



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Do You Remember Sam?

Sam Spear is dead. And the funny thing was I didn't even know it. I still wouldn't know it if I didn't happen to be one of those people that simply cannot drive by a fire station without going in and looking around. That is how I found out that Sam was no longer with us. But, I will bet you that a whole bunch of other people didn't know either.

And that is a shame, because, from what I can find out Sam was someone that I think that I would have liked. In fact, I bet you would have liked him too. The proof was there for review in his epitaph.

How I found Sam was accidental. I was conducting an inspection of fire stations for a planning effort when I found a letter on the wall of a fire station in Northern California. The letter was framed and was titled: **A memoriam Samuel Joseph Spear - 1879 – 1925.**

There was a letter on the wall that started off with "The brave little champion of the fire of San Francisco went to his death last 4th of July, in the waters of the lagoon at Brighton Beach, San Mateo County. He died as lived – heroically – in an attempt to save his two drowning boys. The children were rescued by others while their father perished beneath the waves. He is gone. But behind him he leaves an enduring monument – not a fine stone or marble, but a moment of his greatest endeavor"

I was expecting the next couple of words to be about his family or something about his heroics on a fire. Instead I found "– the two platoon system." Right. At one time the fire service only had one platoon. You worked every day. Time off was measured in terms of hours and minutes. The writer of the letter went on to say - "It is not too much to say that were it not for Sam Spear the two platoon system might still be a vague vision devoutly to be wished for rather than to be part and parcel of the department regulations. Thus he led the fireman out variable house of bondage into the promise land of decent hours and better conditions. As Chairman of the Campaign Committee, he led the vain fight of the two platoon in 1912. Undaunted by defeat, he made plans for another battle to achieve the goal."

Wow! This guy was some kind of hero wasn't he? He stood up for principle not just to get accolades from those he served; the citizenry, but for those he served with; his fellow firefighters.

The writer went on, describing Sam Spears as a person that "Bravely he met the attacks on the two platoon system made by property owners, merchants and professional men. Calmly he talked to them, turned the logic of his arguments on them and converted them to his side. He won the battle by winning their respect; by forcing them to admit that the firemen were men as well as public servants. Despite almost insurmountable difficulties, the measure carried in 1916."



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That says to me that this person was someone that understood the concept of courage under pressure and passed the test with flying colors. The letter writer continued to eulogize the person being memorialized by noting that “In the pay raise granted in 1918 and the last year, Chief Spears was in the forefront of both fights. His time and talents were placed freely at the command of his comrades. His sincerity of approach, his forceful manner and distinctive argumentative style won the people of the fireman’s causes as they had in the two platoon campaigns. “

He didn’t stop with getting the two platoon system, He didn’t stop with getting the guys a raise. He continued to fight for the basic rights of those he serves with. According to the eulogy, “He realized that the civil service system could be perpetuated and good working conditions obtained only by the formation of a central fireman’s organization. Accordingly, with others, he founded the David Scannell plug and served as its first president. “

But what kind of guy was Samuel Joseph Spear? It was reported that he was born in San Francisco in 1879, and he was only 46 years old at the time of his death. He entered the department in 1903, passing “number one” on the first fireman’s sole service examination. In 7 years he made a Lieutenant and four years later he passed first on the exam to be a Captain. He headed the Civil Service list for Battalion Chief in 1917 and was first on the list to be appointed second assistant Chief Engineer when he died. He was a guy that if he was magically brought back to life today would be fiercely competitive for the next exam. He would probably be just as committee today as he was back then. He was no arm chair firefighter – he was engaged

Again, the letter writer reminded the reader that Spears was a man of action. “Justly has he been called a hero. In 1909 he saved several of his comrades from death in the burning whole of the steamer “Contra Costa”. Five years ago he swam half a block off Meiggs to rescue a drowning man. At this hour, a gold medal lies in the office of the Fire Commissioner inscribed with his name for the rescue of a woman at a Golden Gate Ave blaze- a lass, it can never be presented. “

If you think we invented the idea of getting an education to be a fire officer – think again. Spear pursued the four year night courses at St. Ignacio College and graduated with a degree in Bachelor of Law when he was 45 years old. If he had been able to live to enjoy his retirement from the department he planned to engage on the practice of his profession.

Charles Boden – the author of the eulogy stated that “There is no eulogy for Sam Spear. He needs none. In a simple narrative of the deeds of a man who lived a brilliant life of love and service- and died even a more normal death. To his crushed wife and children and sorrowing relatives the fireman offered heartfelt sympathy.” That sort of sounds like the phrase we keep hearing repeated over and over again – our thoughts and prayers are with you tonight....



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Boden also predicted that the San Francisco's Firemen will not forget Sam Spear. He called him the: Prophet of the "New Day" in the department; apostle of the "square deal"; and wished that his sincere friend and his memory shall be ever green. But you know what I don't think that happened.

We did forget. All of you out there that enjoy the platoon system owe a debt of gratitude to Sam Spear. Those of you that have a decent wage as a firefighter owe a debt of gratitude to all of the Sam Spears of the world. But more importantly, we all owe it to the service to remember that each generation makes a contribution and that no one generation owns the image of the fire service. We really talk a lot about tradition and then forget to remember those that fabricated it for us. We talk a lot about courage, but then think that the only acts of courage are those that are exhibited on the fire ground.

I will admit that I am sorry that I didn't know who Sam Spear was till I read that letter. I did know about the Creator of the Kelly day – which preceded the two platoon system, but I didn't know about Sam. I have offered up this tale of recollection in this magazine as reminder that it's not all about us – it's all about all of us. The past, the present and the future.

I would hope that there are young firefighters out there that could learn something from a man who died almost 8 decades ago about integrity. I would hope that there are young chiefs out there that could say that they care as much about taking care of their personnel as a man that only made about \$100.00 a month. Sam Spear may have sacrificed his life along time ago, but he is a role model for today -

May God have mercy on this soul!