

In my opinion...

DEAN SAYS:

There, I've Said It Again



Just the other day I was sorting through some archival storage boxes of old files trying to find some background information on a particular fire alarm control panel that had been involved in the investigation of a fire. Apparently during one of my five-year paper purges—week-long spells of sort-through-and-throw-away that I have come to call “Cleaning for the Rapture”—I had decided that information on the particular control panel was no longer of life-sustaining value.

I did find a lot of other old reports that interrupted my quest while I took the time to walk down memory lane. One in particular caught my eye from 1967. This was a rather lengthy memo to Houghton (NY) Fire Chief Robert W. Gilmore on the subject of Houghton’s public fire reporting system. Bob had salvaged a railroad car full of Gamewell and Horni fire alarm boxes that had been surplused out of some military base. He had trekked to Olean, the nearest community with a street box system, to see if he could find out how to install the boxes around town, and particularly on the

Houghton College buildings. He had then assigned me the task of reading what was then NFPA 73, and is now split between NFPA 72, *National Fire Alarm Code Chapter 4*, and NFPA 1221, *Standard on Public Fire Service Communication*.

As an electrical inspector with the New York Board of Fire Underwriters Bureau of Electricity, Bob was used to doing things in accordance with the codes and standards, and he intended Houghton’s fire alarm box system to be no exception to this practice.

So here was my long memo outlining all of the things we would have to do to make certain our reclaimed public fire alarm reporting system met the applicable NFPA codes and standards. The idea was that we would present my findings to the Board of Fire Commissioners for the Town of Caneadea to see if they would authorize the expenditure of some additional funds to assure the overall operational quality of the system. The commissioners were notoriously tight with taxpayers’ money, particularly since Houghton was only one of three communities that made up the Town, and already had far exceeded its use of special-interest funds to install a public water system, public sewage system, and street lighting, while the other two communities—Caneadea and Oramel—had none of these amenities.

I remember well our meeting with the commissioners. Here I was a twenty-year-old college student representing the

interests of the Houghton Volunteer Fire Department. One particular commissioner, an elderly farmer from across the river who notoriously opposed the special-interest treatment of Houghton, seemed unusually annoyed with my presence. During the discussion of our request for funds he asked me, “Boy, why should we spend money just to meet some darn-fool regulations?”

I remember thinking, “What’s the ‘boy’ going to say to this old man’s question.” Then I had a flash of insight.

“Sir,” I asked the farmer. “Do you treat your cow’s with an antibacterial solution as a part of your routine with the milking machine?”

“Yes, I do,” he replied.

“Do other farmers around you do this?” I continued.

“No, most of them don’t,” he answered with a look of curiosity at my line of questioning.

“Well if most of the other farmers don’t use an antibacterial dip after milking, why do you?”

“Because,” the old farmer asserted with some vehemence, “It helps prevent mastitis and keeps the cows healthier so they give better milk. It’s just the right thing to do.”

“Well, sir,” I retorted, “that’s why we want to spend the money to make certain our fire alarm system meets the codes and standards: because it’s the right thing to do!”

In that moment, I made a convert to the cause. From that meeting onward, whenever we proposed spending money, the old farmer voted in our favor. And, I, of course, was forever grateful to my future father-in-law—who operated one of the larger dairy farms in Chautauqua County (NY)—for educating this city boy about some of the then quite progressive ideas dairy farmers were using. Since I had heard someone refer to the old farmer as “progressive,” I took a chance he would be applying one of these new techniques.

The wheel of time has turned a good many revolutions since that night. But, I still find myself holding to what was to me a self-evident truth: following the codes and standards is *always* the right thing to do. There, I’ve said it again. □

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