



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Route 66

In the 1960s there was a television show called "Route 66". In that show there were two individuals who drove a Chevy Corvette across the country. As they live had various encounters and told their various stories they were mostly in communities that were based upon America's small town syndrome.

As far as I know Route 66 is still there. But, there is a high degree of possibility that it is being bypassed in many parts of the country by the super highways of life. For the most part, people can drive coast to coast today and if they have a big enough gas tank, they wouldn't have to interact with small town America at all. Yet, there are still thousands of communities out there that are representative of that lifestyle and as a result they also represent the type of fire protection that is predominant across the landscape.

Of course, I am referring to the volunteer fire service. I used to joke about the fact that I could almost always count on a volunteer fire department when I drove into town and witnessed at least three phenomena.

The first of these would be a sign saying that I was entering a community and that the population was between 100 and 2,500 people. The second thing I would look for was the layout of the town. If I could see the main thoroughfare as it disappeared into the distance as a straight line and if I could look to either side of the highway and pretty much see the limit of the residential property, I knew I was going to find a volunteer fire department. The last criterion was the fact that as I drove through town I would look for the largest antenna in the air and almost always find the volunteer fire station. In more than a few of those cases, I found the full time police department right next door.

That last statement is important. There are no volunteer police stations in the United States. There are many volunteer fire departments out there that are still providing protection.

But, many of the communities that I have rolled through in the 60s and 70s as a field instructor for the State Fire Marshal's Office, no longer had volunteer fire departments. Many of them had been converted to full time fire departments. The reason has nothing to do with the spirit and intent of those volunteers as a matter of economics and demand. Some of those communities have gone from 2,500 people to 50,000. Some of those areas where we used to be able to see limits of residential development are now blanketed as far as the eye can see with tract homes. If Darwin were alive today writing a story about the evolution of organizations what you would say is that the fire service has evolved!



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Now, firmly entrenched in the lineage of fire department evolution is the concept of the combination fire department. The combination fire department is a hybrid of the concept of volunteerism matched carefully with the idea that you have to have full time personnel available to deal with certain demands. This phenomenon is likely to continue because it leads to the evolution of a combination department into a full time career department.

If you don't think this is true read the history of fire departments as they merge from the city of origin through the development of their first volunteer fire department up through the population when it hits 15,000 to 20,000 and then bear witness to what most fire departments look like when they reach a population of 50,000 to 75,000 people. It is a natural phenomenon. It should not be denied. It is not going to be altered by people wishing it to happen slower or faster, it is strictly a case of changing to meet changing times.

The scenario I just described is not unique. As a matter of fact, I often remind people that the New York City Fire Department where at one time consisted of an amalgamation of large numbers of volunteer fire departments. They evolved and so did everybody else.

When I go back to my route 66 metaphor, I also note that in almost all cases when you drive through those emerging communities, the fire station was a fundamental infrastructure that came about because of a perceived need that no matter how small a community is, it still needs fire protection. That fire station that was built to meet that fundamental need may or may not survive the process of evolution. Fire stations designed for the volunteer fire service therefore have some considerations that should be evaluated as the organization changes over time.

For purposes of this discussion, I would suggest that volunteer fire departments have three stages of fire station development. They are:

1. Fundamental Facilities
2. Transitional Facilities
3. Permanent Facilities

First let's talk about the idea of a fundamental fire station. Let's just put the word limited in front of the word fundamental. When an area begins to realize that it needs some form of fire protection it is usually impossible to come up with large amounts of money to provide that fire protection. How many fire departments have their origin in the idea that a community bought a used fire truck and parked it at a filling station? I don't know how many but I certainly have observed a few in my career. It is not uncommon for limited and fundamental fire departments to buy the fire truck first and not even have a station to put it in. I have seen that too.



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For purposes of community planning, the concept of a limited fire station does not have to be primitive. It just has to be fundamental. What goes in a fundamental firehouse?

The Gertrude Stein admonition that a rose is a rose was not necessarily applied to a building that houses fire apparatus. A fire station is not just a fire station. It is a community asset that has to be configured to match the community's resources and to be consistent with its needs. Ranging from the most fundamental facility up to the most sophisticated facility, a fire station is an investment of community necessity.