



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Just a Job

Well, is it? Is firefighting just a job? I'm asking this question because of a recent conversation with a firefighter friend. He was lamenting to me that he had witnessed some very disappointing dialogue as he had traveled around the country visiting firehouses. The crux of his concern was that we have lost some of the spark that the fire service used to possess. I asked him what spark meant. He responded that many people have told him or have demonstrated to him as far as they are concerned being a firefighter is "just another job," and that the pay and the time off were more important than the pride of being a firefighter.

Well, I for one know that at one point it wasn't just a job. When I entered the fire service they had some pretty atrocious working conditions. Yet, I looked forward to going to work every day. We had some absolutely pitiful salaries and benefits but I never ever considered leaving the occupation for something that was more lucrative. This probably speaks to the question of whether or not I was mentally unstable as a young man. On the other hand it might speak for the perception I had that when I first became a firefighter it was truly something special. It was something to be treasured. It was something to be so proud of that it superseded any other considerations of my life.

What has happened in the fire profession? Have we really lost our inner sense of self worth and converted the lifestyle and culture of the fire family into another blue-collar occupation? In other writings I have discussed the concept of the "good ole days," and have reflected upon the changes that I have witnessed in the 37 years in this business. Have we changed so much we are no longer what we were? I join my friend in acknowledging the fact that I think there is a different attitude and approach to the fire service today than there was back in my days as a rookie probationary firefighter.

In the first place we have a lot more firefighters that get paid to do what they do today than there ever was at my nascent career entry. Over the years the entire fire protection industry has moved more and more towards full time and paid status and further away from the concepts of volunteerism and community involvement that spark the creation of those fire agencies.

One event that I can recall with nostalgia was the night they had a dinner to disband the volunteer fire department for a community that I was working for. As a young firefighter at the time, I was invited to participate as a photographer to memorialize the occasion. Looking back on it now there was a lot more emotions with accompanying stress and strain associated with that retirement than I possibly recognized at the time. I can recall the camaraderie, the spirit; even the rowdiness of that group. But I witnessed a sadness and anger too. These aging gentlemen who were handing over the reins of the fire department from a volunteer department to a full time force gave us a great deal of our initial



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motivation and unbridled enthusiasm for the department. I'm not sure if we ever properly honored them or recognized the fact that they had exerted a tremendous influence on my generation.

For many departments, that transition is the experience that has not only faded in memory, but has been obscured to the point where people don't even recall it. Because we tend to hand along a lot of the traditions of the fire service from person to person, it is not too difficult for me to see that one of the reasons fire departments today are not like the ones that I participated in during the 60's is that we have a totally different transition from one generation to the next. We now retire firefighter's one person at a time for a variety of reasons natural retirements and job disabilities that result in a loss of experience.

I too travel around the State and even the nation. I get frequent opportunities to talk to a wide variety of people about their attitudes and enthusiasm for their fire service careers. I will readily admit that I have also witnessed the same kind of "it's just a job" attitude among firefighters as my friend has. And, I will also admit that I have found individuals who still feel that this job is an absolute delight.

The behavior that I believe is the most depressing and the firehouses are an attitude of "what's in it for me." The job of firefighter has always been focused on what can we do for others. There seems to be a deterioration of that loyalty to the community, with a self-centered if not outright selfish approach, by some of the individuals to provide fire protection. Furthermore, there seems to be an increase in an attitude that if you want me to do something you have to pay me for everything. I am not going to argue the fact that we should have a fair wage and that we should be adequately compensated for what we do. But I have seen departments recently almost go almost catatonic over introducing new ideas into the fire service unless they were somehow or other made part of the meet and confer process and negotiated into existence before they are even proven.

If we had started off that way 50 years ago, the fire service would still look like it did 50 years ago. Many of the things that we brought into this fire industry were paid for with the sacrifices of men and women who went out and learned to do things the hard way. They weren't concerned about compensation. They had compassion and cared about their community so deeply that they made the commitment and then pursued its acceptance within the fire service.

Another thing that I find depressing is the increasing isolation of the departmental members from the very community they serve. I know that a lot of our emergency calls these days are dealing with some pretty usual segments of our society. Many of our medics are exhausted from having to work on homeless people, alcoholics and a variety of other of our societal outcasts. Yet these patients are human beings that are part of the fabric of the community that we have sworn to protect. Closing the doors on the firehouses and isolating ourselves from that community and then not coming out until somebody



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has an emergency in progress, will ultimately result in alienation much more severe than we can reasonably anticipate.

My last observation is probably going to be real offensive. But, it's an honest response on my part. That is the fact that more and more firefighters have grown so dependent on overtime to maintain a basic lifestyle and others have focused so much of their attention on their off-duty time that we no longer have fire departments that we deserve, we only have fire departments we can afford.

There is something missing in our culture. There is an air of hostility in the fire service between labor and management that is counterproductive. There is disenchantment in the voices of young firefighters who frankly haven't been around long enough to be disenchanted. There is an anger in the older firefighters that is inappropriate in the twilight years of their careers. There is a steely edge of our relationship with the policy makers in our communities that is cutting both ways.

Where will it all end? Well, I don't know anymore about that than you do. I spend a great deal of my time reading history books with the fire service and I know that almost every generation that has gone through change in our profession. Each generation has lamented the fact that the present is never as much fun as the past was. There has always been an anxiety about losing something as organizations undergo this transition from the present into the future. The rowdyism of the volunteer fire service in the late 1800's was so destructive that it subsequently resulted in creation of the paid fire service and the professional fire service. The paid and professional fire service went through tremendous transition converting from horse drawn apparatus to motorized fire apparatus. We have always faced turbulence and turmoil through the process of change.

I am not asking us to go back to the way things used to be. What I would like to see is for the fire service to once again become a haven for the most unique form of human being; the person who cares more for community than they care for themselves.

Is my friend right; is this just a job, or is it a career, a profession, a calling. If it's the latter, then let's show our spirit by ...