

## CT man tells story of Middletown relatives lost in Hartford Circus Fire

By [Cassandra Day](#) Updated 10:40 am EDT, Wednesday, July 31, 2019



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The entire Norris family, which lived on Ridge Road in Middletown, died in the Hartford Circus Fire of July 6, 1944. Michael Edward Norris, his wife Eva and their daughters Agnes and Judy perished in the blaze

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MIDDLETOWN – Vignettes of the lives of the approximately 167 individuals who lost their lives in the [Hartford Circus Fire](#) are still coming to light 75 years later.

The entire Norris family of Middletown perished [in the July 6, 1944, blaze](#) at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

[Michael Edward Norris](#), 50, his wife [Eva](#), 43, and their 6-year-old daughters [Agnes](#) and [Judy](#), of 101

Ridge Road, Middletown, who perished in the blaze, were maternal relatives of James Dargati of South Windsor. He grew up hearing the sad recounting of the deaths of his mother's aunt, uncle and cousins.

Little Judy was never identified.

Eva Norris, a schoolteacher, was Dargati's grandmother's sister. The two women were very close, he said. She lived with family of his mother, Elizabeth Dargati, on their dairy farm in Tolland until she married Michael Norris of Middletown and started a family of her own.

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"This was an unimaginable tragedy, losing the entire family," Dargati said. "They felt a tremendous amount of grief and sorrow as a result of this loss."

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I think the fact that nearly 60 victims were children ages 9 or younger is what makes it even more tragic. Losing so many innocent little children tugged at the heart strings of people nationwide," said Dargati, an education consultant.

"For many years, I think this story was just too painful to tell and pass down," he added.

The Norrises were a "strong, devout Catholic family and they relied on the never-ending faith of their parents to carry them through a heartbreaking loss," Dargati said.

That day, Michael Norris had taken a half day from his job as proprietor of the Russell Mfg. Co. store and took his family up Route 9 to Hartford in his 1941 black Oldsmobile sedan, Dargati said.

**"The Hartford Circus Fire,"** published in 2000 by critically acclaimed author Stewart O'Nan, was one of the first non-fiction books published on the subject.

His account includes the Norris family.

In the foreword, O'Nan said he first learned about "one of America's most cataclysmic civic tragedies" a decade before beginning his research, after discovering the lack of books on the subject.

He describes the events of that day: "Inside, the band played 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' over and over, as if the song might calm people knocked through the bleachers or buried under chairs.

"All the while, the fire was crossing the top of the tent. It spread like a grass fire, a haystack fire, a giant orange wave," he wrote. "Central Connecticut residents were familiar with the shade tobacco tents, how a blaze on the sheer canopies could outrun the fastest man: it was like that.

"Everyone had a metaphor. The tent went up like cellophane, like tissue paper, like a fuse. A Roman candle, a sheet of newspaper. It was like tossing a piece of paper in a fireplace, like putting a match to a celluloid collar," O'Nan wrote.

Dargati's late mother wrote a piece for the Hartford Circus Fire Memorial Dedication July 6, 2005:

"The Hartford Circus Fire, which later became known worldwide as 'the day the clowns cried,' resulted in the loss of the entire Norris family and changed our lives forever. The enormity of the devastating catastrophe continues to evoke strong feelings and emotions to this day, despite the passage of time," she wrote.

"We loved them deeply, and their loss left an unimaginable void in our lives. Those who knew them were graced by their love, compassion and goodness," Elizabeth Dargati wrote in her speech.

In the story, "In the chaos of the Hartford circus fire, a 6-year-old boy disappeared; now, 75 years later, his family wants to find out what happened to him," published July 7 in the [Hartford Courant](#), it reports on Middletown resident Beverly Zell, who has appealed to Chief State Medical Examiner James Gill.

Zell hopes Gill will consider exhuming her uncle, Raymond Erickson, who went missing from the circus as a 6-year-old, according to the Courant.

**Gill wants to disinter two females**, among the five unknown individuals buried as numbers in unmarked graves in a Hartford cemetery, the Courant story said.

"You can't help but feel connected. More than anything, you want these folks to be remembered," said Dargati said of his own family history.

In fact, Dargati said, his mother and her four siblings were supposed to accompany the Norrises to the circus that fateful day. "However, my grandfather, William Hannon, didn't like that a major heat wave was rolling in, and decided not to send his family, just days before the circus arrived in Hartford."

A survivor who spoke with his family recounted Michael Norris' heroic efforts in the midst of utter chaos.

"They were sitting near the east-end exit, where the steel animals chutes were brought in. Just before the fire broke out, they brought the animals into the tent. That blocked the exit, where most of the people died because of that stampede," Dargati said.

"He attempted to lift the children over the top to the hands of strangers to lift them to safety," he added. Agnes did get through, but later succumbed to her injuries while hospitalized at Hartford's Municipal Hospital that evening.

The girls' great uncle William Hannon and great aunt Elizabeth Holden, accompanied by a dentist, viewed the bodies at the State Armory morgue.

"He had the unenviable task of having to look at all the other young bodies. He walked out of there saying she wasn't among them, despite the help of a dentist at the scene," Dargati said.

"That ambiguity is difficult to deal with — not knowing for sure, and not having closure," he added.

Dargati's aunt Mary Hannon was Eva Norris' niece and goddaughter, "and adored her, and to this day, still lovingly tends to the family grave," at St. Bernard's Cemetery in Rockville, he said.

His mother felt it was very important for her children to learn the events that transpired, however difficult to hear. He has done the same.

"I think it's important for kids to know their family history as well, so I have continued that tradition by sharing the Hartford Circus Fire story with my children as well as my nieces and nephews. I remind them that it is important to know who you are and where you come from," he said.

"I think this story is a significant part of our family history and hopefully it motivates them to deepen their roots for generations to come," Dargati said.

*Editor's note: This story has been updated to reflect that Michael Morris was the proprietor of Russell Mfg. Co., not Rogers Mfg. Co.*

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