



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Saved by the Bell

Probably the world champion of being saved by the bell was the fictional Rocky Balboa. If you were a fan of those movies you probably witnessed more than once that when Rocky was on his last legs, then the bell went off, allowing him to stagger back to the corner and be treated for his various wounds. Invariably he came back out swinging in the next round and overcame his adversary. In Rocky's case the bell was an indication that he had a few moments of safety before he had to go out to the center of the boxing ring and take his punishment again.

We in the fire service often use bells too as a symbol of our recognition of tragedy. Witness the ritual that occurs at many fire service funerals. Every year the bell tolls for the National Fallen Firefighter Memorial where we solemnly ring a bell indicating the last alarm for many of our fallen comrades.

And then there is a bell that we in the fire service are very familiar with that is OK to hear, it rings right in the middle of potential tragedy but is the opposite of tragedy – it's good news. It's the sound made by a sprinkler bell that signals that the sprinklers inside have attacked a fire. The bell is the systems way of letting us know it. This bell sometimes goes by the name of water gong. I know I have heard my fair share of them go off in my career. They are a simple mechanical device that clearly illustrate that something has happened to a building that contains a sprinkler system to cause the system to activate. That loud clanging noise usually means an emergency is in progress.

And, that is what a student at the National Fire Academy found one evening while he was walking back from the city of Emmitsburg on his way to the dormitory. It was shortly after 1:00 AM on Sunday, May 25th, 2008. As he was walking down the street he could hear the bell clanging in the distance and he could clearly identify its location as he came closer and closer. In this case the bell was attached to the outside of a building called the Carriage House.

If you have ever been to the National Fire Academy it is likely you have gone by it. If you are a person who enjoys a better than average lunch or dinner you are likely to have actually gone inside of it. I know I have many times.

The curious firefighter was quickly joined by several others as they walked around the building twice to make sure that it was not their imagination. According to the County Communications Center, they received the alarm at 1:07 AM. They immediately responded the Vigilant Hose Company. The Carriage House address of 200 South Seton Avenue is literally right behind the fire house. It is literally within rock throwing distance.

The fire had occurred in the kitchen area. Moreover, an interesting aspect of the fire was that the



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sprinkler activation and the initial attack by the firefighters were all caught on a security tape. A single sprinkler head had caught the fire. It had kept it confined long enough for the fire crews to extinguish the final embers and restore the place to normalcy. The whole thing was over by 0400. Another save!

Our opportunity to return back to that restaurant was saved by the bell. Not only was the 150 year old building saved in that short period of time, but the event converted a reluctant restaurateur to a fire sprinkler advocate.

In this particular case the ringing bell was accompanied by a fairly large amount of smoke that could only be seen by looking into the exterior windows of the carriage house. It is possible that without that bell ringing the smoke could have been nothing but a silent witness to a fire that could have gone to flashover like thousands of them do every year in this country.

The Vigilant Hose Company responded in a timely fashion like we would expect them to do. But what if the sprinkler had not been there and no one noticed the smoke. This is a story that has been told a million times. Unfortunately it is still ignored by many. It continues to unfold throughout the nation on a regular basis. In this case a single sprinkler head had gone off on the interior of this restaurant confining the fire to the area of origin. It continued to smolder as the water continued to discharge and eventually firefighters had to force their entry into the building and the final job of extinguishing the fire by removing the smoke and attempting to put the restaurateur back in business.

The miracle is that it happened probably for the millionth time. A single sprinkler head kept that building from being consumed by fire in the early morning hours. I didn't read this story in a magazine. I was told this story by the owner of the restaurant himself. The manager and his father are the joint owners of the Carriage House. I happened to be enjoying a lunch meeting at his place when he came over to talk to several of our members. Wayne Powell encouraged him to reveal the story. He was happy to cooperate.

After mentioning to him that all of us have a keen interest in the outcome of sprinkler fires he proceeded to tell us the rest of the story. It started with the fact that he was very angry when he was told he had to sprinkle his building. What caused the requirement to occur was a remodel that exceeded the local building code requirement that activated the sprinkler requirement. He was more than candid in admitting that he considered the decision at that time to be an economic imposition that he was not very happy about. However, he also acknowledged that as he continued to work with the fire authority the relationship continued to be relatively uncomplicated as he approached the task of actually getting the system installed.

His real conversion came the morning he was notified by the fire department that his building was on fire. The vision that went through his head about what could be happening to his building started being



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modified practically from the moment he left his residency on his way to the fire. He knew that he had a sprinkler system and his next question was what had happened and what kinds of outcome really transpired. Upon his arrival and his brief conversation with the firefighters his conversion was complete.

His building was intact. His insurance company provided him with an adequate amount of compensation and allowed his employees to have a paycheck for the very short period of time that it took to put the building back in service. The Carriage House wasn't exactly the same as new – instead it was now a building survivor.

This is one restaurant owner that is now a witness to what we have been attempting to get society to understand. Fully sprinklered buildings don't burn to the ground. Historical and valuable structures don't need to be made into a pile of rubble. There is a solution that can be engineered to solve most structural fire problems.

So the next time you go to the National Fire Academy and you are on your way up the street to visit one of the other nearby facilities which will remain nameless, take a look to your left at the Carriage House. It does not look any worse for the wear. It still serves outstanding food. Probably the most significant difference in the Carriage House now is that the owners have a full realization of what is truly meant by built in fire protection.

Because of that sprinkler head the building is still standing.

One of the unique features of this particular fire was that it was caught on tape. Not unlike some of these tapes you see of perpetrators beating up on liquor store clerks, it is grainy and difficult to really evaluate. But those who have seen it actually got a chance to bear witness to a very rare occasion. Not only did they see the sprinkler head discharging on the fire they were actually able to hear and see the firefighters who had to force entry into the building eventually to do the final extinguishment. Truly, this is a rare occasion for everyone.

Because of one sprinkler head, because of one code requirement, because of rapid response of a fire department, you and many others can still count on the Carriage House being there the next time you are in Emmitsburg. Now that's what I call a happy ending to a story!