



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Why Study Fire Service History?

The most famous quote regarding the phenomena of failing to learn from the past is from George Santayana who once stated “those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”<sup>1</sup>

Does that really apply in a modern world that is changing so fast that nothing seems to be the same as it ever was before? In a recent conversation with a couple of young firefighters, they indicated that history was irrelevant to them because they live in a different world than I did. I also reviewed a New York Times article entitled “In Ignorance we Trust”. In that article author David McCullough stated that we are raising a generation of Americans that are historically illiterate.<sup>2</sup>

I have to admit that I have some concerns. We didn’t have Twitter or LinkedIn or Facebook when I started my career. What is interesting, however, is that I built up a very powerful network of individuals that I have known over a lifetime in the fire service and I have managed to maintain communications with a significant number of them without that technology. I recognize that many of these individuals have historical knowledge and that with each retirement or death, this memory is fading. I would submit that most of the people in my Rolodex I have either had a face to face contact with periodically, or I communicate with them on issues when needed without the benefit of any of those fancy mechanisms.

I am also reminded of a story that was told to me once by Ray Picard. Chief Picard had come up with the idea that he felt that the most significant impact on the fire service was the use of trains at a certain point in our civilization. The way he characterized the story was that fire chiefs who lived on the west coast and wanted to go to a conference on the east coast had very few options. Certainly using a sailing ship to go down and around South America and come up on the east coast was out of the question for most of them. Taking a stage coach ride from the east coast to west coast was arduous. But when the trains reached the west coast this began to change things.

According to Picard’s hypothesis, many of the fire chiefs hopped on the train in San Francisco and rode down to Los Angeles or got on a train in LA and rode up to San Francisco and then got on an east bound train and started heading towards their destination of a future NAFE Conference. (Note: It was not the IAFC in the early days..It was the National Association of Fire Engineers.) They would sometimes be on that train for four or five days making the trip across country.

What do you think they did during those four or five days? If you speculated that they got together in the smoking room, had cigars and shared ideas, you are probably pretty close to being accurate. Adult

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<sup>1</sup> [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/george\\_santayana/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/george_santayana/)

<sup>2</sup> Egan, Timothy, In Ignorance We Trust, New Your Times, December 13, 2012



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beverages were probably involved too. There is no doubt in my mind that the level of communication was pretty personal at that point.

As I listened to Chief Picard's theory, I then went back to the history of the IAFC and read some of the accountings of early meetings and found that the Fire Chiefs came to those meetings extremely well prepared. They had positions on issues. They had done their homework. They did not tend to debate as much as they came to articulate and advocate. Many times groups of chiefs had already formed alliances to solve specific problems or recommend a course of action.

Not a computer in sight. How was all of that done? It was done at a very personal level. They understood that they had to maximize their time together, and so they did.

To me, the history lesson for the fire service is to realize that when undergoing change being connected to other people is more than just key strokes and applications. Being in communications with them on life- long projects and being committed to similar outcomes is where it's all at. It's not about a connection with 10,000 people. It's about personal behavior of keeping in contact. I would submit that we live in a world today that has so many methods of communication that people are getting worse and worse at relating to each other. How many of you have had the experience of someone getting upset with you because you didn't answer an email that just came in your in box about three minutes ago?

How many of you have been upset when you call someone you really need to talk to and you get their voice mail and don't hear back from them for 96 hours? How many of you have been frustrated with the idea that you have forwarded communications to someone expecting a reaction and you never hear back from them at all?

You might want to do an inventory of communications and ask yourself what channel of communication is your most preferred one? If you plan on using your cell phone then you have to keep it on. If you plan on using email then you have to check it frequently. If you plan on using hard mail, then you better be reviewing it as quickly as it comes through the door. A full mail box is a sign of disconnected communications

I am not denying that there are multiple ways that you can communicate and that you can often multi-task to accomplish a lot. The history lesson that I feel needs to be reviewed today is that what has made us successful in the past has been the act of conducting one on one personal contact. It involves making alliances that develop the specifics to change things.

Some of our organizations are doing an outstanding job of that today. This is not intended to be anything disparaging about the growing culture of communications in the fire service. What I am focusing on is that you can't sit back and observe that process just hoping that things are going to



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change. You have to be involved. You have to be one of those who are a player in the game. You are going to be criticized for doing it.

I remember an old Teddy Roosevelt quote about the man in the arena. It is as follows:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

— [Theodore Roosevelt](#)

If you want to gain an understanding of what history tells us about advocacy study Roosevelt’s quote. It is as appropriate today as it was when uttered by our rough and ready President over 100 years ago.

The corollary to Santayana's admonition is that those do remember history, have the ability to alter the future.