



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Indoor Plumbing

I moved to Riverton Kansas in 1952. It was a pretty small area back then. I am not sure what it looks like today. At that time my father rented a house on one of the rural routes. For the lack of a better term, the house could be considered somewhat primitive. For example, it only consisted of four rooms; there was no electricity and no running water in the house, it was heated with a wood stove and most important, no indoor plumbing. Any time we felt the need to quench our thirst we had to use a hand pump in the backyard and if we were following nature's call, regardless of time of year or inclement weather conditions we had to trek some fifty feet out to use a facility that was affectionately known as a "four holer".

I don't live like that today. And, frankly I think the largest percentage of our population today doesn't live that way either. I am sure that somewhere in rural America there are still places that utilize facilities similar to what I just described, but the concept of indoor plumbing is pretty much taken for granted by most people. If someone was going out to buy a house today it is very unlikely that they would have to choose between the two options of indoor plumbing or no indoor plumbing.

In the words of current colloquialism that is a real no-brainer. On the other hand, when a person does buy a home they do have all sorts of other choices. For example, you could choose to "upgrade your carpet". Or you can spend an awful lot of money on amenities such as tile in your bathroom, or granite on your kitchen sink.

Moreover, it is becoming more and more common for developers to provide structures that are "green". The concept of the green building is not one that doesn't consume an awful lot of energy nor does it impact the environment any more than is natural.

If you go into many model homes today it is very likely that you will see all of these options and these alternatives arrayed on a wall somewhere with a cost factor attached to every single one of them. Here is my rhetorical question for you. How many times have you seen a residential sprinkler highlighted as an option and moreover if you did see it as an option how many people do you think would actually take it?

Well I wouldn't have written that paragraph if I didn't think that the answer was not very often, in both cases. The fact is that the consuming public has not gotten with the program that all of the residential sprinkler advocates have been suggesting for the last thirty years; install sprinkler when the home is new. To the contrary, the consuming public still seems to be more worried about upgrading their home to meet aesthetic accommodations rather than fire and life safety.



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Now before you think I am going to blame them, I am not. Frankly, I think when a person buys a new home; having a fire in that home is absolutely the last thing that goes through their mind. To the contrary, they are more concerned about whether they can afford the mortgage and just exactly how much more is it going to cost them to do the landscaping and to buy the furnishings to make a house look like a home.

The challenge for us in the fire service is to craft a message to the homeowner of new buildings that appeals to their sense of responsibility for their family and their lives. Most of the battles that have been fought over residential sprinklers have been fought in city council chambers and in debates in a political context. The message has yet to be delivered to the average citizen in a way that begins to resonate with them.

I have always been curious as to why we have not been able to mount a campaign that has been as effective as the anti-smoking campaign. In a period of probably the last twenty years we have actually gone from a society in which smoking was condoned just about any time, any place, anywhere, to one in which smokers are considered to be an inconvenience on society. We have anti-smoking ordinances, we have designated areas in which smoking can occur and it is a constant struggle to try to keep young people from starting to smoke.

Where is the similar campaign to try to demonstrate to people that there is a better solution to make sure that your home, which might be your castle, needs a little help in order to remain in tact.

Part of the problem resides in the fact that we don't seem to have a very good grasp on just how effective sprinklers are in dealing with this specific problem. In other columns I have alluded to the fact that we don't do much outcome analysis nor is anybody really tracking our success stories with the exception of anecdotal information. I appreciate the anecdotal information and moreover I appreciate what is going on in those communities that have gone through recognition by operation life safety with regard to having no fire fatalities.

But the campaign needs to be done at a much higher level. I am not sure who is going to pay for it. I don't think that there is a readily available funding source. The United States Fire Administration and our respective professional organizations have done, I consider an admiral job, in trying to advocate this message but there is yet to be a consumer advocate –the Ralph Nader of Sprinklers that is standing on the stump heralding the use of automatic fire protection.

In keeping with the concept that it takes years and years to be an overnight success, perhaps some of our public education efforts need to be redirected into a totally different arena. Instead of arguing the case about residential sprinklers at the political level, perhaps we should be populating every source of information that we can get out about lifestyles. In the past there have been articles published in non-



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fire protection magazines about sprinkler protection but not to any real large degree. Pursuing opportunities to share this message in magazines such as Good Housekeeping, Sunset, Popular Mechanics, and Popular Science may do more to continue to raise the level of public consciousness than the limited amount of public education we do to people who have already purchased a home that has sprinklers in it.

It is not as if someone hasn't tried. In my files I have an advertisement from a Saturday Evening Post from the turn of the century that talks about installing "junior sprinkler systems". The ad was paid for by Grinnell Sprinklers. If we can only go back to that era and find out why that campaign fell on deaf ears we might have some understanding of why it is so difficult to get the public interested in fire protection today.

Success in sending a message, more often than not, is not always the function of motivation but rather that of persistence. As we move forward with the development of information on residential sprinklers we have got to find younger and younger audiences to listen to that story. When those younger audiences emerge as homeowners, parents, businessmen and women and community advocates, then they have a totally different perspective than those who were raised lacking that knowledge.

At the local level we need to be doing a better job also. I have seen some outstanding materials developed by communities that have a sprinkler ordinance in place. Most are given to a property owner after they have purchased the home. But, there are always opportunities to improve upon that situation by giving those materials to those that do not have a sprinklered home. Many communities have done a good job at that too. You might be wondering what I am referring to so let's get specific. The following websites provide access to a vast array of public education materials. As a fire prevention professional you should be accessing them every chance you get. It doesn't matter that you don't have a sprinkler ordinance. This is where you get the ground swell to support one once the time is right. Have you ever visited these sites?

Name	URL
Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition	http://www.homefiresprinkler.org/hfsc.html
United States Fire Administration	http://www.usfa.fema.gov/safety/sprinklers/
National Fire Sprinkler Association	http://www.nfsa.org/
Residential Fire Safety Institute	http://www.firesafefhome.org/indexFlash.html
American Fire Sprinkler Association	http://www.firesprinkler.org/
The Center for Campus Fire Safety	http://www.campusfire.org/
Fire Team USA	http://www.fireteamusa.com
Fire Team Tennessee	http://www.fireteamtennessee.com
Home Safety Council	http://www.homesafetycouncil.org



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News Articles

Residential Fire Sprinklers:

http://www.nbc4.tv/houseandhome/3893793/detail.html?aracontent=c2_id3

The Logical Choice For Saving Lives And Property

Vancouver Fire Department's Sprinkler Success

http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/fire/fire_prev/sprinkler.html

Scottsdale Quick Facts

<http://www.homefiresprinkler.org/ResourcesScottsdale.htm>

If you haven't visited them, why not? The more you learn the more you can share with others.

Then lastly, when it comes to making sprinklers a household word, fire departments should be making sure that every time that a fire occurs in a dwelling and a person is lost, injured or even displaced, or if a fire fighter is injured or killed a statement in the press release should read "the building was not equipped with sprinklers." That is a story we should be telling over and over again.

Well, I still live in a sort of rural area, but I don't live in a house that has outdoor plumbing. I have sprinklered my two residences in San Clemente and am in the process of retro-fitting another. Maybe someday there will be a person that can say that they remember way back when sprinklers were not available, but now they live under the umbrella of their protection.

When sprinklers are as taken for granted as household plumbing the world will be a safer place.