



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Bull of the Woods

There used to be a cartoon series called the Bull of the Woods. It was based upon a perception of supervisors and bosses in the 1940's and 1950's that basically said that most bosses were pompous jerks and that the cartoon made fun of many of the things they said and did. That was then, this is now.

Recently in a conversation with a newly appointed fire chief, the topic turned to what it was like in the good old days and what it is like today. The nature of the conversation was to try and characterize what are the differences and what did those differences mean to both the labor and management sides of the fire service.

The good old days weren't that good. The day that I was hired as a firefighter I was introduced into the fire station by receiving a letter from an individual who told me to report for duty on a specific morning. The letter contained a list of things that I had to go buy from a uniform shop prior to my showing up. Many people might be moderately surprised that it included me buying my own protective clothing, my own helmet, my own rubber boots, etc. There was no orientation my first day on the job. Instead I was merely told to arrive at the fire station at approximately 0715 and report to whoever was in the Captains office that morning.

There was no such thing as a recruit-training academy. I knew that larger fire agencies had recruit academies but we didn't have one. I had been exposed enough to the fire community to realize that there were places that you could go to get training, but my initial experience in the fire service was not much more than stepping off the street car on a street corner and walking in a front door of a building full of strangers.

It is not that the firefighters did not make me welcome. To the contrary. The firehouse culture in those days was a barrel of laughs. We did have a lot of things that were part of the process of being made part of the group. As a matter of fact in that particular era hazing had been developed to a finely defined art form. The conversations that occurred in the fire station were anything but politically correct, and yet the firefighters were the greatest individuals. They would give you the shirt off their back, but give you a hard time all the way up until the day returned the shirt.

Interestingly enough the fire officers of that era seemed to be much more in tune with their role as a fire officer. Many of the fire officers had former military experience either through World War II or through the Korean conflict and we are pretty much no-nonsense kinds of individuals. The term captain, in that era, literally meant respect. The officers lacked a great deal of formality but they did possess a tremendous amount of influence over what went on in the firehouse.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The chief officer's of that era, for the most part, were more a product of growth than they were of experience. My exposure in this period of time was in the suburban fire department that was attempting to embrace the growth and development process and yet had no experiential base such as might have existed within the metropolitan departments for what a chief officer was supposed to do. Chief Officer's in those days tended to be the best of the best captains and a significant amount of their work consisted of going from fire station to fire station delivering supplies.

Incident command was not a finely developed science at that point and chief officers had a wide variety of reputations as fire ground commanders. Some, forgetting that they were the best of the best captains often took a hands-on approach to fighting fire and it was hard to distinguish who was in charge at the scene of an emergency. It was not uncommon for a white had and a white coat to almost be on the front lines with a nozzle at times.

The chief of department in those days was pretty much of an iconic figure. They were not "one of guys" for the most part. Many had earned their spurs as firefighters in the 1930's and 1940's and had a fairly bureaucratic sense about themselves. It was an old joke in those days that you could always tell the chief – but you couldn't tell him much. The concept of participative management was nothing but a glimmer in the eye of some management consultant in that era. There were a few of those types of chiefs around but for the most part chiefs in that era were accustomed to the exercising authority with a minimum amount of criticism.

Labor groups were just beginning to get their feet underneath them. It wasn't uncommon for any effort to organize a labor group to be greeted by a real hostile environment from the previous two ranks of officers discussed in this article. It was not uncommon for either idle threats and in some cases outright intimidation to occur to try to stop people from moving forward with any desire to accommodate representation.

Upon reading the previous two paragraphs it might seem like that was a terrible place to work. It wasn't. It was a wonderful place to work. It was different than it was today. But on the other hand it was a different time. Many of the things that we have been witness to in the last thirty years have changed the culture that surrounds the fire service. The culture inside a firehouse was a reflection of the culture outside it. As individuals experience the changes that were brought into the fire service then the fire service began to evolve.

Many of the things that are taken for granted in the contemporary fire service were raging controversies when first initiated. If you started your career in the 1960's you got to see gasoline engines become a dying breed – you began to see hazardous materials rise on the forward edge that could get firefighters in trouble, you were witness to the fact that scooping and running and applying band aids was replaced by a much more intense emergency medical services system. If you were an officer through that era you



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

got to see a point in time in which being dictatorial evolved into being much more participative. Some people got that. Some people didn't.

It is hard for me to truly characterize the evolution of what it was like by the time I made chief for the very simple reason I made it fairly young. Nonetheless as I looked around me and observed other individuals making chief, I do remember a couple of things that I think were predominate. One of the first was the emphasis on training and education. Secondly was a shifting of preference of people to become chief from strictly being the head firefighter to being something more than that. I distinctly recall conversations where people noted that chiefs were starting to come out fire prevention bureaus and out of training divisions instead of always being the chief in charge of fire suppression. That was a subtle but significant change to the environment of who became the fifth trumpet in a fire department organization.

Well, my cartoon of the bull of the woods as a setting does not evolve into the fact that we have a whole new generation of fire officers who probably don't remember that cartoon series but started off with their memories of television cartoons.