



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

It Takes Years and Years to Be An Overnight Success

As humored columnist Dave Barry once pointed out, “If you put a man in front of a television set and give him a channel control he will engage in continuous surfing.” I don’t recall if Mr. Barry eluded to the fact that the attention span of an individual with that channel control in his hand is shorter than normal or rather that the tactile sensation of punching all those buttons and watching those flickering images is most of the fun. Nonetheless every once in a while I find myself doing that same old thing. Channel surfing often results in you just getting little tiny snips of information. Yet, it is amazing how much information that you can collect from just a short vignette as it flickers across the screen.

You may have experienced the same thing yourself. A mere few seconds of an old TV show will often cause you to pause in the channel button and dwell on the topic for a few moments. That is exactly what happened to me recently. I was going through some channels and caught just a very few notes of a song that was very popular when I was a teenager. What I found fascinating about the song was that it was the only hit that the group ever produced. Yet, they were being brought back on television as a reprise of that one hit forty years later. They were an overnight success that went away overnight.

What came to my mind was how long it takes to be an overnight success in this business of sprinklers. Sometimes when we see things we don’t appreciate them when they first occur and then as they grow longer in the tooth they begin to acquire notoriety and infamy that lives far beyond the original impression.

Shortly after leaving the couch and my channel surfing experience I had an opportunity to read a recent fire service publication that was talking about the concept of residential sprinklers. The column essentially talked about residential sprinklers as if it had just been invented yesterday. They stated that residential sprinkler was “An entirely new concept”. If that is true, residential sprinkler is a concept that has taken years and years to be an overnight success.

As an amateur historian I often find evidence back in the early documents in the fire service that many things that we take for granted today had their origins literally decades ago. That is especially true in the field of residential sprinklers. Among my treasured possessions is a copy of a Saturday Evening Post advertisement from the early 1900’s touting the benefits of putting a residential system into a home. In those days it was called a “junior system”. Nonetheless it was designed to be put in a dwelling.

As I continued the historical sleuthing I discovered that residential sprinklers have been brought to the forefront almost every decade since the turn of the century and almost everybody believes that they were the one that created the new concept. I passed my ordinance in San Clemente in 1976 and was often referred to as the “Father of residential sprinklers when I was introduced as a speaker in the 80’s



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and 90's. I have often stated that the reference to paternity was way off the mark, but that I recognized that failure is often an orphan, while success has many who claim parentage.

Going back to those early days there were pioneers like my Fire Marshal Don Hodgson, and Gary Carmichael, Bill Meyers, Kathy Vernot, Sonny Scarff, Jim Estepp, Dave Hilton, Lou Witzeman, Harry Shaw, Dick Patton and a host of other parentally involved partners that helped to get the movement off the ground. There were many cities that looked at the concept and accepted it. There were others that examined it and rejected it. Others even went so far as to adopt an ordinance and then went back and repealed it. The concept was not so much born as it was cultivated and evolved from location to location. My history files on this topic alone fill up a 4 drawer file cabinet.

Something tells me we are still not an overnight success however. In reviewing public education literature I am amazed that the number of times that I run across a reproduction of the statements about the fact that very few sprinkler heads ever accidentally discharge – “one out of sixteen million” This comment has been repeated so many times that people have forgotten where it ever came from in the first place. The report it comes from precedes most of the careers of those serving as firefighter today. And, the problems that the industry has had in sprinkler head recalls have tarnished the image a bit. Perhaps we should update the performance records of sprinkler heads to be more current.

Then there is a constant repeat of the theme about the dealing with the myths about automatic sprinklers. If there were as much distress about the automobile as there seems to be about the technology of sprinkler systems we would probably all still be out in the driveway hand cranking our cars to get them started.

Yet, there is a lot we can be proud of. Survey after survey keeps proving that more and more communities are using fire sprinklers as a means of mitigation to reduce fire losses in their community. To the best of my knowledge nobody has put together a recent nationwide study but regional studies have demonstrated that hundreds of communities have moved beyond the idea that sprinklers are all that innovated and are now making them a regularly scheduled part of growth and development.

There is an entirely new generation of sprinkler advocates out there blazing trails in areas where none have gone before. And they are sorely needed if the phenomenon of success in getting sprinklers into dwellings is to continue in the future

Part of being the overnight success includes telling the story over and over again. I have recently witnessed an example of how effective telling the same story but putting it in a modern context tends to be. The Orange County Fire Department in California has recently put out a DVD entitled “The Marble Fire”. It is a classic use of the side-by-side fire comparisons that have been done by many individuals to



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tell the story of sprinklers. Some of you may recall the NIST study that has been done recently showing the use of side-by-side fire in a dormitory fire.

This story needs to be told over and over again until such time as it loses the sheen of newness with an audience. The next stage after an overnight success could best be characterized as “Oh- it has always been that way!”

Advocates of fire and life safety systems have to be pursuing the concept of being an overnight success in every locale that is in an area where sprinklers are not taken for granted. The job is not only long from being over, but increasingly has to compete with a lot of other factors in modern life.

I have heard it said that history often repeats itself. Or, that there are new lessons to be learned from tragic deaths in dwellings. I tend to disagree with that statement that it history is repeating itself, but rather that it is telling the same story over and over again because we haven't done anything to change the situations. The lesson will be repeated over and over again, until we finally get it.

In the field of fire protection residential sprinklers this is a story that bears repeating. Kudos to the Orange County Fire Department for putting it in a new format for wider distribution. Kudos for those fire organizations that are still bringing the argument forward to their city councils. Kudos to the individuals who are still performing analysis such as Jim Ford in the City of Scottsdale. Kudos for all of those who are doing everything they can to turn a lifelong pursuit into an overnight success.

Recently I was approached by a student that was looking for a copy of a book I developed once to document the evolution of the residential sprinkler movement called “Alpha to Omega” I have now produced the book in a PDF format and can provide copies of it electronically. If anyone out there is in need of the information, just send me an email at ron@fireforceone.com and I will send you back the electronic file. It is available for use by fire prevention bureaus that are attempting to educate others in the field of residential sprinklers.

As of the writing of this column a code amendment is under consideration to make residential sprinklers a part of the code requirements. Some have predicted that it won't happen. Others are hopeful that it will. And, when it does happen it will be heralded as a significant moment in the annals of fire protection history. It will not be an overnight success – it will be a professional success.

And everyone that has contributed to the movement over time should be justifiably proud that they have helped make it happen.