

What Killed the Chief?

The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial is the nation's monument to law enforcement officers who have died in the line of duty. Dedicated on October 15, 1991, the Memorial honors federal, state and local law enforcement officers who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the safety and protection of our nation and its people.¹ In that respect, there may in fact have been a former Fairmont Police Chief that could conceivably qualify for this honor.

One evening back in October of 1930, at about 10:15 p.m., beloved 54 year old Fairmont Police Chief August "Gus" Haase took time to help a stranded, homeless stranger on the Fairmont streets find a place to stay. The Chief took him to the sleeping quarters in the jail at city hall and allowed him to stay the night. Shortly thereafter, Fairmont Patrolman Henry Plenge noticed from the First National Bank corner that the lights were on in the city jail. Patrolman Plenge entered the jail and was informed by the person given lodging that another officer had given him permission to stay. As Plenge was about to leave, he heard the Chief call for him. According to the account provided by the October 15, 1930, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, Chief Haase was quoted as saying, "Come in Henry, I want to have a talk with you." Plenge entered the room and Haase continued, "I've been wanting to have a talk with you for quite a while. It is all quiet around town isn't it?" Plenge assured him that all was well.

Chief Haase went on to say, "No need for you to be walking around all the time. You know I have been disgusted with the way things have been going for quite a while and believe I will quit. You have been doing fine work since your were appointed." Plenge then said, "Why, what's the matter Gus?" Plenge next asked if the Chief wasn't feeling well. At that, Chief Haase replied, "No, I am sick, I" These were last the words uttered by Chief Haase as he slowly slumped over from his chair. At that point, Patrolman Plenge caught him and gently eased him to the floor. Dr. Hunt and Dr. Zemke were called and responded immediately. However, there was nothing that could be done. They pronounced him dead at 10:27 p.m., less than fifteen minutes after providing the stranger on the street a place to stay for the night.

The headline in the October 15, 1930, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* read, "Police Chief Gus Haase Drops Dead At City Hall." Chief Gus Haase was a highly respected and very well liked member of the Fairmont Police Department. The local citizens were understandably distraught at his sudden death. A Fairmont mother reported that her children cried when informed of his death. Yes, tears came to the eyes of many, including the school children at Central School where Chief Haase

¹ <http://www.nleomf.org/memorial/>

helped them cross at Park Street and Blue Earth Avenue every day. But the lingering question remained, what caused his demise?

It was determined that Chief Haase was stricken with a heart attack, described by physicians at that time, as being a result of over exertion in the recent arrest of an individual known to have been a long time chronic drunk in town, a baker at the Town Pump Cafe. Since the arrest two days prior to his death, Haase had been complaining of chest and arm pain. The apparent cause may have resulted from the struggle involving the arrest of the individual in question. The baker, who was arrested for intoxication, was chastised by Justice Harry M. Serle in stating that "You have caused more trouble in Fairmont than any man I've known in 50 years. You are an undesirable citizen. I am going to give you all the law will let me." The baker pleaded for leniency; however, Justice Serle stated that he had given him plenty of previous opportunities. Serle went on to say that he told Chief Haase not to struggle with him, but to use his club, and to use it hard. Serle went on to say, "Instead of coming with him as you should have done, you gave him a rough and tumble, and I am sure that it is what resulted in his death." The baker was consequently sentenced to sixty days by Justice Serle. If the baker was truly the cause of Haase's death, this would certainly seem to be a lenient consequence for his lack of cooperation.

Finally, was the death of Chief Gus Haase a direct result of actions taken by him in the line of duty that would in turn qualify him for a spot on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, or was it simply a medical condition that would inevitably cause his death and eventually happen anyway?

Based on the events described in the newspaper account, it would seem that although he obviously had a serious heart condition, the uncooperative actions he encountered in arresting the contrary, intoxicated baker may well have provided that pivotal incident in ultimately causing his untimely passing. It appears that the results of the autopsy, as expressed by the three doctors that conducted it, would seem to support that theory. According to an article in the October 17, 1930, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* regarding Haase's autopsy, the following was stated: "The doctors expressed the belief that the violent exertion made by Chief Haase in the arrest of the baker hastened his death. With his heart condition, he might have lived considerably longer had he kept clear of over exertion and excitement."

Justice Serle summed up the tragedy in stating the following to the formerly drunken baker: "We lost a mighty good citizen last night, and I lay the death of Mr. Haase to you." That statement alone would weigh heavily on the conscience of most!

Also, in conjunction with National Police Week, the Fairmont Police Department would like to ask any family members of former police officers that if they have any memorabilia, pictures, or other mementos that they would like to share to contact the department.

For more information about this story, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



"Gus" Haase, Fairmont chief of police, who dropped dead last night at the city hall.

AUGUST W.
HAASE
1878 - 1980