



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Bed Time Stories

Many a child has delayed the trip to their bedroom by nagging a parent to join them. This they accomplish by saying the following sentence; "Please tell me a bedtime story" Puyhleeeee!

On the one hand, while many a child has attempted to extend their time during which they can stay awake by encouraging the bedtime story routine, there are equally a large number of children who have gone to sleep in midst of hearing that bedtime store because it was either repetitive or boring.

More often than not, bedtime stories were classics. I am sure that if I asked you to recall the ones from your youth you could elaborate on any number of them. What has all of this got to do with fire departments? Well, it is my belief that we have our own version of the bedtime story that often finds it being played out around a dining room table or in a rest area in a fire station as people begin to exchange stories about things that happen in the department in the past. Some are fantasy and some are fact. It is the phenomena of storytelling.

The firefighting culture is replete with stories. The only problem is that sometimes they are not truthful and, sometimes they get modified through the re-telling through individual enhancements to do no small amount of damage to the truth. Being the storyteller provides the opportunity for some parties to make themselves look better. Truth sometimes goes by the wayside in storytelling. Aggrandizement is often not out of the question.

Nonetheless, at almost all levels I love to hear these stories. I have had my fair share of opportunities to sit in kitchen or dormitory areas or around a table in a restaurant or tavern, re-living yesteryear with the old timers. But, in case you haven't noticed, an interesting phenomenon is beginning to take place in the fire service. We are starting to lose a large number of experienced people and their stories are going with them. Granted, they are likely to be replaced by a new set of stories, but, what about the old ones? In the course of daily life in the firehouse, individuals and organizations create and keep information about their personal and business activities in a very fragile manner. If we are not careful much of the history that has made up the last fifty years is going to disappear in the next ten to fifteen. I would like to make my case for the idea that fire departments should all develop a function within the every organization to preserve the history of that agency. I am suggesting that every fire department should have an official archive. And, furthermore every department should have a historian.

The word *archive* is derived from a Greek word (arkhē) meaning government or order. The word is also found in such words as an-archy, and mon-archy. The word originally referred to the home or dwelling of the **Archon**, in which important official state documents were filed and interpreted under the authority of that official. In a modern sense, the word "archives" can refer to any organized body of



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records fixed on some form of media. It also refers to where the records are kept. An archivist can identify and preserve portions of this recorded information that have lasting value.

For purpose of this column the term archives refers to the written or printed documentation that is very perishable that is maintained by a department. This is not the same as a fire fighters museum. The purpose of an archive is preserve primary source documents which accumulate over the course of an organizations lifetime. A museum usually focuses upon the hardware.

For example, the archives of an individual may contain personal letters, papers, photographs, drafts of reports, computer files, scrapbooks, financial records, diaries or any other kind of documentary materials created or collected by the individual--regardless of media or format. The archives of an organization (such as a corporation or government), on the other hand, tend to contain different types of records, such as administrative files, business and incidents records, memos, official correspondence, meeting minutes, and so on.

In general, archives of any individual or organization consist of records which have been especially selected for permanent or long-term preservation, due to their enduring research value. Archival records are normally unpublished and almost always unique, unlike books or magazines, in which many identical copies exist. This means that archives (the places) are quite distinct from libraries with regard to their functions and organization, although archival collections can often be found within library buildings. The management of archives is essential for effective day-to-day organizational decision making, and even for the survival of organizations.

Does you department have an archive? Most fire agencies do not have an official approach to developing an archive approach to those perishable items. The majority of departments have a time table for disposal of materials and when time is up everything goes. Moreover, when individuals retire or leave the fire service more often than not the records and correspondence they possessed gets tossed into the dumpster. If you don't have an archive, maybe it is because you have no historian.

The historian is important to help create an archive. The historian is not just a teller of stories but rather the protector of them. Way too many fire departments have neglected to capture their history because they are so busy doing things that they didn't take the time to document their activities.

The historian is an individual who studies and writes about the history of an organization, and is usually regarded as an authority on the facts of the department. Historians are concerned with the continuous, systematic narrative and research of past events within the organization; as well as the study of all events in time from the date the organization began. The term "historian" can be used to describe both amateur and professional historians alike. Used as professional title it usually is reserved more recently for those who have acquired graduate degrees in the discipline. However, the type of historian I am



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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suggesting are not professionals. They are individuals who know and care about the culture of the organization.

History is the study of the past, with special attention to the written record of the activities of people involved in the organization over time. It is a field of research which often uses a narrative to examine and analyze the sequence of events, and it often attempts to investigate objectively the patterns of cause and effect that determine events. Historians debate the nature of history and the lessons history teaches.

Now is the time for all fire departments to look backwards and ask themselves this question: how much do you know about your own history? What lessons are there to be gained for reviewing your own history? What will your future firefighters know about how your organization came to be?

As stated previously, my suggestion is that every fire department needs at least one person who is an archivist of the bits and pieces that often get left out of history. The department needs a historian. These roles can be combined into one individual or better yet, the organization can create a History Committee. The activities of such persons include collecting such things as memorandums and letters, old photographs, and other material that have been right in front of the department's own nose, but often tossed away as part of the trash.

Let's start with your own fire department right this moment. Do you have a written history? If the answer is yes, how long ago was it written? Is there a plan in place for updating it? What has happened since the last history document was prepared? Do you have a place to preserve documents that are important once their legal retention requirements have expired?

If you are the reader of this article and you don't have any desire to be the historian or the archivist, then at least you should accept the fact that you could be a contributor to them. If you are reading this article thinking that you have the capacity to be the historian, don't wait around until the fire department appoints you to that position. Candidly, most departments don't think about making this an official function until it is way too late.

There are a minimum of three things to do if you want to preserve the history of your department. The first of these is to stake out the claim to be the one that is responsible to keep track the written history of your department by keeping track of names and dates, places and faces that you personally know about. Then begin to interview the older members of the department so that your notes may allow you to go back in time and recover things that were germane to older events in time.

1. When members of your department retire, spend an hour or so with them on video or audio tape asking them to relive the memories of their career.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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2. If the department has a newsletter or any form of communication create a file and keep copies of them
3. Whenever an important event takes place capture the new articles that are produced by the local media.
4. Start a filing cabinet with copies of annual reports and other perishable documents.
5. Set up a filing system of first person single source documents such as staff reports on important city council actions, and the passage of important legislation.
6. Create a departmental repository for photographs and other visual media.
7. Obtain copies of major fire loss incident reports, especially those with a major impact upon the department or the community
8. Keep original copies of important reports and actions by the department
9. Keep in touch with retirees that may have items that they take with them when they retire that may be given back to the department
10. Create a system of cataloguing these items so that they can be retrieved sooner or later.

A famous quote by George Santayana has it that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹ That same admonition applies to our fire agencies as they grow older and more mature. We ought to be remembering the past for its lessons, but just as importantly we should be remembering the past for its contributions to making you organization into what it is today.

For additional information on the concept of creating a department archive contact: The Society of American Archivists. They are the national professional association of individuals and institutions concerned with the preservation and use of archives. Founded in 1936, it has more than four thousand members and serves the field through programs in education, research, and publication. The Society is a source of information about archival education, local and regional professional associations, and specialists in the archival field. Contact the Society at 17 North State Street, Suite 1425, Chicago, IL. 60602-3315. (312)606-0722; Fax (312)606-0728; Toll-free (866)722-7858.

¹ George Santayana, "The Life of Reason", Volume One, p. 82, BiblioLife, ISBN 978-0559478062