



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Is a picture really worth a thousand words? If that cliché is true, then a motion picture consisting of thousands of frames must be worth millions of words. A feature length movie probably means that we have enough information to make up an encyclopedia on the topic.

But you already know that a picture does make a difference don't you? Sometimes one single photo will symbolize an entire concept. I recently had a chance to visit the "Pulitzer Wall", which is a traveling exhibit displaying photographs that have won the Pulitzer Prize over the decades. If you have ever seen it you probably have already noticed the same phenomena that I observed. That observation is that firefighters and fire departments are a key part of the entire exhibit.

In our efforts to sell the concepts that we are trying to encourage in our community we need to be more effective in using those pictures to tell our own stories. I know that I have been carrying a camera with me almost my entire fire service career. Early on, as a training officer I carried a 16mm motion picture camera and photographed hundreds of minutes of fire ground operations. These were used later as both historical and training information for that fire department. Today I carry a digital camera.

Now we all know what happens with pictures of spectacular fires. They either end up on the front cover of one of our fire protection publications or the end up in a slide presentation of someone either teaching fire ground command or leadership and management in the fire service. We often use those pictures that are worth a thousand words to spell out our successes or document our failures.

But when was the last time you saw the front cover of a magazine where all it showed was bed perhaps a nightstand and a small burned out area off to one side that had been conveniently controlled by the act of a single sprinkler head? With the possible exception of a few articles that have been written on this topic these are hardly the types of pictures that command attention. Yet they tell a story that if it was adequately elaborated on could be an incredibly valuable asset.

How many fire departments actually take pictures of their success stories. Generally speaking, we whip our cameras out and take pictures from the outside of the building once the flames have reached flashover and the smoke level has reached total obscuration. What if we reverse that trend and starting carrying a small digital camera or for that matter even one of those throw away instamatics on every engine company with instructions that every time we have a successful stop by a sprinkler we take a picture of it. If there is a sprinkler head activation or a smoke detector that work somebody should take a picture of it. Then the picture should be forwarded to either the sprinkler industry magazines or the mainstream fire publications.



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And, if fire suppression personnel are not interested in supporting a program of that nature what about if we equipped our fire inspectors so every time they went out to the scene of a successful fire stop we would have a collection of those photographs?

In my thirty years of working with residential sprinklers I cannot tell you the number of reports that I have read or written on the topic of a successful save, but I have seen very few pictures to substantiate it. This is where a lot of those words that pictures could have been used for have gone to waste. There is an old saying that: seeing is believing. But believing is also seeing. We need to develop a national archive of success stories with residential sprinklers that can be seen. I know I have several in my personal collection and I am sure there are many of you out there that have ones in your also.

But to move this concept a little further we should also recognize that if a picture is worth a thousand words then a moving picture is an order of magnitude better. I would like to advise you that there is one such story that should be made available to anybody who is a sprinkler advocate. It is a CD Rom put out by the National Institute of Standards and Technology. The disk is identified as a "side by side" illustrating what happens in two separate but unequal firefighting scenarios. The first shows a fire in a dormitory in which the building is fully sprinklered followed with a side-by-side almost identical fire in a room that is unsprinklered.

I will leave the visual image as to what that CD gives you to your own imagination.

Anyone who is a sprinkler advocate should make contact with NIST and have that CD available as we tell our story to those who are none believers. The test was done under scientific scrutiny. The test was not being done by the local fire department. The test is valid and tells a story. What else is there to say?

Copies of this can be acquired by contacting NIST at the following address:

National Institute of Standards and Technology

100 Bureau Drive

Building 224, Room A 345

Gaithersburg, MD 20899

As a sprinkler advocate you should have your own photo album. For those of us that have been on a lot of fires we should be exchanging those pictures with others. Each of our photo albums should begin to reflect the total experience of those who are keeping track of the near misses that are going on in our communities that have been mitigated as a result of sprinklers being there.

Continuing to write about a concept that could just as easily be seen is a waste of a lot of ink and paper. We have a lot of good stories to tell, let's make them visible.