



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Santayana Syndrome

Jorge Agustín Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana y Borrás, known as George Santayana (December 16, 1863 – September 26, 1952), was a philosopher, essayist, poet, and novelist. He is probably most often quoted regarding a statement he made about remembering the past: “He who does not remember the past is forever condemned to repeat it.”

What has that got to do with modern times? The answer is found in the fact that we have wasted a lot of our energy in the advocacy of residential fire sprinkler technology because we have refused to accept the body of work from the past by constantly reinventing it in contemporary times. If you are a sprinkler advocate and are a strong supporter of overcoming the obstacles being thrown in our way, how well informed are you regarding the history of this technology? What documents should be part of your library? In short, how much institutional memory do you have of sprinklers, or are you basing your support on a sense that this is a “brand new way” of doing things?

Recently, I had an opportunity to go through my library to look at some of the early correspondence. In reading some of these materials, I was struck by how much they look like contemporary versions on the argument over sprinklers. To be more specific, why are we still arguing over the myth that when one sprinkler head goes off, they all go off? Not only is that stupid, but anybody that repeats it is misrepresenting reality in a form best called “a bold face lie.”

This research also caused me to remember how much I discovered when I was working on the San Clemente Residential Sprinkler Ordinance in the early 1980s. I found *Saturday Evening Post* advertisements by sprinkler companies on installing basement sprinklers. Here is a research question: how many firefighters have died in basement fires since 1928? Next question: how many more are going to die in basement fires over the next 50 years?

When I wrote *Alpha to Omega*, I was startled to find that there had already been numerous reactions to the question of whether sprinklers were cost effective or not. Apparently, that is a question being posed that has been answered, initially, by Grinnell and the other pioneers, and is still being mirrored in the arguments of almost all of the current advocates.

Let me be more specific about some of the documentation. John Viniello published an article entitled “An Old Idea with a New Technology” that serves as a perfect model of how long some of these points have been debated. The 1985 issue of *New Technology Update*, which was a document resulting from reprints of previous *Sprinkler Quarterly* articles, provides a lot of the basic information that hasn't changed in 25 years.

How many more tests do we have to run? In my files are slides of our tests in San Clemente. These slides sit alongside a flyer and brochure put out by the Rural/Metro Fire Sprinkler Test, published by Bob Edwards and Bob Butler. The words of Harry Shaw from the United States Fire Administration resonate



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even today, “that the quick reaction sprinkler will soon be used in residences, hospitals, nursing homes, hotels and motels, and boarding homes, with the result that fire deaths will be reduced significantly.”

Yet, the headlines today reveal catastrophic fires in these same types of occupancies that, for some reason or other, are not being sprinklered. A recent Canadian fire resulted in the deaths of over 30 elderly people.

From my perspective, we have come a long way since 1982. But, at the same time, we have not overcome the discrimination and indifference regarding how sprinklers can save lives and property. We have been betrayed by politicians and we have been attacked by builders because of our beliefs. Using another verbal cliché, “the beat goes on.”

Early pioneers are getting older. Some of them are no longer with us. This is why I would like to encourage all sprinkler advocates to become more knowledgeable of the institutional memory of this movement. There is a doctrine issue here. Do we really believe in what we believe in? What would Harry Shaw say if he were alive today? How about Lou Witzman? Are the test results from Fort Lauderdale to be ignored? What about Operation San Francisco? I don't want to continue to belabor the past, so it is important that we focus on the present and the future. Fire protection contractors should be commended for trying to keep some of these stories alive because they provide a fundamental foundation of the philosophy of modern fire protection.

George Santayana was quoted in the opening of this article. Perhaps it is time to update his commentary by stating unequivocally that the future belongs to those who act in concert with the past. The action I would recommend to anyone who reads this article is that they create a library of past success. In addition, they should go to it frequently to find samples of this success. Once you have compared your attempt with those in the past, you will then be able to measure how your contribution takes us closer to our national goal of preventing the unnecessary loss of life and property to fire.

About the Author:

Chief Coleman was *FPC's* Person of the Year for 1989.

For more information contact: Ronny J. Coleman, Fireforceone,
8866 Saint Anthony Court, Elk Grove, CA 95624; (916)
689-5363, Cell (916) 799-5363, Fax 916-686-5266, ron@fireforceone.com