patrol duty with a police squad car when dispatched to the bridge at 9:28 after the police department received a call reporting a young boy had fallen into the river.

Police Officer Harvey Wagner, also on patrol with the department's motorbike, reached the

scene within seconds after McKee arrived at the bridge. McKee whipped off his cap, gun belt and shoes before leaping into the river and swimming toward the youth.

Gerald Burghaus and his brother, Frank, who had been looking at used cars in the nearby Bethke Chevrolet lot, saw the police officers drive up and looked on as McKee ran down the riverbank.

Sensing an emergency, the Burghaus brothers jumped into the river to assist McKee who by then had grabbed the boy.

Witnesses reported the Nielsen youth appeared in a state of shock and did not heed McKee's shouts of "Don't panic! Don't panic!"

The coldness of the water then appeared to begin taking its toll on McKee, Gerald Burghaus and the Nielsen youth. The youth slipped from the grasp of the two would-be rescuers and disappeared under the muddy waters.

McKee and the Burghaus brothers then began to make their way toward shore.

Gerald Burghaus was nearly exhausted when gathering spectators pulled him onto the river bank, his brother was next to be pulled from the water. "I turned around to look for McKee," Gerald Burghaus said.

"Then I saw he was in trouble." Police Chief William Ciske, who arrived at the scene shortly after the call was received by his department, attempted time and again to throw a life preserver to McKee.

McKee, however, evidencing weariness from the cold and the grueling rescue attempt, was unable to swim close enough to grasp the preserver.

His head disappeared below the waters seconds later.

Persons began arriving at the river from all directions. A call had been sent earlier to the Jefferson County sheriff's department for aid with its motor launch. All off-duty police officers, arriving at the scene, pushed four row boats out onto the river to begin the long, grim grappling operations

Students, released from classes for the Easter vacation, swelled the ranks of the spectators. Many had often heard Officer McKee discuss bicycle and driving safety in classroom lectures.

The body of the Nielsen youth was recovered first, at about 9:50 a.m., soon after the boats were launched to begin the search operations.

Officer McKee's body was recovered at 11:05 to bring to an end the long vigil by his fellow police officers and townspeople. His coworker, Officer Harvey Wagner, slowly placed the shoes, gun belt and cap with the familiar badge No. 3 on the back seat of McKee's squad car with tears in his eyes and his lips firmly pressed together.

A Gazette reporter, manning the radio at the Fort Atkinson police station in the absence of police personnel during the recovery operations, broke the news to McKee's brother, Tom, a custodian at the municipal building.

Tom approached the reporter and asked, "Who is it?" The reporter answered, "Officer McKee." "My God, my brother!" Tom cried out in shock.

Tears filled the eyes of the some 100 persons who lined the river bank when Officer McKee's body was recovered. Few could say more than "Isn't this terrible?"... "McKee a wonderful person, a truly fine officer"... "Always ready to help others."

Officer McKee had been a member of the Fort Atkinson police department for 14 years and resided at 414 McKee Court in Fort Atkinson. He had been active in local athletic activities, coaching Little League baseball and basketball teams, the Junior Legion and Black Hawk baseball teams.

He was a recipient of the Fort Atkinson Jaycees' "Man of the Year" award.

He was the Fort Atkinson police department's fingerprint expert and at one time was the department juvenile officers.

Arrangements for McKee are pending at the Dunlap Memorial Home and for the Nielsen youth at the Royal F. Hayes Funeral Home.



OFFICER DOWN MEMORIAL PAGE

REMEMBERING ALL OF LAW ENFORCEMENT'S HEROES

<http://www.odmp.org/officer/9031-patrolman-david-a-mckee-sr>



Bio & Incident Details

Age: 38

Tour: 14 years

Badge # 3

Cause: Drowned

Patrolman

David A. McKee, Sr.

Fort Atkinson Police Department, Wisconsin

End of Watch: Tuesday, April 9, 1968

Patrolman David McKee drowned while attempting to rescue a teenage boy who had fallen into the Rock River from the North Western Railroad trestle in downtown Fort Atkinson.

When Patrolman McKee arrived at the scene he stripped off his gunbelt, coat, and shoes as he ran to the river before jumping into the river and swimming out to the boy. He became exhausted while struggling with the panicking boy in the frigid water and they both went under the surface.

The boy's body was recovered thirty minutes later and Patrolman McKee's body was found about two hours later.

Patrolman McKee had served with the Fort Atkinson Police Department for 14 years. He was survived by his wife, six sons, mother, brother, and three sisters.

My condolences go out to the McKee family and the loss of a great man. I was only 6 at the time from what I have found out my father and his brother both attempted to save the lives of officer Mc Kee and the young boy by entering the water also. I

would like to send a shout out to whoever pulled my father Frank and his brother Jerry out of the water. I think you saved their lives. Thank You..... Kenn Burghaus This is so saddening and gives me another reason to be proud of my father for at least trying.

*Kenn Burghaus
concerned citizen
April 29, 2014*

I second Kenn Burghaus in his reflection. According to my Father, Jerry Burghaus the water was so cold it caused almost instant cramping and it was next impossible to swim with someone struggling in your arms and having to make the painful decision to let go or die. I was not even born yet at the time of the incident, and am grateful I didn't lose my Dad that day. My condolences to the McKee family, Dave is a truly a hero. I am also grateful to those who pulled my Dad from the water. Truly all three men are heroes for selflessly giving of themselves and coming to the aid of another. It is just too bad that all four didn't go home that day to their families.

*Wesley Burghaus
concerned citizen
April 29, 2014*

David McKee was my father. I was 3 years old when he went to be with god. I miss him terribly and wish he was still here to talk to through my darkest days I love him with all my heart and soul I cherish the day when I see him again. I love you dad.

*james john mckee
last born son
September 6, 2013*

You are thought of often and always with pride and respect by your sons, wife, grandchildren and community, I am sorry I was never able to know you, but am very lucky and honored to know your wife and sons and be a part of their lives. I am the lucky wife of your oldest son, and know you would be so proud of your children and grandchildren, and now great grandchildren. R.I.P until we can meet again.

*Susan Mckee
Married to David mckee Jr
November 13, 2012*

On the front of the memorial on the place he died is written: Officer Down: On A Cold & Overcast Day, April,9 1968, Police Officer David McKee Dove Into The Rock River To Rescue A Teenage Boy Who Had Fallen In The River From The Railroad Bridge. Neither Of Them Made It Out Alive. Officer McKee Left Behind His Wife And Six Sons. His Oldest Son 16. The Same Age As The Boy He Tried So Valiantly Tried

To Save.

On The Back Of The Memorial:
Found In A Worn Clipping From His Wallet:

I am Of The Opinion That My Life Belongs To The Whole Community And So Long As I Live. It Is My Privilege To Do For It Whatever I Can. I Want To Be Thoroughly Used Up When I Die, For The Harder I Work The More I Live. I Recjoice In Life For It's Own Sake. Life Is "No Brief Candle" For Men. It Is A Sort Of Splendid Torch That I Have Got A Hold Of For A Moment And I Want It To Burn As Brightly As Possible Before Handing It On To Future Generations!
"George Bernard Shaw"

Vern Zech

*Fort Atkinson: Friend Of Family And The Person He Tried To Save
November 13, 2012*

APRIL 9, 1968

<https://www.facebook.com/DailyJeffersonCountyUnion/posts/1066793510025586>



Patrolman

David A. McKee, Sr.

Fort Atkinson Police Department, Wisconsin

End of Watch: Tuesday, April 9, 1968

Vern Zech to Fort Atkinson WI - Taking a Stroll Down Memory Lane

April 8, 2016

APRIL 9, 1968

It will be 48 years ago now. We thank you for what you did for our community. Patrolman David McKee drowned while attempting to rescue a teenage boy who had fallen into the Rock River from the North Western Railroad trestle in downtown Fort Atkinson.

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David McKee was a fourteen-year veteran of the police force and a popular officer actively involved in youth sporting activities and scouts. At an earlier awards ceremony, he was praised for always extending a helping hand to the youngsters of Fort Atkinson.



On April 9th, 1968 the only Fort Atkinson Police officer to die in the line of duty, died the way he had lived -serving youth. David McKee left behind a wife and six young sons. His oldest son was 16 years old – the same age as the boy he so bravely tried to rescue.

Patrolman McKee had served with the Fort Atkinson Police Department for 14 years. He was survived by his wife, six sons, mother, brother, and three sisters.