



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **Good Old Days**

Do you remember the good old days? I hear that term used a lot in fire houses. It is usually expressed by the more senior members of the organization when talking nostalgically about how much better things used to be before something happened in contemporary times.

Having lived and worked through almost four decades of the fire service I have had the opportunity to listen to several different generations of elder statesmen talk about the good old days. This, coupled with my interest in history, has given me an interesting perspective on what constitutes the good old days.

I'm sure many of you remember a time in your career when things were seemingly just perfect. However, how many of us recognize that period of time when it is actually occurring? There is a tendency for us to regard events suspiciously as we are experiencing them and then be able to give them a whole new spin once we place them into our memories. As a result, often times the most delightful of our experiences are traumatic when they occur and pleasurable when they are recalled.

Another phenomenon I have noted with the concept of nostalgia is that it is generational. There is a tendency when we are younger and more naive to be more open to new experiences and to the pleasures of that experience; however, as we grow older and find ourselves becoming more confident we also begin to find ourselves more easily dissatisfied with conditions even when they are better than those that preceded them.

Now what really gets interesting is when we combine a couple of generations who start comparing notes. I'm sure most everyone has heard of the "generation gap." We have it in the fire service like everyone else. It is manifested when an older group of individuals have a different set of values and perspectives than their younger counterparts. Sometimes it produces outright conflict. Other times it is just a source of minor irritation.

What about those good old days? I started my career in 1960. There are many individuals who are in the fire service today who weren't even born at that time. When I first received compensation to become a firefighter I worked a 96 hour work week and received the grand sum of \$219.00 a month. I was hired on a Monday morning and driven to my first fire station without benefit of any orientation or training. I was told to enter the fire station by the person who drove me there and to introduce myself to the crew on duty. I did not have a clue about my job duties, nor the degree of danger that was involved in the kind of firefighting I was about to enter.

The agency I first started with was a wildland firefighting agency. Therefore, it was pretty much a seasonal operation. As a result, almost all of the people I was working with were not much older than I



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was. The little knowledge they possessed was passed onto me through a concept called “on the job training.”

In 1962 I left the wildland fire fighting operations and entered municipal fire protection. Was it much better? Well, let’s see. In the first place, back in those days the department did not issue any protective clothing. You had to purchase it yourself. I bought my first helmet, turnout jacket, pants and boots and a complete uniform - the price equaled my entire first month’s salary.

The first fire I went on occurred about 15 seconds after walking in the fire station the first morning. As I was entering the back of the station, a Klaxon horn went off and another total stranger emerged from the back of the building. He glanced at me and my brand new protective clothing and asked, “Are you the new guy?” I muttered something in the affirmative. He said, “Jump on a rig; we’re going to a fire.” Initially, my response was, “What rig!” A finger point put me on the back of a piece of fire apparatus alongside another person. I was struggling to put on my turnout coat and jacket, hanging onto the bar with one hand as we went out of the apparatus bay and made a right turn. The person I was riding with was doing likewise. Shifting hands in mid bounce we both ended up with our coats on. It was a miracle both of us were not ejected into the street as we immediately made a sharp left hand turn. Were they really good old days?

Frankly, I can recall my first couple of days in the municipal fire service with such clarity that I can almost reproduce conversations that occurred between myself and others. It was a time of newness and vitality that has probably never been repeated in my personal experience. Yet, in retrospect, some of the things we did in those days was very dangerous and, in some cases, outright stupid. We did not realize that either of those words applied to us. We simply thought that was the way things were done and we were invulnerable. We must have been. After all, we never wore breathing apparatus because that was a sign of being a wimp. Every day we used to go out on the apparatus floor, clean up the equipment, and as soon as we had the floor polished to an absolute mirror image we would do crazy things such as wash and wax the tires.

I can actually recall a captain had us taking black shoe polish and polishing the tires on the apparatus. When the apparatus was backed into the fire station we literally got down on our hands and knees and wiped the treads of the apparatus so there was no dust on the treads when the truck was sitting still. You think I’m kidding! I’m not.

There were other equally bizarre behaviors on our part. I recall when we had to get out of our work uniforms and get into a full class A uniform, complete with tie, so we would present a certain image to the public. An apparatus never had a person in the seat going anywhere unless everyone was wearing a hat.



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And the fires! We had fantastic fires - fiberglass factories would burn like college bonfires. Fruit packing sheds use to go up with a great deal of regularity. Back then, if we spilled a flammable or hazardous material on the surface of the road it wasn't a big deal. We merely called it a wash down and made sure that by the time we hosed off the asphalt there was no residue on the surface. We cared very little as to what happened to the material once it was in the storm drain system.

Of course, we had to fight very hard for all the health and wealth accumulated to us in those days. The city refused to give a retirement system to the fire department during my first 10 years. When we would have a meeting to discuss labor issues, the meetings were almost always well attended, sometimes with as high as 80 to 90% of the off duty force being in attendance.

What does all this mean today? We talk a lot about the good old days as if those were the days when everything was so much better than what we have today. The fact is, that is not true. The contemporary fire service has evolved into an occupation that contains such things as career orientation, training and education, developmental processes, protective clothing including the uniforms we wear and the protective breathing apparatus we utilize.

We have made great strides. The compensation we receive for being combat firefighters and the protections that our society has offered to us are significantly greater than they were previously. Yet, there are expressions of dissatisfaction with the way things are. Older generations keep talking about wishing we could go back to the good old days and younger generations seem to feel that what we have today can be taken for granted and, according to many of them, is totally inadequate.

Of course, like many other controversies, the answer lies not in the extremes but rather in the proper balancing out of perspectives. Those of us who are reaching the end of fire service careers may look back at the past and remember those experiences fondly. At the same time, we should be remembering that we paid a price for the accumulation of those experiences. It is alright to be nostalgic about what we have accumulated in our lifetimes, but it is inappropriate to imply that somehow it was much better than things are today. Younger generations who are collecting their experiences at the front end of their career have a similar need to maintain a proper perspective.

There should be a consideration of the legacy of the previous generations. I can recall at a training officers' meeting where a younger officer kept referring to his seniors as "the old dummies." His lack of respect for their experiences and contributions finally raised the ire of a fire captain by the name of John Whalen. Captain Whalen, Los Angeles County Fire Department, took it no longer. He strode to the microphone and gave a dissertation which could basically be summarized as follows: "We might have been the old dummies because we are the only ones who survived long enough for you to be able to criticize today. We paid a price to learn the lessons the fire service now takes for granted. He stated he would rather be an old dummy who has made a difference than a young dummy who has not made a



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contribution.”

Each generation, as it enters the fire service, has a great deal of potential. Conflict between the generations over what constitutes the state of perfection is counterproductive. The more important aspect of generational contribution can be based on the respect of the past and pursuit of the future.

There are many who feel the fire service has lost many dimensions that once made it a much more enjoyable profession. Much of the camaraderie of the fire service has disappeared. Much of the respect that was once demonstrated by the community about the fire service has dissipated. Much of the loyalty and respect that was demonstrated between leaders and followers in the fire service has become mired in bitter conflict.

As I look back over my 32 years in the fire service, I can say that if I had to do it all over again I wouldn't change a thing. I would still enter the fire service. I would still have engaged myself in the types of activities that have contributed to my experienced profile and I would still advocate that there are others who should follow in the same path.

In the final analysis, the good old days weren't necessarily good, they were just old days.