



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Silhouette on the Sheet

Have you ever read America Burning? At one time that was sort of a prerequisite to being part of bringing about change in the fire service, starting about the early 1970's. Those that read it when it was brand new were galvanized to action. However, with the passage of time it is slowly but surely moved from the front burner to the back burner of fire literature. It is too bad because America Burning could almost as easily be written about the contemporary fire service. Same song, second verse.

Don't get me wrong, we have made a lot of changes. But, we haven't solved America's fire problem yet. Proof of the pudding is any idea that single family dwelling is still the most dangerous occupancy from the standpoint of fire. Our fire codes have made huge inroads in reducing fire problems in commercial and industrial occupancies. Our training system has evolved into a system that cranks out certified firefighters at a rapid rate. We have added skill sets to the fire service that never existed before, i.e. paramedicine, hazardous materials response, homeland security training.

But, is America still burning?

One of the more touching photographs in the original book on America Burning is what I call the silhouette on the sheet. If you go to America Burning you will find it on page 15. I wonder how many people out there are still seeing silhouettes on the sheets like that in single family dwellings.

Don't tell me they don't occur because every year there are headlines in the newspaper almost every single day indicating that multiple people have died at the scene of single family dwelling fires. Moreover, it is not uncommon for there to be multiple deaths in the case of a dwelling fire as opposed to a singular death in other types of events. And, if the picture on page 15 doesn't inspire you to action – go to page 122.

For how many years in the future will we continue to have silhouettes on the sheets? The second question is whether or not we have reached the lowest possible acceptable level of loss in the country to satisfy the economics of modern fire protection. In other words, is a 1,000 people a year a reasonable loss figure and we should give up on the fact that we have reached a level for which there is no solution?

Should we just declare that we are the winners and that those people are collateral damage. If we deal with the American fire problem as if it were strictly nothing more than an economic formula there are those that will make the argument that continuing to put in smoke detectors and sprinkler systems into homes is just not cost effective. Depending on who accepted the numbers there are any number of arguments to that equation. What if that silhouette on the sheet back in the 1970's had been treated as



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

if it was truly a national tragedy and some politician had drawn a line in the sand and stated that this is unreasonable and needs to be eliminated?

Let's go back and look at the statistics of what the United States looked like in the 1970's. The population in the United States was 203,211,926. The average annual income was around \$8,730.00. The price to construct an ordinary single family dwelling averaged about \$26,500. Today according to the United States Census there are 281,421,906 number of people. That is a difference of 78,209,980. The average annual income is now about \$ 42,409. That is a growth of \$33,679. It now costs an average of \$ 305,900 for a new home. In 1970 the ration between income and new home costs was 33%. In short, a new home costs about 3 times more than the median household income. What is the ratio between 42,000 and 350,000.00? And the housing industry blames us for rising costs? What is the real reason that Johnny can't buy a house?

It is not hard to visualize that if the United States would have done something about the single family fire problem in the 1970's there is a huge number of people that would now be more adequately protected. Interestingly the people who fight with us the most are the people who build those homes that have continued to escalate in cost in a significant fashion over that same timeframe. And the average income has jumped by a quantum leap during that same time period.

One of the arguments that you will hear at political hearings is that new houses don't catch fire. Well, every house was new once. How soon do they get old? My answer to that is that they are old the minute they are occupied. The real problem is not how old a house it's the behavior of the people who happen to live there. I can draw some conclusions from the fire records that I have reviewed over the last forty years. Poor people die in fires a lot more than rich people do. People who engage in inappropriate behavior such as drinking and smoking at the same time die at a higher rate than others. If you put a small baby and an elderly person into a brand new house, give a pack of cigarettes to grandma and a plant a fifth of Jim Beam on the dining room table, there is a high degree of possibility that something bad is going to happen in that house even if it happens to be sooner than it has the new carpet smell still left in it. Children that are fascinated by fire live in both new and old homes.

The silhouettes on the sheets are the real story. The arguments that are being made today about new houses being more fire safe is suspect at the very least. If we could solve the fire problem by just making houses nicer by each generation then we would have eliminated the majority of the fire service merely through construction technology.

Now let's talk about that new construction technology. In order to build bigger and more spacious homes has resulted in the creation of an industry to overcome long spans. Guess what came along with that? Engineered wood products. If you get a wide span that is unprotected, unsupported and unsprinklered that is a place where firefighters are putting their lives in their hands when they go inside



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

that building.

So those of you that haven't read America Burning nor have you seen the silhouette on the sheet, you ought to go back and do that as a sense of resetting the clock on just exactly how serious America's fire problem really is. In the thirty years that has ensued we have lost enough people to populate a small suburban city. We have racked up a cost of property losses and life insurance losses that the number of zeros seems almost obscene. Those of you that have had a fire service career and have never seen the silhouette on the sheet might still think that the fire department exists for the physical aspect of firefighting. But, that silhouette on the sheet is a haunting reminder that fire protection is not always entirely about heroics. It is about courage of conviction. It is not always about the BRT'S.

Because people in single family dwelling die in relatively small numbers they don't raise the level of public ire that is caused by a tragic bus crash or an airplane collision. Yet the numbers continue to accumulate year in and year out. We have fifty of these United States. If we allow 20 people to die in each of these 50 states then we will have killed another 1,000 of our citizens. If we allow that number to go up to 50 per 50 states the total casualty list is 2,500. If we allow it to go up to 100 victims per state, on an annual basis, the total tally is 5,000. You tell me, where do we want to draw the line?

The current battle is shaping up at the national level with regard to the next and quite possibly the final step in addressing this issue on a national basis. That is the adoption of fire sprinkler technology into the residential environment. The battle has pretty much been won on apartment houses already and now we are waiting for the final shoe to drop. If we continue to sustain the idea that individual states are going to be opted in or out of this process because of the political maneuvering of special interest groups then I will make a prediction for you. In about twenty-five years we will begin to see another trend.

Those parts of this country that have embraced modern fire protection philosophy and technology will have a lower level of loss of life than those that don't. You can mark this column in any way you want, put it in a file folder and open it up on about the year 2050 and see if my prediction does not come true. There will be some states in which the fire death per thousand will remain high and there will be other states in which the fire death per thousand will continue to decline in proportion to growth and development.

It is unlikely that you and I will be around to witness that phenomenon. At least I know I won't be. It doesn't take long to add twenty five years to my age to realize that I would have to be a statistical anomaly to bear witness to my own projection. But there are some of you out there that are entering your fire service career or are at least on your first or second level of your fire service career then you may be around to tell the world whether or not we have been able to eliminate the silhouette on the sheet. I wish your state the best of luck.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

For an additional outlook on the issue of costs of housing got to <http://mercyman53.wordpress.com/2008/01/11/the-cost-of-housing-1050-higher-than-1970-and-climbing/>