



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Well, Duh

Some fires don't make any difference to our community. If you burn down a barn out on a farm, it may make no difference to anybody except the farmer. On the other hand, some fires wreak havoc on society. Generally speaking, we recall the big conflagrations in this context and seldom focus on individual fires as having a social impact. Granted, some fires result in code changes such as the Coconut Grove and the Iroquois Theatre. But to really have a profound effect on society individual building losses are usually chalked up as bad luck. There are exceptions to this rule. How about the burning of the Royal Library of Alexandria that was originally constructed in the 3rd Century BC? It was deliberately destroyed in 640 AD by a conquering general named Caliph Omar.

It is claimed that this single fire set back civilization for hundreds of years, because it destroyed some of the most valuable papers regarding the practices of the ancient world. Most historians agree that the real tragedy is not knowing who burned the library but wondering what facts from ancient history, literature and learning were lost forever. I guess we will never really know the impact of that fire. The real reason is that burned is forever. If a book is burned, unless there is another copy, that knowledge dissipates as smoke and products of combustion. Why should you care?

This was brought to my attention recently by a fire that occurred in Sacramento California. The Arden-Dimick Branch was recently closed because some malcontent threw a Molotov cocktail into the return box. The event occurred approximately at 3:30 in the morning on a Monday. The library was closed until 10:00 am Saturday. Wow! The place was out of service for an entire day. But that is not really the most important aspect of this little story. The very first sentence in the second paragraph states "about 1,000 books were damaged, mostly from water when fire sprinklers were activated." This was followed by another sentence that says "most of the damage to books occurred in the book drop room.

Sprinklers extinguished the blaze but water flooded the library, soaking carpets." The library facilities manager went on to state that the books that were soaked by the sprinklers could probably be restored. But the sentence that grabbed me immediately was "there appears to be more damage from water than from fire." The library director put that in writing as part of a press release.

That is where the well – duh, comes in. Of course, there was some water damage. Why isn't the library manager delighted that she has a library to come back to because the sprinklers did their job? Why is this article so heavily structured around water damage? Why isn't someone touting the fact that unlike Alexandria, this library will still be around to dispense knowledge and wisdom in the future?

This gets to one of the most common myths that are constantly repeated about sprinklers. That myth is very simply that there is more water damage than there is from fire. Let me be redundant, well, duh! If



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the sprinklers put the fire out, it is 3:30 in the morning, water is going to continue to run but the building is not going to burn to the ground. The inability of the media to understand this phenomenon baffles me. The unwillingness of the librarian community to recognize the significance of this relationship also baffles me. I have said it before, and will continue to repeat it every chance I get. It is the following statement; burned is forever!

As we continue to communicate to society the value and benefits of sprinklers, we have got to get over this water damage hysteria. Every time the story is repeated in the press it perpetuates the image that sprinklers are negative. It simply ignores the fact that sprinklers have done their job when they have extinguished the fire.

What could have been done to make sure that this damage was limited? Well, for one thing, there is the idea that the sprinklers should be hooked to a fire alarm. That is a common sense idea. I am not entirely sure that it didn't happen in this case because the news reporter did not identify that fact in the write-up. However, the fact that they knew the incident started at 3:30 in the morning was a pretty good indication to me that the fire department was on scene very early. That might have been the result of an external alarm, I don't know. The library could have been equipped with modern high pressure misting sprinklers instead.

Maybe a public education program that would have prevented the malcontent from throwing a Molotov cocktail through the return box would have helped. Certainly, catching the perpetrator and punishing them to the extent of the law is a good idea. All of these are remedies that are available.

My point is, stop making water damage make it sound like there is a disastrous outcome when a fire sprinkler does its job. The library is still standing. The carpet can be repaired. Computers can be replaced. Hard disks can be salvaged. Books can be dried out. But, failing to have a sprinkler system in a library could see that library a pile of rubble at some point. I recall the Alexandria Library because I am interested in the wisdom of the ancient world. But I can also recall a fire in a library in Los Angeles City in which the destruction had a profound effect on the entire library system. This library originally constructed in 1926, was the third largest library in the United States. On April 29th, 1986, a fire broke out that required more than 350 firefighters to control. This firefight consumed 60 firefighting companies, an arson unit, 9 paramedic rescue units, 3 helicopters, 4 salvage companies, 1 squad, 2 emergency air units, a heavy utility company and more than 40 staff and support personnel. The fire was commanded by one of my personal friends, Chief Don Anthony.

The Alexandria Library Fire occurred long before sprinklers were a reality. The LA Library had no sprinklers but if they had been there they could have helped. The fire I have described in this column was not a tragedy. The Sacramento library system was a real winner in this case. I would classify it as a minor inconvenience not a tragedy.



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I was particularly interested in the fact that this branch office was actually constructed in 1971. I will almost bet you that it was not sprinklered at that time. However, the building was expanded in 1999. I can't help but wonder if that was when it was retrofitted. I do not have facts to support either contention.

What I do know is that sprinklers stopped the fire that was caused by a random act of violence. Not much different than the soldiers who deliberately torched the Alexandria Library. We should be celebrating the success of the sprinklers instead of emphasizing what damage as if it were somehow or other more significant than the value of the library.

Water damage is repairable. But no one can rebuild a book from ashes.