



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Have and Have Nots

If Thomas Edison had invented the automatic sprinkler head instead of the light bulb, I bet almost every home in the US would be sprinklered today. But he didn't. He only invented the light bulb, based upon the concept of putting electricity in homes, which has resulted in hundreds of thousands of electrical fires. Nice guy!

Just kidding, of course. None of us today would deny that putting electricity in homes wasn't a good idea. Yet, I have an article in my collection of newspapers from the late 1800's in which a fire chief in San Francisco absolutely felt that putting electricity in homes was a sure fire formula for disaster. The San Francisco newspaper, called The Argus, carried an article in which the chief expressed grave concerns. His opinion on indoor plumbing was not expressed, nor was he credited with having an opinion on indoor water supply over wells. But he was really opposed to installing electricity in homes.

But, imagine this; what if 100 years ago, that fire chief had succeeded in prohibiting electricity from being put in homes? What if the response by the politicians and our society would have outlawed it? What if they said: let's make it voluntary. But let's put as many obstacles in the way as we can. Would America look different today?

I have one theory about the consequence. I bet the electrical code would sure be a lot smaller that it currently is. But it isn't and we have a nation that is mostly wired today.

If Grinnell would have been just a little better salesperson, then perhaps our current debate over residential sprinklers would be moot. Among the rest of my antique articles, I have an ad from Saturday Evening Post where Grinnell was selling a junior sprinkler system to houses with basements. The ad is circa 1910. Let's see, what was the population of the US in 1910? According to the Census Tables, I have discovered that from 1900 to the last official census, we have gone from a population of 76.0 million, to our current population of 281.4 million. Lots of homes. Lots of basement fires.

Any idea out there how many firefighters have died in basement fires since 1900? Any idea how many more are likely to in the future?

Let's flip the discussion to the future. Do you know how many homes are going to be built in the next thirty years? According to one source it is somewhere around 158 million homes.

Now let's marry up these two facts. In the last 100 years we have built probably 93.4 million homes. In the next 30 years we are going to build 58 million more.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Ok, let's now go back and look at one of the arguments that are constantly brought up. Most fires occur in old homes. Well, duh! The average age of a home in this country is based on a statistical reality that each and every year the number of new homes is only a fraction of the ones already in the housing stock.

That's sort of like saying that most of the people who die every day are old folks. Same idea, there are a lot of old folks, and there are some replacements called kids. One turns into the other over time.

The argument that fire does not occur in new homes sort of makes one kind of sense, doesn't it? You wouldn't expect a new home to be a fire trap. But jumping to the conclusion that new homes are exempt from fire is just not logical. Fire causes are separate from construction date or type. In fact, in my career I have gone to structure fires in homes that were brand new, even unoccupied in which fires have occurred. I recall two specifically. One was in a model home created by workers discarding smoking materials in a trash bin and another was an intentional fire set by an arsonist from an anti-growth group.

My question to those that use the argument that we shouldn't be using sprinkler technology in new homes; just because they are new, is this; when does new go away? For example, when I was the Chief of San Clemente we pursued a residential Ordinance in 1976, the population of the city was about 18,000 people. Since that time, the population has grown to about 70,000. At one point my own home was new there. Today, its 37 years old. I bought it as a slab and its sprinklered today. When does the concept of newness wear off? When does the concept of oldness begin?

In another column a few years back, I wrote of a concept called "graceful degradation". This concept is based upon the idea that if something is brand new, it begins to deteriorate at some level as soon as it is beginning to be used. Not new, as one might assume.

So, when is something old? There is a period in which a new object retains its newness and then there is a point in which it is no longer the state of the art. Based on two specific criteria, I would submit that these are two different ways of defining newness of housing stock. The first is that it is constructed according to the latest code; and it is in 100 % compliance with that code into the future. That suggests a constant effort to upgrade to the new code requirements and that is not likely

What the definition suggests is that all buildings are new until a new code comes out and that any building is old, when it no longer complies with the code it was built under. Under the definition a building can stay new if it constantly upgrades and it gets old when it is not newly maintained. I have seen examples of both. It also suggests that new homes last about 4 years (the code cycle)



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

What percentages of homes in your area exist, non-conforming? Well, I bet that answer is different in Toledo than it is in Scottsdale. Next question, what percentage of the housing stock is in total compliance with the existing code? Again, I would suggest that Glendale Arizona and Glendale California have different answers to these questions.

The theme of this column is the haves and have nots. So far I have described the situation where these are homes that are old and some that are new. I will not propose that some have built in fire protection. That is a statement of fact.

There are current debates as to how significant are the haves in relation to the have nots. Testimony at a lot of the hearings, from both sides of the issue speculate on the existence of the number but it's not a scientific fact yet.

What we do know is that in the last 30 years there have been not hundreds, not thousands, but hundreds of thousands of homes sprinklered in the country. Let me give you a perspective here; here is a list of some of the areas when residential sprinklers in single and multi-family dwellings have been adopted as a matter of policy by local government. This list is going to be fairly long, so be patient.

- San Clemente, CA
- Orange County, CA
- Corte Madera, CA
- Manteca-Lathrop, CA
- Foster City, CA
- Livermore-Pleasanton, CA
- North Star, CA
- Cobb County, Georgia
- Scottsdale, Arizona
- Dallas, Texas
- Prince George County, Maryland
- Montgomery County, Maryland
- Vancouver, British Columbia
- Greeley, Colorado
- Arvata, Colorado

Some states do not have anyone on a list. If your department is not listed on this inventory, I apologize for not knowing about your efforts. But, that just provides me with the chance to make one more point. Where can a person go to find out the answer to this question: how many homes, apartments and condominiums are actually protected by the use of 13D and 13R systems in the United States and Canada today? Where is the data base that everyone can go to answer the real question of how effective are they in reducing fire loss? Where is the data base that illustrates the types and sizes of fires



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

that have been handled by those systems? I know that there have been many, because I have been on a few of them myself and have heard stories from a lot of fire marshals about their successes.

One way we might overcome this lack of knowledge is to make a commitment to collect that information at the local level, report it to the state wide reporting systems and then, we could actually accumulate the data at the national level. Data trumps anecdotes any day of the week.

I would like to start the ball at one level right here. If you are a reader of this magazine and you know of a community that has a 13D or 13R ordinance, drop me a postcard. Just put the following on the card: Name of the Jurisdiction followed by the Name of the Fire Chief or Fire Marshal, with a phone number or email address. I don't even need an address. I can't help but wonder how many communities there are out there that have already taken action, but are not being considered in the debate. I am not asking for details on things like when the ordinance was created or even the numbers of dwelling units. I just think it would be great if we could figure out where you all are.

What I will do with the names is put together a list and pass it along to anyone that wants it. I am sure that many of you are aware of the existence of several advocacy groups that support sprinkler installation. Let's help populate their mailing lists and help those organizations find a better way of documenting the details of this concept.

Frankly, I know that there are not going to be tens of thousands of cards. But, I can also remember when we could have held a meeting for the residential sprinkler advocates in this country and it could have been conducted in a telephone booth. Join the crowd of the Haves and help the have-nots have a better chance of succeeding. Let's find out just how much progress we have made