



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## In the Looking Glass

It happened again the other day. Bad fire. People died. In fact a whole family. The news media made a big deal out of it. Somebody called for an investigation – make that an inquiry. It is not like that was all that newsy. Fire like this have happened before and it is very likely to happen again.

But, inquire they did. What was interesting was what came out of the inquiry. As one might expect there was a lot of finger pointing. The rhetoric ran more towards being inflammatory than insightful. There were a few zealots that were out to find out who to blame.

And then there were the fire chiefs.

As one might expect the fire chiefs were asked to testify as to how this tragedy could have possibly occurred. Then in addition they were asked what they could have done differently in order to have prevented this tragedy from ever occurring. If there is any one thing fire chiefs are consistent at is they constantly keep telling the same story. That is exactly what happened in this inquiry. The fire chiefs testified that with better code enforcement and the installation of automatic fire sprinkler system this tragedy would have simply not occurred.

Ripped from the recent headlines? Not exactly. Don't go looking for this one on U tube. There were no television cameras to catch the images. As a matter of fact, I found it when details on this fire when I doing research on the internet late one night. I was looking for life loss history in different occupancies and this popped up. This website was all about the Triangle Shirt Waste Fire. The website contained the testimony given at the inquisition. – excuse me, inquiry. <http://www.ilr.cornell>.

If you have any affinity for history, you may recall that incident was almost one hundred years ago, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1911, a Saturday to be exact. The fire broke out on one of the top floors of the Asch building. When the bodies were finally collected 146 of the 500 employees of that business went to the coroner's office.

What some of you may find surprising is that up until the point that I told you when the event occurred; it could have just as easily been a headline in a newspaper somewhere in the United States today. I bet you can tell me the name of a few fires we have had in the last decade that meet that criterion. Does West Warwick, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003 sound familiar? The Station Nightclub fire. 100 lives were lost and many, many more scarred for life either physically or mentally.

<http://www.newcenturyfriends.net/station.html>



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If you want an interesting experience open up the two websites at the same time and compare the descriptions and the emotions being expressed. The more things change, the more they stay the same

Everybody keeps talking about the fact that we have done a better job of protecting life and property. But everyone forgets the fact that almost all of the advances made in modern fire protection there was a body count before that occurred. Think not? I would ask you to look at the events of just the following few fires out of the history books of the fire service:

- Wynecoff Hotel
- Hartford Connecticut, the Barnum and Baileys Ringling Brothers Fire
- Coconut Grove Fire, Boston Massachusetts
- Our Lady of the Angeles Fire

What is common among all of those tragic events? Well, the good news is that most of them occurred a long time ago. The not so good news is that while the frequency of such events has gone down, they still occur. The bad news is that we had to wait until we killed a sufficient number of people under a specific set of circumstances in order to attract political attention to them. A term that has been coined to describe this phenomenon is called the "catastrophic theory of reform". In other words, it takes a catastrophe in order to cause something to be restructured to prevent its occurrence in the future.

Do you think that phenomenon is over? I don't think so. Pages out of recent history include things like the Station nightclub fire mentioned earlier. Massive urban wildland interface fires have been striking California on almost an annual basis for the last five or six years. That problem sure hasn't gone away

Then there is America's most significant fire problem. I am of course referring to the single family dwelling. The Insurance Institute of Building Safety recently published the results of its annual losses and posted a chart that indicates that again the nation's fire losses seem to be centered on the residential occupancies. Yet, no one seems to take this as an indicator that reform is needed yet.

It is my belief that one of the reasons that this phenomenon occurs is that people don't die in single family dwellings in large numbers at the same time. All one has to do is look at the pictures of the Triangle Shirt Waste Fire with the crumpled bodies at the feet of the firefighters to realize the emotional significance of such an event. Yet, if you look at the losses of single family dwellings, it is usually in one or two people at the maximum, an entire family. These events, while tragic, in many communities are considered to be an **acceptable** level of loss.

How do I know it is acceptable? Because we have continued to allow that condition to exist long after we have identified the fact that it does exist. The loss of a single home in a community is neither an economic or philosophical threat to the community.



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Another dilemma in this is that there is just a whole heck of a lot more homes in which people are threatened than there are businesses in which they can be regulated. After conducting relatively exhaustive research into assessed parcel information on a lot of communities, it is pretty clear that the residential occupancy is the vast majority of the built environment yet it is only a minor part of the regulatory and even the educational process that is aimed at the elimination of fire death and loss.

This almost generates a duh! like response. I don't know of many firefighters that have been on the job more than a year or two who haven't recognized this phenomenon.

Our literature is full of recommendations about how to address the issue of fire. Public education has been proposed as a process and many communities have done an outstanding job of dealing with this phenomenon without changing the basic code enforcement infrastructure.

A good example of a proactive approach on this might be Tualatin Fire Protection District located in Oregon. Fire Chief Jeff Johnson and members of his staff have carved out a communications process aimed at apartment owners that has proven to be fairly successful in gaining the business managers attention in apartment houses.

There are other samples that we can pull from the files on how fire departments have become more successful in reducing fire loss through the public education process. Yet, on a nationwide basis, each and every year we continue to lose thousands of people in the very place in which they ought to be the most secure; where they live.

I called this column "in the looking glass" because I think we have to take a look at ourselves in terms of what this really means. Being a firefighter for many years I know that nobody signs up on this job to sit in the fire station hoping the bell will never ring. It is one of the most fundamental contradictions in our line of business. The very fact that we are there to protect life and property, according to some of the more famous quotes of people such as Chief Croker of New York is to "respond". I don't think anybody can dispute that.

I wonder if you can go back a few moments in put ourselves in the shoes of the firefighters who stood on the fire ground at the base of the Triangle Shirt Waste Fire could we say that their morale was improved by that fire? I wonder if we could get into the minds of the individuals who were at the Hartford Connecticut Fire. If we could understand how they felt? I feel the same way about almost every tragic event I have personally been on myself. While doing a good job of extinguishing a fire is a reward by itself, watching the coroner take a casualty out of that fire takes a huge edge off of it.

Currently we are engaged in a philosophical battle about this issue with some of the same people that were around back in 1911. Our communities want to build residences and businesses in which people



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are willing to invest their life savings into them. They are on a quest to make a profit and provide a product. It is my personal belief that their opposition to what we are attempting to do is not about fire and life safety. It is about economics.

It is also my belief that if we continue refining the economics we can probably build homes safer cheaper than we can by building them with the current paradigm. We just can't seem to get that dialogue going on a national level. A combination of a need of our society to make the single family dwelling a more greener environment, coupled with a need for our society to start doing something about the huge waste of energy that goes on in the residential world, then tied together with new and relative non-traditional means of construction we need to look long and hard in that looking glass and then turn around and reflect it on those who are our partners in achieving true fire and life safety security from those who live and work in the United States.

You can be assured that there will be fires in the future. You can be assured that people are going to die in fires in the future. You can be assured that we are going to need firefighters far into the future.

But I wonder if someone who is 100 years away from today's date and who is an amateur historian who finds himself reading about the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in the fire environment of the year 2010 they will be very impressed with the progress that has been made.

We can only hope that in the ensuing years between 2010 and 2110 we can find that those who build America's fire problem and those who are around to protect it both get on the same sheet of music. Wouldn't that be a novel idea?