



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

So Stipulated

Sometimes when two parties disagree they use different facts to make their respective arguments. However, it is also true that sometimes parties that are conflicted can actually agree that some facts are the same for both parties. The term that is often used to describe that agreement is that the facts are “stipulated” or unarguable.

Many disputes have taken off onto a new tact, once the basic facts have been stipulated. Perhaps that concept needs to be expanded in the fire prevention arena. For example, one debate that is currently being developed into a serious public policy issue is the various positions being expressed about the requirements to put residential sprinklers into new housing stock.

This has certainly not been the first time the issue of introducing a specific technology into the dwelling market. At one time there were homes with no electricity, no ground fault interruption, and of course, the proverbial indoor plumbing was even lacking at one point. As one of those who was born in the 1940's I have actually lived in structures lacking all three. Now I have all three because the codes say so!

At the code hearings in Rochester, New York, a motion to require sprinklers passed by a majority vote, but failed to achieve the necessary 66 and 2/3 majority, so it was not adopted. During that discussion many numbers were tossed about as if they were scientific truths, yet both sides in the debate disagreed with the interpretation of the other side. Sounds normal, doesn't it?

One of the problems with the discussion is that the dispute over the interpretation obscures the fact that the facts themselves are based on one set of attributes; our national fire record. And, many will admit that the data base that is used for that data base suffers from lack of participation from many fire agencies. That's a truth that cannot be denied. Shame on us. Repeating an old expression by Pogo – “I have meet the enemy and it are us.”

On the other hand, we do have some facts regarding the number of deaths per year and we do have some facts on the number of houses being built every year and the number that fall into different housing markets.

Is there any of these that both sides can stipulate on being true, so that the debate can move onto options and alternatives?

Let's go back to the basics. Builders build buildings. Firefighters try to keep those buildings from burning, resulting in loss of property and lives. What facts are present to represent these two basic assumptions? First, we should look at the construction of buildings, because that act anticipates the



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

need for a fire department in the future.

As near as I can observe the first buildings that were constructed in this country were built in the early 1600s. I have no doubt the few, if any of these are still in existence. As populations increased in the 1700s more were built, with many of these still extant. The 1800s saw a building explosion. And guess what? All of those buildings were built before we ever had building and fire codes.

The 1900s saw another order of magnitude increase. And, in the same early 1900's we got the first set of codes that started codifying the process. Here is a question for you, what was the population in 1900?

The twelfth census of the United States was conducted under the terms of the census act of March 3, 1899, and supervised by the Director of the Census, William R. Merriam. The enumeration was conducted in each state and organized territory, including Washington, DC, Alaska, Hawaii, and "Indian Territory." The census was taken as of June 1, 1900, and was to be completed in two weeks in places of 8,000 inhabitants or more (as of the 1890 Census) and 1 month in rural districts. The United States and its territories were divided into 297 supervisors' districts, which were subdivided into 52,726 enumeration districts

The answer, according to that Census was 76,803,387. Fire departments were essentially volunteer until the 1850's and only because a part of suburban and urban America were paid – careers in the late 1880's, emerging as a part of the infrastructure of most developed areas by the 1920's.

So, could both sides stipulate that a significant part of America's building fire problem was created under the provision of both limited technology and limited public commitment devoted to the contemporary fire problem? The industrial age took off about the same time. The buildings that were built to house that industrial age started to burn with a frequency and those losses had an adverse input on profit and competition. So, automatic sprinklers were introduced at that time. In a very few years the industrial fire losses plummeted to levels that were acceptable. Major industry utilized sprinkler technology as a form of risk management to protect investment and profit and now have about a 100 year track record of sustaining that protection. Is there any disagreement on that point?

From 1900 to the year 2000, the population of the United States increased to 281,400,000. It tripled. If we can use the census figures from the various interval periods of time we can project that our past population increased by a figure of about 49 million people every 10 years. The increase in population was paralleled by the transition of many fire departments from volunteer fire department to paid, full time. The argument that is often postulated is that most fires occur in older homes. If we assume that each decade added 19, 600 new homes it should be easy to agree that the probability of a fire occurring in a building that is at least 25 years old has increased every decade since 1900. The accumulation on dwelling units is not a linear progress, i.e., it doesn't just doubles every 10 years, but rather it increases



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

almost exponentially.

In that same timeframe, codes were revised about every four years or so. That means that in a 20 year period there are 5 cycles. And in a hundred years the cycles go to 25. This answer begs another question. When is a building new? If a building is built according to one code is it “new” until there is a new code, and then it is “old”? Or, is a building new until it reaches a level of deterioration that renders it out of compliance with the code it was originally built under.

All buildings were new once. All buildings are old at some point in time. Is it possible that we could provide a definition on what is new that meets both the definition of the building industry and the fire services?