



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

*Ronny J. Coleman*

---

## **THE HANDIEST GADGET**

Do you have any gadgets in your house? Do you have any gadgets in your desk drawer? Do you know what a gadget is? Is a gadget worth even talking about? Well, the History Channel obviously thought so, because they recently put on a presentation entitled “101 Gadgets that have Changed the World”. I ran across it one night while browsing TV channels looking for something that was more informative than a reality show.

What I found was a program that had been put together by the editors of Popular Mechanics Magazine in which they attempted to enumerate what “gadgets” have had a most profound effect on society. They believe that their list resulted in our civilization being different today than it could have been previously through the invention of the gadget and therefore, changed history. One of the disclaimers in the show was that not everybody agrees on the sequence of the gadgets or the priority of which one gadget was more important than the other. Moreover, they had to admit that some gadgets were directly related to the invention of a previous gadget.

If nothing else, it was an entertaining show so I decided to sit down and endure the countdown. Imagine my surprise then when gadget #61 was the smoke detector. To be honest, when they first started talking about it, I was a little surprised. All of the other items that had been talked about previously were pretty heavy duty things such as the invention of aircraft, printing machines, etc. Then, up pops the smoke detector. It was on the screen for probably less than a minute and the brief narrative spent most of the time talking about how the smoke detector has saved so many lives.

As a fire officer, I am certainly not going to argue with that case. But, I was moderately surprised to find out that the guys who are the geeks and gismo makers, felt strongly enough about the smoke detector to give it that degree of priority. After all, society fought the installation of the smoke detector for over a decade.

So, I was happy enough to sit back and think that was pretty cool. Then amazingly, gadget #46 was the basic fire extinguisher. That is right, higher than the smoke detector was the common garden variety fire extinguisher that you have in your garage or on the wall of your business.

The narrator went on to explain that the concept of fire extinguishers is not exactly a modern invention. He stated that extinguishers been around for hundreds if not thousands of years but the modern fire extinguisher was given that priority because of its role in controlling incipient fires. The narrator postulated that hundreds of thousands of fires a year are actually stopped in their tracks by a fire extinguisher. I am not sure where they got their facts, but the very existence of a fire extinguisher on this list in a higher priority than a smoke detector, I found somewhat fascinating.



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

Continuing with my interest in this parade of gimmicks, I kept waiting to see if there was going to be another one that would pop up that comes from our arena of expertise. Sure enough, it happened. Gadget #23 started off with the footage of the major casino fires in Las Vegas. Showing horrific scenes of the building on fire, they proceeded to say that the number 23 priority was putting computers on fire trucks. The computer had already been brought up as a gadget that had changed society but here at gadget 23 was proof positive that computers made a difference in the fire service.

I can accept the fact that computers have had an effect on the fire service, but I can also believe that there a whole bunch of fire departments out there that do not have computers to this day. Not only do they not have them on their apparatus, they don't even have them in their fire stations. So it got me to be even more focused on is there going to be something else pop up that is going to demonstrate the biggest, baddest fire protection gadget of all.

Of course, I am referring to the fire sprinkler. Inasmuch as it has been in service well over 100 years old, I had sort of hoped to see it appear in the inventory already. But, I was destined to remain disappointed. It was never mentioned once.

When they got to number 1 and I never heard the word sprinkler, I was disappointed in the imagination and expertise of the techno-gurus put together by Popular Mechanics. I ended up questioning the wisdom of their wizards.

How can anybody overlook the role of the fire sprinkler in altering American's fire problem?

Well, I guess it is easily done because it happens all the time. I am not sure what Grinnell did to aggravate society in general, but apparently nobody in the wonderful world of technology is ready to make the fire sprinkler head the hero that it really is. So, let me make this comment. If I was going to list the top ten devices that have influenced the American Fire Service the most, I would certainly place the sprinkler head on that list. It would be right behind the recognition that putting water on a small fire is a whole heck of lot better than putting lots of water on a fire that is out of control

How about you? If you were given a choice of a built-in fire protection device to protect the lives and property of your wife, your children, your business, which of the four technologies would you think is the most important. A smoke detector; a fire extinguisher; a computer on a fire truck; or a fire sprinkler properly installed and maintained.

Where would you put it on the list? My vote is for number one!

First published Sprinkler Age, September 2012  
© 2012 All Rights Reserved