



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Once Upon A Time: A Fire Service Fairy Tale that is True!

Most of Grimm's Fairytales start off with the phrase "once upon a time ...". That phrase often invokes the nostalgia. Nostalgia is our way of favorably reflecting on how things were in the past. It is interesting that most folks who take the time to look back upon their own past have a tendency to remember mostly the good things and to interpret the bad things from their own perspectives. The teller of tales in modern times is often sharing a story with someone who did not live during the timeframe of the story, so they are asking the listener to suspend their own experience and believe the storytellers version of the past.

As we all know, storytelling is rampant in the fire service industry. My observation is that the people who are telling a fire service story, who really lived the experience, often have a totally different perspective than those who are retelling the story after hearing it from someone else. Embellishment is not out of the question either

As a student of the past, I often seek out the documentation that occurred at the time of an event, rather than reading a rehash that was done years later. First person reporting is often less ambiguous and more realistic. Take for example, the differences between the newspaper articles that were written beginning on September 11, 2001, and the variety of books that have been written since. I kept every newspaper that was printed here in Sacramento from September 11, to September 31, of 2001. The nature of that reporting represents a breadth and depth of the emotional aspects of that event that is somewhat different from both works of fiction that have made it into television and movie stories as well as personal accountings published years later.

This month's edition of Fire Chief Magazine is celebrating a past event that is not a fairytales. October of 2006 is the 50th anniversary of Fire Chief Magazine. It is the magazines Golden Anniversary. It's time to look back over those 50 years and evaluate what has happened.

In order to look back at what it was like in the fire service in 1956, we have a couple of choices. One is to go talk to people who were in service at that time. Another is to read what they had to say in the literature of the time. The third is to repeat the stories of the past that have been passed on by others.

Let me start you off with a shocker. 1956 was in the "last century". We are now in the 21st century. 1956 was in the 20th. Many of those who served through that era are still with us, but many are gone. To properly respect this event I engaged in all three of the behaviors from the last paragraph. I have talked to people who were in service back then. I read what was written during that time, and I collected input from some of my contemporaries by asking them what they remember from the stories of that era and what does it mean to them today.



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I was reminded as I reviewed this material of a speaker named Morris Massey who used to talk about *“what you are now, is where you were when”*. His lecture explored the fact that we gather our experiences at different times in our lives and it shapes how we not only look upon the past but also, how we see the future. Those things we experience early in our lives often shade the way we see things for the rest of our lives.

So, where were you in 1956, when Fire Chief Magazine produced its inaugural edition? I was a checker-stocker for Piggly Wiggly Supermarkets in Tulsa Oklahoma and had no more idea that I was going to be a firefighter than I was going to enter any other occupation. I was sixteen years old. The closest thing I knew about the fire service was that my grandmother had named a cat “Fire Chief” because it kept getting up in the trees and having to be retrieved by our local fire crew.

On the other hand, Cyrillis (Cy) Holmes was a newly minted Battalion Chief working for the California Division of Forestry in Pixley California. Gerald Derr was a member of the Elk Grove Fire Department and was about to be elected as the Assistant Chief. He was going to be paid \$150.00 a month for the job. Dwight D. Eisenhower was the President of the United States. The Hungarian Revolution had just been waged. The Cold war was continuing to get chilly. Korean War Veterans were being mustered out of the service and many of them were looking for jobs. Not surprisingly many of them chose to become firefighters. My own uncle, Lowell D. Teter, was among them. He joined the Costa Mesa Fire Department and started his career in 1956. In October of that year, the United Kingdom and France began bombing Egypt to force the reopening of the Suez Canal. The current President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was born that year.

The world was different then – or was it? According to those who were in the service in the 1950’s, there was a lot of change in the wind. AM radio was being replaced by FM radio. All of the radios were tube types and incredibly unreliable. There were many fire departments that were already in the ambulance business, but the word paramedic was never uttered in the firehouse. Advanced first aid was about all we knew at the time. The whole idea that wearing breathing apparatus, when fighting structural fires, was being debated with many fire departments purchasing breathing apparatus for the first time. Auto-extraction was done with axes and hand tools – there were no hydraulic tools to speak of. The GI bill was prompting many war veterans to seek an education, which was prompting the creation of training and education systems throughout the country. Gasoline engines were predominant – diesels weren’t even under consideration in fire apparatus design. Yet, while all that change was occurring, firefighters and those in positions of authority were constantly struggling with a combination of both change and growth. A motto that was taken from that era was “the difficult we do right away – the impossible takes a little longer.”

Imagine if you can, that 1956 one of three events was occurring in your personal career. What if you had retired in October of 1956? Or, what if you had started your career in 1956? Lastly, what if you



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were like Chief Holmes and Chief Derr and you were hitting your stride as a fire officer at that time. How would any of those events have impacted your perspective on the fire profession today?

All three perspectives deserve our respect. There are lessons to be learned from all three. For just as surely as we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of Fire Chief Magazine today there will be a fire service looking back from 2056 with a similar form of curiosity.

There is a theme here. The theme is that there is continuity in the process of change and that those who can understand the perspectives that bring about change are probably going to be the best qualified to take advantage in the future. Those that don't get it, won't be as well equipped to survive. Just because something is old doesn't make it bad and just because something is new doesn't make it good. What we need to treasure are those things that work and work well and continue to make incremental improvements as we gain experience along the way.

If we could steal a page from H. G. Wells and go back into our past, knowing what we know today, could we have done things better? That kind of speculation is an exercise in futility because it implies that somehow what we are doing today is so much better than it was back then. Personally, I am not so sure. In many ways I wish we could go back and capture the essence of some of the things that were present in the past fire service that seem to be eroding today. I have had many individuals reflect on this concept by expressing concerns about a range of things from attitude about the job to the inference that some of the changes have changed our culture. If you would like to start a real good argument in your firehouse, you might initiate it by bringing up the proposition that things aren't the way they used to be.

It is also useful for us to observe very closely is what has continually improved over time. There have been many changes that have emerged from the experiences obtained over the last fifty years and some of them occurred without us really knowing it was happening. Chief Holmes and I were talking the other night about how much communications has improved on the fire ground. We are as far away from the first fire radios today as the speaking trumpet was from the first fire radios installed on fire trucks. Just how close are we to the day that everyone on the fire-ground will have instant communications and their locations will be readily available for the incident commander? But, we still have problems with communications don't we?

Other lessons that we have learned along the way continue to add to our arsenal of defense as professional firefighters. Lloyd Laymen gave us Fog Attack. The military surplus equipment that was passed along to the fire service in the 50's along with the civil defense surplus property program probably did more to help many of the small newly formed fire departments as the AFG grant program is providing assistance today. There was not as much technology around then as there is today, but



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many of those pieces of basic fire apparatus put out a lot of fires and serve as the basis for planning efforts in fire departments today.

As we look back with fondness on the memorabilia of the 1950's and the symbolism of what the fire service looked like, as typified by Saturday Evening Post covers by Norman Rockwell, it is fairly easy to be nostalgic about that also, but it is probably more relevant that we realize that what we were then is not what we have become today because society has changed too. Nostalgia is rapidly being overtaken by the demands of a profession that is changing to meet the needs of a changing society.

In the future we may look back at the year 2006 with that same narcissist approach of how we experienced the process of change because the recent past is our experience, and the future tends to belong to someone else. We may either respect it or regret it. But in both cases, we will need to be reminded that what causes our profession to continuously evolve is that lessons learned must become the foundation for the future practices of prevention. Renowned fire service speaker Gordon Graham says, *"if something can be predicted it can be prevented."* That is the challenge we have faced for 50 years and is likely to continue.

Let's take just one example, the concept of firefighter fatality. In the past we have been able to say that this is a dangerous job. Many of the basic techniques of firefighting that we take for granted today were paid for by the lives of past firefighters. Kingman Arizona taught us about BLEVES. Kansas City gave us better ways of handling flammable liquid fires. But, failure to wear seatbelts is still killing firefighters. Have we learned our lesson there? The list of lessons could go on forever. And that is where Fire Chief Magazine and its fifty years of experience is truly important.

Since October of 1956, this magazine has produced information that has been added to the body of knowledge and has helped develop the inventory of skills and abilities of fire officers of many different generations. Old timers like Bill Clark, Keith Royer, and Manny Fried have set the bar. Newbie's like myself, Charlie Rule and other contributors of the magazine for the last twenty years have added to the discussion. Now many of us fire chiefs are senior citizens. There is another new generation out there ready to pick up the gauntlet. May be you are one of them.

What is interesting to me is to watch the newly appointed fire chiefs add their two cents worth to this discussion. In the last thirty days, I have talked to several newly appointed individuals who will likely be contributors for the next twenty-five years. While this is the 50th year of Fire Chief – this is their first year as Fire Chief. If you would like to have a glimpse of the future, go through the last two years of Fire Chief Magazine and look at the list of contributing authors, write those down, and then come back and visit that list in twenty-five years. You are likely to see that many of these authors have risen to roles of leadership in the fire service, if they do not already possess it.



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Lastly, to continue with this theme of reflection on the past, we might use Bullwinkle the Moose's friend Mr. Peabody, to use his Way-Back machine to talk about how the fire service has become more a reflection of society that it serves than ever in its history. Diversity has entered our profession. Those individuals entering our recruit academy of today are different than those returning war veterans who populated the fire service of the 50's, in many ways. But we also have returning war veterans from recent conflicts among our ranks also. Each generation can debate the merits of those changes but none can deny that it has occurred and that it will have a profound effect on what our profession will become in the future.

In contemplation of completing this article, I think the thing that most impressed me and the feeling that I take away as a result of celebrating Fire Chief's fifty years of success is that this magazine parallels the increasing competency and capacity of the fire service to meet the demands of an ever increasing complex society. We can take pride in all of those incremental changes. We can look back with fondness on some of our failures. We can anticipate more of the same in the near future.

I am not exactly sure whether or not Fire Chief Magazine plans on having a birthday cake to celebrate this 50th year, but if they do, I am sure that the amount of heat put off by fifty candles could possibly set off a smoke detector that is likely to be in the room but unlikely to set off the sprinkler that are also likely to be in the room. In neither case would they have been likely to be in any room in 1956. It's not too hard to recognize that the reason that 50th Anniversaries are marked as gold – and that the chiefs badge is likewise made of gold is in recognition of the value we place upon them both. When we watch a movie made 50 years ago – we often call it a classic. If we are still carrying out the same esprit de corps that was present 50 years, we can call that tradition. If a magazine is still providing a valued service to its readership, it deserves to be called a success.

We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go. And gold will always be more valuable in the future than it was in the past. Congratulations Fire Chief! May you be celebrating 100 years of success in 2056.