



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

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## The Picture of Dorian Gray

Let me introduce you to Dorian Gray. He was a handsome and naive young man, who lived in England at the end of the 1800s. He had an artist friend, who was obsessed with Dorian's appearance, and painted a perfect portrait of him. Once Dorian saw the painting he wished that he would be able to stay that way forever and his wish included the fact that the picture would grow old and ugly instead of him. Unfortunately, in making deals with the devil there are consequences. As the years went by, Dorian did remain handsome but the picture took on the aging process. Eventually, Mr. Gray realizes that this arrangement was unsatisfactory and he attempted to destroy the painting. Instantly, he dies and the painting goes back to one of a handsome and naive young man and Mr. Gray's corpse lying on the floor is old and shriveled.

How many of us would like to go back at some point in our past and preserve things the way they were? How many of us would like to go back in our past and change something slightly so they would have a better outcome? How many of us would like to go back in our past and avoid some problem to avoid a consequence that occurred later? It is wishful thinking in all cases. It simply doesn't happen.

Instead of having a picture of Dorian Gray on my wall, I have the memory of what the fire service looked like in the 1960s and 70s. And, I have aged. I still have a picture of what I looked back then, but, the profession is changing in so many ways it is scary. While in my mind I am still about 30 years old, my current portrait reveals that I have not benefited from being preserved as I was in the 70s. The picture that is most interesting to me today is that of the portrait of the fire service that has evolved since I was a young man. We have both aged. I guess a human being ages, but a profession evolves.

Or, perhaps a better way of expressing it is that it **has** evolved. There are things we take for granted today that did not exist 30 years ago. There are assumptions we make today that were only fantasies 30 years ago.

Of course this column is aimed at those of you who are fighting the good fight of fire prevention. So it begs the question, what has changed from 30 years ago until today with respect to fire prevention and code enforcement? If we had a picture of what a fire marshal looked like in 1970, would that portrait look the same if we were to portray his modern counterpart? It might not surprise you to observe that there are a lot of similarities and simultaneously there are a lot of differences. Not unlike the phenomena of laughing at photographs of how you used to dress, the picture of a fire marshal out of the 60s and 70s might be a little humorous.



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So what is similar? For the most part, most fire marshals still come from inside of the fire service. They start off as an entry level firefighter and work their way up through the ranks until fate finds them faced with the task of becoming a fire marshal. Seldom is there any preparatory training for that function. Yet, way back in the past there was a high level of knowledge amongst fire marshals regarding basic code enforcement practices and principles. We didn't have a lot of educational opportunities, but the learning occurred nonetheless. Of course the code was much simpler in those days. You could actually carry a copy of the code around with you. It even fit onto to your clipboard. What was similar with today's fire marshals was that the majority of the people in these positions did not consider them to be the terminal appointment position. In other words, they expected to have a shot at the chief's job someday.

It was during this timeframe that my philosophy about fire protection was given focus by reading *America Burning*. One can pick up that book today and have a strong sense of appreciation for how important *America Burning* was in channeling the direction for the future of the fire service. Without *America Burning*, many of the things we take for granted today would not exist. That includes, the US Fire Administration, The National Fire Academy, a National Fire Data System and the incentive for residential sprinkler technology.

What is different today is that the fire marshal is often much better prepared through participation of training and education processes. Many fire marshals are given a much more fundamental background in the codes and ordinances before they take on the job. Simultaneously, the fire code has experienced an almost logarithmic increase in complexity and technical requirements. The fire marshal may or may not have ever served in a line position. Many fire marshals now boast of fire protection engineering credentials. The fire marshal is likely to be of an ethnic or gender background that would have been a rare occasion in the 60s and 70s.

The last distinction I would like to draw is that the fire marshal of the past had a very limited amount of information to support their decision making process. There weren't as many organizations as there are today. In preparing for this article, I noted that the American Fire Sprinkler Association was actually conceived and created about the same time I was just starting to fight the sprinkler battles in the City of San Clemente. The American Fire Sprinkler Association became one of my information networking sources in the early days of sprinkler advocacy. I am told that *Sprinkler Age* became a magazine 30 years ago this edition. I know that it was one of the early reference resources for me as a fire chief to seek names, numbers and content from experts.

I became a columnist for *Sprinkler Age* in April of 1989. That means that if I would have had a child born on that day, they would now be eligible to vote. It is my belief that one of things that prompted me to become a columnist for *Sprinkler Age* was the publication of the *History of Alpha to Omega*. I know it opened up a lot of doors in the sprinkler world at that time. The time just seems to fly by. I was Chief in



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Fullerton by that time and no longer in the midst of the San Clemente experiment. Yet, I was still engaged in the sprinkler movement with the original Coalition created in California. A lot of my work at that time was with Fire Chief Bill Daley of Beverly Hills. He has long since retired.

When Oscar Wilde pinned the picture of Dorian Gray, it was to tell the tale of evolution of a life that was reflected in a painting that grew older while the subject remained eternally youthful. In Wilde's fantasy the individual while appearing fresh and unaffected by aging, was actually absorbing all of the lessons of life. The price that Dorian Gray paid was to be angry at the image of what he could have looked like if he had been allowed to age naturally. When he attacked the painting he became a shell of his former self and the painting went back to reflect his youthful demeanor. The lesson I take from all of this, is that it is best for us to absorb the aging process by learning all the lessons we possibly can and handing them off to the next generation so that they can go somewhere that we only wished for in our day. We might age, but our contributions never fade away.

Congratulations to the AFSA for now being over 30 years old. At one time in my life, I was told that you couldn't trust anybody over 30. When I got to be 30, I changed my opinion. All of us are Dorian Gray's in our own way. We look back to the past and reflect on what we used to be but more importantly we look into the future to determine what it is that we are going to be.