



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Remember When

When were you born? That is a very important date for most folks. Most everybody can think back upon the time during which they became very much aware of whom they were and what they were and they can begin to remember their experiences from that point forward. I have had this conversation with a variety of people and it amazes me as to what age that seems to have occurred in people. My own daughter, I swear can remember things when she was two years old. I personally am back to about five years old and that is as early as I can recall. If the date you were born starts the clock ticking for a series of other events that has to do with history it might have an impact on how you see the world.

Yes, history. You are part of history. Maybe the part you played was relatively small. Maybe your part has a certain amount of significance in a certain context or you might be one of those rare individuals who have truly made a significant difference and everybody knows who you are and what you are. Our history starts the day we are born. Everything that occurred before that we can read about, but we can't experience. Through a series of other events that have specific time frames to them that we ought too many people come to an understanding how their experience puts them into the context of history.

For example, there is the period of time when we start school. Starting in kindergarten we start developing perceptions of knowledge and information that whether we remember it or not gets stored back in that reservoir of the subconscious part of our minds. Then there is the point in time in which we actively get engaged in being a teenager along with all that stage of life experimentation and challenges. Then we become and a adult and or life begins to play itself out. We involve ourselves in getting a job or continuing our education or whatever. The point is that each of these steps along the way we acquire information that gives us perspective on how we process information from the outside world.

I would like to draw sort of an artificial line in the sand here and talk about when you became interested in the fire service. You will note, I didn't say get a job as a firefighter. When did you become interested in the fire service? In many cases that is generated by exposure to family members and that comes along with a certain amount of history. I have talked to individuals who are as many as five generations deep in the fire service. They have a totally different perspective on things then someone who just accidentally became a firefighter over a period of time.

That date of when you became interested in being a firefighter also applies to people who are not firefighters. There are lots of individuals in our society who have aspired to enter this profession that have been denied for a variety of reasons. Some of them have to do with physical aspects of being capable of doing this. Others have to do with a competitive aspect of trying time and time again of being unsuccessful and then lastly there are people who love the fire service but have not intent to becoming a firefighter. In another section of this report we talk about a concept called "fire buffs".



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Then there is a smaller group of individuals who are interested in the fire service and who actually become one. Their history begins with their date of hire. That is the date that the stop being a candidate and start being a probie. There are many individuals that have had that experience. But that number pales in comparison with the number who has either aspired or has an interest. One of my more interesting experiences as a fire chief was conducting a hiring process once in which there were 2,000 candidates for six jobs. I couldn't help but wonder as I looked out on the assembly of candidates an ask myself the question of: How many of those people would eventually give up and go on to become other things in life, i.e., doctors, lawyers, attorneys, ditch diggers, airline pilots, or whatever?

Then there is another important date, retirement. That is the day you are asked to hang it up. It is traumatic for some, a goal for others. But it is also a reflection of a distance from the day you entered the job to the day you leave it that reflects your experience and exposure to the contemporary fire service. During that same time frame you will either learn a lot about the way things used to be or you will learn a lot about the way things are today and in some cases there will be reconciliation between the past and the present as you work your way towards the future. In other cases there are individuals who never quite grasp the significance of why things are the way they are and live their entire careers by only dealing with the here and now.

Although it is not highly desirable to talk about in the context of the living, but it is intended that sooner or later we all expire. None of us are looking forward to that date either. However, it is also an ending point.

The reason for drawing this entire analogy is to talk a little bit about the concept of history, experience and tradition as having a stair stepping effect that leads the modern fire service to either understand or to misunderstand its own culture.

You may have heard the old cliché that the fire service is 300 years of tradition unhampered by progress. In other writings I have taken on that cliché' and so to be consistent I will restate it here that the contention that we haven't progressed is pure poppycock. The fact is that over a period of 300 years the fire service has changed in order of magnitude many times. I think what people get hung up on is the fact that they only see the generation just before themselves and they only have a chance to really observe the generation right after themselves and the period of time engaged in that is about sixty years. Maybe seventy for those that is real fortunate. The reality is we think we are locked into a traditional solution because that is the only thing we know. Reality is that if you go back three generations or six generations or even more in the past, you will begin to see that there have been huge strides made in how we perform as a profession.



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That is all the more reason why we should be reading about the history of the fire service. I don't think it is even reasonable to expect everybody to know everything about the past of their occupation. But I do believe that it is reasonable to have them understand the framework of their profession. Doctors do it. They know the history of the caduceus. Lawyers do it. They know the legacy of Roman lawmakers. Engineers do it to a very large degree, with reference to the pyramids and the great engineering achievements of the past. But in the fire service our past has sometimes been rolled up into a little ball called tradition and spun out as if it is all very simplistic and straightforward.

If we go back and look at that stair stepping affect of awareness, schooling, job entry, retirement and expiration there are numerous opportunities to do essentially three things with regard to the history of the fire service.

The first thing is to gain an understanding of everything that happened before your career. It is not probably going to be all that important for you to remember something you learned in your sixth grade history class about the signing of the Magna Carta you should be reasonably familiar with the concept called America Burning as you explore your career.

The second step is you should be paying real close attention to the events that happen around you during your career. How many of the readers of this book can talk about the Coconut Grove fire. How many of you can talk about September 11? How many of you can talk about an event that just happened last week? The concept of history is that it is made up with tiny brush strokes of experience that occur to individuals all across the landscape exercising the same profession. As a former firefighter I chased a lot of fire trucks. During the writing of this particular column, I had an opportunity to follow one of our local engine companies to a large fire in an agricultural area recently that involved a huge amount of smoke but no damage. The pictures that I captured that particular day have been given to the fire department because they reflect a day in the life of the individuals who were on that call. It may not make any big difference in the history of that fire department but on the other hand other events may and should leave their mark on their legacy of departments.

The third thing we can do regarding history is to do our very level best to be as accurate as possible about really transpires. Documentation, photographs, copies of original records, copies of original writings, etc., again are like the brush strokes of experience.

You may recall a philosopher named Santayana who once stated "those who cannot remember the past are doomed to recreate his mistakes". It is that context that provides us with an understanding of why it is important for us to understand the history, the tradition, the legacy and the legend of the American Fire Service.



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It is reasonable to expect that someone else may pick up this task of writing a similar document at some point in the future. I would anticipate that at least 100 years from today there will be someone who feels compelled to tell the story of what happened in this century as opposed to what happened in the last. I feel that same way as I read the works of Costello and his extensive history of the New York City Fire Department. I wonder what is happening to our collective memory of the last twenty or thirty years. Our institutional memory is evaporating with the retirement and then the expiration of each generation. Do your best to provide a small but important effort to preserve the remembrance of our past by making sure that the written history of your department is prepared, preserved and published. .