



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Heritage of Your Fire Department

You have probably heard the statement that the more things change; the more they stay the same. I have a good example of it in my library. Several years ago, I was fortunate enough to obtain a log book from Brooklyn, New York's Engine Company 46, from the year 1882. Not unlike the station logs that we keep today in our fire stations, either in the form of a book or on a computer entry, it is a direct reflection of what is occurring in that fire department at that period in time.

The reason I say that the more things change, the more they stay the same are the entries. I was struck right away by the fact that over 100 years ago, we were engaged in almost the same types of activities on a shift basis that are reflected in our station logs today. There are entries regarding training, fire prevention, code enforcement difficulties, personnel matters, and, of course, the ever present emergencies. Of course, routine entries were in blue or black ink and all emergencies were in red ink.

The one entry I think I enjoyed the most was the one regarding the exercising of the horses. Apparently, in this department, every morning at the change of shifts, there was time devoted to taking all the horses out and running them around the block to make sure they were ready for duty.

Another interesting entry was a series that related to an individual who had improperly stored "coal oil". I am quite sure that that term may not be recognized by a lot of individuals today. The placard, if it had been assigned by DOT in 1882, would have read ??? . The chemical was kerosene.

The significance of this log book is in relating what we are today to what we are going to be tomorrow by looking at what we use to be in the past. You hear a lot of discussion today about planning for the future. Much of what we are going to be in the future is found in the legacies of each era that have contributed to the changes in the fire service.

More importantly, what we will become in the future is a reflection of three different aspects of the image of our organization. These aspects are tradition, heritage, and leadership.

Another element of this discussion of the future is the fact that the future "is sometimes beyond us before we even recognize its existence in the presence." My operations chief, Larry Greene, coined that expression one day after we were discussing how fast things seem to be impacting on fire departments of today.

I indicated that there were three dimensions to the legacy of an organization. The first of these is in the present, and that is leadership. Tradition is out of our past and so is heritage.



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I once defined tradition as anything that we continue to do once we've forgotten the original reason for doing it. For example, it is traditional in the fire service to utilize trumpets to symbolize authority. Yet, there are literally hundreds of firefighters that fail to recognize that the trumpet is actually a symbol of authority that was generated in the fire service in the late 1800's. It is traditional that fire chiefs wear white helmets. It is traditional that we man watch desks in some fire departments, and so forth. Tradition is very much a part of the past because it is a reflection of practices that have become inculcated in our profession without regard for their utility, but rather for their symbolic impact.

If the trumpet was the symbol of authority from the 1800's, I wonder if the fire officer of the year 2089 will be wearing crossed pack set radios on his collars. Or, if the term captain or battalion chief will disappear from our vocabulary as a result of changes in the work ethic that is occurring in the fire service today.

Heritage is different than tradition. Heritage is those events that we remember because they made a significant difference in the way we looked at ourselves and our profession. For example, the heritage of the fire service includes such events as the Coconut Grove fire, the Beverly Hills Supper Club fire, Kingman, Arizona, and others. Many fire departments have traditions that have been founded on local practices and heritage that comes from local events that has definitely shaped the way their department is, will be, and will remain for a certain period of time.

While we often focus on tradition and heritage as being the conservatism of the fire service, both of them reflect the fact that we have made major changes in the profession in the last 100 years. Frequently I hear people refer to the larger fire departments as being "traditional". I tend to feel that all fire departments are traditional in the sense that they have reasons for continuing to do things in spite of the fact that they often fail to ask themselves the reasons why.

That leads us to the third leg of the organization and that is the element of leadership. Leadership is that component of our past and present that allows an organization to move in a direction because that is the right way to go.

Unfortunately for us and the profession, there are some who feel that leadership is a position instead of a process. One is not always anointed as a leader. True, an individual may often be appointed and given the symbols of rank and the accoutrements of office, but fail to exercise the leadership role. That role is doing what is right for the organization in spite of obstacles, resistance, and contradictions with other people of similar authority and orientation.

The fire service has many "legendary figures" who have contributed to the tradition and heritage of fire service through exercising leadership. Among the first was James Braidwood from Edinburgh, Scotland, followed by Sir Eyre Massey Shaw, Fire Chief Damrell (sp) who started the International Association of



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Fire Chiefs as its first president, Chief Ralph Scott from Los Angeles City, who was responsible for getting the vocational education system to recognize the fire service as a bonafide occupation, and Chief Bob G????, Downey, California, who contributed to the development of the Uniform Fire Code. I'm quite sure you can think of individuals from your location who have exercised that leadership role and did things in spite of the fact that there were others who did not agree with them.

Therein lies the definition of legacy. Legacy is anything in an organization that remains behind and is repeated as a result of individual or collective contributions to the profession. The legacy is what individuals who exercise leadership leave behind. In some cases, legacies turn into traditions or heritage, but in all cases they make a difference in the organization's direction, focus or impact on the community.

Right now the fire service faces a lot of challenges. We hear a lot of these discussions at chiefs' conferences, training officers' conferences, and in dialogue in city council chambers all around the country. On the other hand, we've always had challenges. How can we doubt the impact on the fire service of the invention of the steam fire apparatus 100 years ago. I have no doubt that the history books reflect that the renaissance of automatic fire protection occurring in the 1980's will have as significant an impact on the direction of the fire service as the creation of the sprinkler system 100 years earlier.

It's not the fact we have the challenges that will determine the future of the fire service. It is the manner in which we address those challenges through the use of the leadership process and how much we exercise the tradition and heritage of the fire service in assuring that we evolve in a manner that is consistent with the mission of our organizations.

The fire service does not need a leader. It needs leaders. There are tremendous challenges facing our training officers, fire prevention officers, apparatus maintenance personnel, safety officers, budget officers, our administrative officers, and yes, the fire ground officers also. Most of the literature addresses the issues of the combat situation quite adequately. Month after month, we critique and review the impact of major fires on the safety and security of our communities. But those fire ground challenges are just part of the scenario.

The role of leaders in organizations is not much different than the role of leaders in associations. There is a tremendous amount of responsibility in the assumption of either role. A question that often remains is how seriously one approaches that responsibility.

Now, before anyone gets upset and thinks I'm talking about them, in particular, please be aware that I feel we are making some major advances right now. We are not going backward. Granted, we have some tremendous challenges ahead of us because of changes in our society and changes in the attitude



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of humanity about issues that we are concerned with. I don't see in short term future any significant changes on the part of the federal government to restore the federal fire focus. I anticipate that if it is ever going to be restored, it will be in the hands of the professional associations and in the leaders of those organizations to pursue programs and activities that will begin to address our nation's almost tripling fire problem.

If I go back to my New York City log book of 1882, it is clear that the technology has changed. We don't have horses in the fire station anymore. We now have diesel powered pumpers. We no longer are concerned with small quantities of coal oil; we are dealing with such things as rail cars full of acrylanitrile (sp). Yet, reading between the lines of that manual, you will see the relationship between the fire officer of the 1800's and the fire officer of the 1900's. The chiefs were doing everything they possibly could with the resources they had available to them to address their problem. They took the responsibility seriously, and so do we.

I just wonder if the fire officer of the year 2089 will look back at this generation and say, "What were our traditions and what was our contribution to the heritage of the fire service?"