



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Rubber Hits the Road

Have you ever been out of town, on vacation, or on a business trip, lying in a motel and you hear the sound of a siren coming down the street and you just know that it's a fire truck? My wife claims that I can pick out the distinctive sounds of a half a dozen responding fire apparatus by the sound of the siren, the engine noise and the accompanying squeaks and squeals a fire truck makes as it goes down the highway. Of course, if they use an air horn, that is a dead giveaway. Reality is that I am not always right – but about 99% of the time I am.

That is where the rubber hits the road. That fire truck going to the scene of an emergency demanding that people get out of its way and give access to the right of way is a tradition going all the way back to the colorful prints made by Currier and Ives in the late 1800's. But there is more to that story than meets the eye if you ever get out of that bed and follow that fire truck and see where it's going and what it can do when it gets there.

I recently had that experience. In fact I had it a lot. What I am referring to is going to a lot of small towns in the USA to take a look at the fire service. There are still a lot of fire departments in existence in this country that are totally different from the public's perception created on TV. What public? I am talking about John Q public! I am talking about the fact that the vast majority of people in this country lives in suburban and urban communities and has developed a concept in their mind of what the fire service is all about what if is related to them by two separate images. The first and probably the most pervasive is the image of the American firefighter that emerged from September 11, 2001. Who can doubt the powerful influence of that image? The second image is that, that has emerged by the public being inundated by "play acting" of people like Kurt Russell in *Backdraft*, and the stars of *Rescue Me*.

Neither of these images really fulfills the depth and breadth of what the fire service is all about and neither do justice to the real drumbeat of the American Fire Service; it's that response down main street at one o'clock in the morning in small town America that also tells the story.

I am very sensitive to the fact that in my columns I frequently write about the family and friends of the fire service that I have had a chance to visit with. In this particular article I am not going to talk about the specific locale from which these observations are drawn, but rather to put them into the context of a bigger picture. The picture I am interested in painting is the difference between the haves and have-nots.

A significant number of people who read this magazine are probably from suburban or urban fire departments. While I have never really closely examined the mailing list of the magazine I do know that it has readership of about 55,000 people. I also know that a number of people who read it and who comment to me come from fire departments that are very similar to the ones that I have been involved



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in urban America. But I also know there is another fire service out there. It is one that is struggling very hard to survive. It is fire service on a shoestring.

So, the next you go on vacation and you find yourself staying in a community of around 3,000 people and you are getting ready to pull up the covers up to your neck in a bed and breakfast, have you ever thought what kind of fire protection might be down the street from you?

The next time you are out there you might be well advised before you crawl into that snug bed to go down the street and find out. What I am witnessing out in the field is a large number of volunteer fire departments that are struggling mightily against an increasing demand that is unsupported by society in general.

What I mean by unsupported is that many communities don't have enough money to buy modern fire apparatus. For those of you in the urban fire service do you ever wonder what happens to most of those old pumpers that you sell off into used fire truck dealers? They end up in firehouses continuing to do yeomen's duty for probably another thirty years after you washed your hands of them. Have you ever wonder where a lot of the old protective clothing that has gone that you turned into the warehouse when you got your new PPE?

Well, the answer may be right there in that same firehouse that might be called to your motel or resort. I am not going to try to debate the question of whether or not you are happy or unhappy with what you find when you go to that station. If you happen to be a well-paid full time career firefighter you might be sadly disappointed. But you ought to take the time to look past what you see and start seeing what you need to observe.

Let me tell you a few things that exist in those fire departments. Dedication; commitment; loyalty; compassion; and yes, even competency.

As I mentioned before I am not going to talk about departments but one of the things that I have discovered by visiting many small fire departments over the last couple of years is that they are every bit as committed to providing a quality of service to their community as anybody else who puts on a badge. And, yes there is conflict. I believe it is tragic that the fire service has divided itself into camps of us versus them when in fact it is really a case of the haves and have-nots.

In examining most of these fire departments budgets one of the first things that you learn is that fire protection is an incredibly low priority for many local governments. When you go into many small communities and they don't have enough money to keep the lights on at City Hall they are reluctant to invest much in fire protection.



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Further, it has been my observation that when that community begins to grow up and begins to realize what risk, hazards and values are on the table many of those same individuals who served that community as a volunteer evolve and turn into paid firefighters. Whatta metamorphosis. It really bothers me when I hear paid firefighters belittle the volunteers as being unworthy. And just to be equitable I find it really disturbing when volunteer firemen belittle or deride their paid brethren as a result of making statements that relates in the firehouse to an old and often quoted profession.

We are all, after all in the same business; the saving of lives and property. The most significant difference between a firefighter and small town America and a firefighter in downtown Gotham is the luck of the draw. Population breeds the money to have a paid fire department. Pride and performance breeds the department being a good one

Don't you find it interesting for example that many firefighters serve, as volunteers when they go back to their own community are embarrassed to say so for fear of criticism? Don't you find it interesting that many firefighters who are demanding high wages and extraordinary benefits live in communities in which the firefighters receive none of those and yet they feel perfectly safe residing there?

If we were to move together as a profession small town America in Gotham USA we should have the aim of getting on the same sheet of music as quickly as we can. It is not us versus them. It is not the haves versus the have-nots. What it really is is the family of the fire service. We are all in this together.

I recall teaching a class to a group of volunteer firefighters in one state in which I was extremely complimentary of their dedication and loyalty to duty. Just as a joke I remarked to them that I felt that they were so good that if I were their chief I would have them all tattooed as being owned by me, the fire chief. During the next coffee break, one firefighter came to the front of the room, pulled his shirtsleeve up and there on his right shoulder was the shoulder patch of his fire department tattooed on his upper arm.

I have no idea where that young man is today. But I do know that whatever made him put that shoulder patch on his shoulder is probably deeply engrained in his desire to be a part of something that we need to sustain in our business. So, the next time that you are on vacation and you hear that siren going down the street maybe you ought to get out of bed, put your clothes on and drive down to see what is at the other end of that event. You may be shocked, you may be surprised but the one thing you will be is you will be in the real world of where the rubber hits the road.