



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

No Laughing Matter

How many people remember Fire Marshal Bill? Jim Carey made himself famous with that character. He also became a focus of controversy when he, as the infamous Fire Marshal Bill set fire to himself. Carey was trying to use stupidity to demonstrate humor but it was not received very well by some of us in the fire profession. By laughing at that scenario, it seemed as if it was condoning an inappropriate form of behavior. In spite of the humor it that could only result in some idiotic person trying to copy the same thing and suffering dire consequences.

But, that controversy went away. Mr. Carey is now a multi-millionaire movie star. But he wasn't the only one who set some bad examples. How many of you remember the MacGyver series that showed our entrepreneurial hero escaping from a dire set of circumstances by setting off a sprinkler head that resulted in all of the other sprinkler heads in the same room going off? When that event hit television it also created a big uproar. Letters were sent to television writers, producers, directors and even entire networks expressing a professional concern that the image continued to perpetuate the myth that when one sprinkler goes off they all go off. Humm!

I wonder how many people wrote nasty letters to Steve McQueen after the film Towering Inferno was produced. If any of you remember that movie you may recall the way the fire was ultimately extinguished in a high rise building. The technique was to blow up a water tank on the roof and have the water filter down through the various floors extinguishing the fire as it went. Now how realistic is that?

Mr. Carey used fire for humor. Mr. McQueen represented himself as a fire chief and a hero. What story do we want to spend most of our time being overly concerned about?

What brought this to mind to me personally was watching television the other night. There is a TV series called "America's Favorite Videos". In the particular video that sparked my reaction, a school teacher was holding a birthday party with what appeared to be kindergarten or first grade children. They are all sitting around in a circle. Suspending from the top of the camera angle is a piñata. Typical of anybody who watches AFV movies most people expect a piñata shot to result in somebody getting smacked with a stick. Well, they were partially right. A small child was standing in the room carrying the obligatory stick and the piñata was sent swinging back and forth after the blind fold had been tied. Smack, swoosh, smack, swoosh. Smack, gush, the piñata had been tied to the struts of a sprinkler head and it discharged. The small children immediately began to scatter and shriek moving away from the cone of water that was being discharged at the time. Interestingly enough as soon as they got outside of the cone of water they stopped, flipped back over to their backsides and started laughing about what



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was happening to the remainder of the people. Guess what, all of the sprinkler heads did not go off at the same time. The only one that was discharged was the one that was violently jerked out of position.

Everybody was laughing. But is it funny? One might classify that scenario as an example of stupid human tricks. Chances are, if that sprinkler head would have gone off outside in the middle of July, children would have scrambled to get under the cone of water not run away from it.

But what is the story in this event? It is the humor. Rather than being offended by the video, I laughed along with everybody else.

Perhaps our best approach about the serious business of sprinkler involvement ought to take a non serious journey in a different direction. How about using humor?

In my personal collection over the years I have received many cartoons involving sprinklers that have been humorous. My favorite is one showing Smokey Bear installing sprinklers in the overhead of the forest. Another was done by an international political cartoonist showing a bunch of maids sweeping up an office and noting that sprinklers “had been installed” and “it is about time”.

I also have a collection of film clips from various movies that showed someone setting off sprinkler head that result in the discharge of all of the sprinkler heads as on MacGyver. Sometimes it was the villain, sometimes it was the hero. In either case it certainly wasn't very realistic.

This story took another turn aboard a recent airline flight. I am sure all of you are familiar with the spiel that is given by the airline attendants speaking about things you can and cannot do aboard your flight. Among those is the idea that you are not supposed to smoke in the lavatory. The common routine is for the attendant to tell you that you are not allowed to smoke there. If you do smoke in there you will activate a smoke detector. Sounds like common sense to me.

However, Airline Attendant David Pinkwasser put an entirely new spin on it, one that I found quite humorous. It goes as follows: “Ladies and Gentlemen”, individuals aboard this aircraft are not allowed to smoke in the lavatories. Each lavatory has been equipped with a smoke detector that will activate in the event that you do smoke in there. It is against the federal law to remove or tamper with a smoke detector – besides that, this airline has gone to the extent of installing a sprinkler system in the bathroom – and if you do smoke in there and set fire to the room that sprinkler will go off. I need to warn you that we have connected the sprinkler with that blue water system that is used in the commode. I have a sneaky hunch that you will emerge like one of the Blue Men from the Blue Man Group in Las Vegas if you set fire to our lavatory.

Everybody on the aircraft laughed.



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The issue is not whether there is rationale for us to laugh at our own seriousness but whether we can laugh at other people who use humor with a focus on a positive outcome. After the airline attendant finished his spiel and came to the back of the aircraft I asked him when he came up with the joke. He informed me that he had made the joke up after he had heard some discussions of sprinklers.

So is joking about sprinklers the same as being against sprinklers? I don't think so. As a matter of fact at one point in my career I contributed a joke to a fire service book on jokes authored by Chief Jim Evans of the Anchorage Fire Department. That story went something like this:

A young man lost his lower left leg in an automobile accident and was equipped with a very expensive wooden leg. Because of the expense of replacing the leg, the young man went to his insurance agent and asked if he could purchase a policy in case the wooden leg, which was combustible, was destroyed in a fire. His insurance agent provided him with a rather expensive premium quotation which the young man rejected. He said, "isn't there something else they can do"?

The following morning he received a return phone call from the same insurance agent saying "congratulations, I have obtained for you a 50% reduction". The young man was delighted with the offer but went further asking why the new rate was available.

The agent replied, "because I looked it up in my tables and it said that any wooden structure protected by an overhead sprinkler is automatically available for a 50% reduction."

Well, so far I have used two potty jokes to make my point but maybe there is something funny about sprinklers, especially when they actually do good. Especially when people see the fact that sprinklers are not sacred cows to be fought over like perpetual trophies in an annual conflict between the advocates and the opponents of sprinkler technology.

As I was recalling the AFV show, I was reminded of a circumstance that I once faced. We had a convention center that had an annual conference of a large number of vendors. Someone got the bright idea to put a big banner up across the front of the building under the outside portion of the building. Nobody noticed that the banner had actually been attached to the building by tying it off with the sprinkler links. The rope was about the size of the normal white clothesline. It went through the link and as the banner was raised into position it was fairly loose. However, as the day went on with wind was blowing back and forth, the banner eventually ripped off one of the set of links resulting in a discharge of a sprinkler. As if that wasn't enough, one of the workers in the area responded to this dilemma by coming over and jerking hard on the other side of the banner which automatically made other sprinkler heads discharge. Well, guess what, all the heads didn't go off, just the two that were violently pulled out of location by another stupid human trick.



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Realistic? I think so. As a matter of fact I have seen sprinkler heads shorn off by forklifts. I have seen sprinkler heads damaged with a golf club (I don't have time to tell that story) and a whole host of other things that only go to prove one thing.

When you knock a sprinkler head off all of them don't go off automatically. Humm, isn't that what the issue is we are trying to solve?

To recap the idea of collecting the humorous side of all of this, over the years I have noticed that more often than not, stupid human tricks do a better job of teaching lessons than pomp and circumstance – and even our pleadings for common sense.

David Pinkwasser's joke about blue water in a sprinkler system is based on the premise that the sprinkler system would go off and put the fire out. The school teachers' embarrassment in tying a piñata to a sprinkler head is probably well learned by all of the other teachers at that school.

Will Rogers, one of America's earliest humorists often said that he got most of the really funny things to talk about straight out of the newspaper. Instead of railing against the creative juices of producers and directors who perpetuate myths in fictional movies, perhaps we ought to be taking advantage of the fact that human nature is what we are attempting to alter and to use all of these humorous scenarios as examples of how we can't take fire protection for granted. We need to teach people to protect those sprinkler heads not fear them.

If you happen to have some other humorous examples of this type of activity, please feel free to share them with me and I will perhaps find an opportunity to forward them as content in future columns.

While we all recognize that fire protection is no laughing matter, the idea that we should take umbrage with every misuse by artisans in films and TV can easily be balanced out by a few laughs from the real world.