

TRMA History for 90th Anniversary

Come on a journey with us as we look back in time and travel through the decades and uncover the history of Three Manufacturers' Association.

It all began during the peak of the Great Depression in 1933. Thousands of banks had failed and millions of Americans were out of work. Here in Joliet things were so bad that schools couldn't afford to pay their teachers.

Our nation just elected Franklin D. Roosevelt as our President and in his inaugural address he spoke one of the most memorable phrases, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Roosevelt's address was filled with messages of promise to make things right. These words were certainly inspiration for, Joliet legend, Frank Turk Sr.

Mr. Turk along with several industrialists had enough courage to take action. Together they formed a group and underwrote scrip, a form of currency, so that teachers could buy food and pay the rent. In 1933, this group created the Will County Manufacturers' Association to unite industry, share information and weigh in on legislative issues.

Only a few early records still exist and the names of the founding members are not known. Likely candidates include American Steel and Wire—later U.S. Steel, the EJ&E Railway, Phoenix Horseshoes, and Global Oil and Refining—today's CITGO.

By the 1940's the economy began to recover as the nation ramped up for World War II. Thousands of jobs were created when the government built the Joliet Arsenal and thousands more when Caterpillar came to town.

Once the war ended and through the 1950's, pent-up consumer demand fueled an unprecedented era of industrial expansion. Major companies set up shop in Will County and industrial growth expanded to neighboring Grundy County.

Reflecting the changes, the association officially incorporated as a Not-For-Profit and adopted the name of "Greater Will County Manufacturers' Association." By 1959 we hired our first fulltime director, and had 35 members.

The 60's ushered in more government regulation for industry, particularly with respect to water and air pollution. The association formed committees to help members as they grappled with these new compliance regulations.

Association members reported a critical shortage of 9,000 workers by the mid 1960's. In response we promoted the need for more affordable housing and took up the fight against overly restrictive and discriminatory ordinances.

The association also responded to the labor shortage by supporting a referendum to build a new campus for Joliet Junior College, the nation's oldest, and by creating educational and training opportunities with business partners. The association's strong support for a vocational training center for high school students helped to build the Wilco Area Career Center.

During the 1970's, association members created the Three Rivers Response Cooperative to prevent and plan effective response to accidental industrial spills in local waterways. This Spill Co-Op was the first of its kind and continues still today.

The association changed its name once again in 1980 to Three Rivers Manufacturers' Association just as the Will and Grundy County region slid into the worst recession since the Great Depression.

Icons like U.S. Steel, GAF and Texaco closed their local plants and thousands of workers were laid off, driving unemployment in Joliet to 26.5%, a national record at the time.

As the industrial base collapsed, TRMA nearly collapsed with it. The willingness of Bob Stewart, a retired plant manager, to manage the organization for little pay, and Joliet Electric Motors who offered office space for minimal rent, allowed TRMA to endure and revive the organization.

Since our founding, we've maintained a special relationship with our local schools and educators. For decades we've maintained an Education Committee, which became the Three Rivers Education Partnership in the early 1990's. This business-education consortium fused the expertise of educators and business people to assist schools. TREP is celebrating 33 years of providing innovative programs to stimulate student learning.

Also in 1993, the Three Rivers Safety Council was created to train and certify competency for craftspeople to perform work at member plants. Over the past 30 years our Safety Council has helped reduce the OSHA incidence rate from 5.9 to an impressive .37 for our local industry.

As the 21st Century rolled in, TRMA embraced computers by offering computer-based safety training and implemented an online Learning Management and registration system. The demand for Computer Based Training and electronic testing was out pacing our capacity which triggered multiple expansions of our computer lab.

The annual MFG Day for high school students began in 2014 and gets bigger and better every year. The event expands knowledge and raises awareness about manufacturing careers and manufacturing's value to the economy. Today, our event is considered one of the largest such events in the country.

In 2015 we created a Fall Protection training system that includes a CBT module and Hands-On module. This program has become one of the industries most recognized programs.

The end of the decade proved to be pivotal for defining the future of TRMA. We changed our Not-For-Profit status to a 501c3, which in turn allowed us to become a member of the Association of Reciprocal Safety Councils (ARSC). Reduced training costs, increased training effectiveness, and national credibility are a few of the benefits we now enjoy as an ARSC member.

So many times throughout our history we overcame adversity. The 2020 pandemic was a challenge, but it resulted in a healthier facility with improved ventilation, ongoing air and surface testing, and expanded virtual meeting and training options.

With our LINK system there are Live On-Line opportunities for training. It is a secure solution that maintains integrity while allowing you to train at your home, our TRMA lab, or virtually anywhere.

We are now an authorized PSI test center, offering assessments, certifications, and licensure exams. And through NCCER we can offer your employees complete entry and journey-level written assessments.

While we do not know how Franklin D. Roosevelt knew that the coming changes would bring unparalleled prosperity and growth for our nation. We do know that anything is possible when leaders join together and work towards strengthening their community.

This year we're marking 90 years since the founding of TRMA, an organization founded with the guiding principles of strengthening our business and education community. We continue to uphold these principles by promoting manufacturing excellence, delivering life-saving information, and providing a bridge between business and education.

Thank you for joining me on this journey through history.