



**In my opinion...**

**DEAN SAYS:**

## **A conversation remembered**

### **GEORGE A. SMITH, JR.**

As we prepared this issue of *TM-WSR*, we were saddened to learn of the death on February 7th of a veteran of the signaling industry, George A. Smith, Jr. of Dallas, TX.

Without a doubt, if we were to begin to list the many positions of responsibility, committees, chairmanships, and leadership roles that George undertook during his long and active life, we could fill the entire 16-pages of this newsletter. George was a man who was much appreciated by all who knew him.

Physically a tall, imposing man, George's warm, friendly smile was a unique offset to his image of "typical Texan." There was nothing typical about George. He was a man unique in our industry.

No doubt George was pleased when his sons carried on the work at Smith Alarms that he had carried on from his father. George's legacy to the industry is most significant.

We will miss you, dear friend. May God's mercy, grace and peace be yours throughout eternity. □

We had just returned to our hotel in Minneapolis in the fall of 1985, when George Smith, Jr. telephoned me asking if he could come up to my room for a chat.

The past few hours had been spent touring, first, the downtown office of the telephone company, where we viewed a new technological marvel called "derived local channel." We then dined on sumptuous fare, compliments of 3M Company. Following lunch, we toured the central station operating company of 3M's Alarm Division.

The producers of *Star Trek* would have been proud of what 3M had done: taking a somewhat mundane and broken down central station and launching it into the 21st century. Gleaming chrome and glass consoles housing color video monitors. Several console positions handled literally thousands of customers nationwide by means of computer-managed digital alarm communicator systems. We were astounded and amazed.

The "we" of this story were the members of the NFPA Technical Committee on Central Station Signaling Systems. In what we believed at the time was a "first," we had scheduled a technical committee meeting in two cities: Milwaukee and Minneapolis. We did this so that we might visit the telephone companies in those two cities who were using the two competing manifestations of derived local channel equipment. Our task was to develop language for inser-

tion into NFPA 71 that would effectively regulate this new signaling technology.

George arrived at my room within a few minutes of his call. I remember thinking as he walked into the room that his warm, friendly smile would disarm the most apprehensive opponent. But I was certainly no opponent of George Smith. He was a man I admired immensely. His contributions to the signaling industry had been felt in so very many quarters. His sons had followed George into the alarm industry. And his son, Jim, serving as George's alternate on the Technical Committee on Central Station Signaling Systems, had also become a special friend.

As we sat down at the little table over by the sliding glass door, George told me what was on his mind.

"That was a mighty impressive place we visited today," he began, referring to our dazzling tour of the 3M facility. "I wanted to make sure you understood the millions of dollars it took to make that place gleam. And, I wanted to make sure you understood that the rest of us poor central station operators can't filter those kind of dollars into a show piece central station like that. I don't know how long they can keep pouring money into that place."

I smiled at the subtle humor wrapped in the cloak of a Texas drawl. Show piece, indeed. I remembered our visit to George's own central station in Dallas not many months before. Clean, efficient, businesslike surroundings boasting state-of-the-art central station signaling technology with state-of-the-art management philosophy and practices to make the technology people-effective.

"I'm concerned about our industry," George went on, as the smile on his face faded. "Lots of new technology coming fast. Maybe too fast. I fear that we're not going to be able to keep up with all the potentials for failure. I'm not comfortable with technology that relies so heavily on a third party to operate. Leasing lines from the telephone company is one thing. Depending on them

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for alarm transport is something else again. I can't help but feel it's opening the door for a lot of people getting into this business that don't understand the heart and soul of the central station industry."

"But I'll tell you, my friend," he said, patting my knee and smiling once again. "Chances are an old fogey like me isn't going to have to wrestle with these problems as much as younger guys like you and my sons are. I have confidence in you. I know you'll do the right thing. I know when it comes to making tough decisions, you'll make them."

I remember shaking George's hand. In a somewhat awkward moment I tried to express how much I appreciated all that George had done over the years. How much we all appreciated it. He seemed a little embarrassed at my words. He shrugged his shoulders and said something about just doing what needed to be done. And then he was gone, his head just barely clearing the top of the door frame.

It wasn't long after our conversation that George's illness flared to a newly critical level.

George never attended another Technical Committee meeting. His son Jim carries on the task of representing the interests into which his father in-

vested so much of his life.

George was a man who gave unstintingly of himself to causes he believed in dearly. Because of his willingness to do so, he left a mark on the signaling industry in the United States that will never be erased.

George's predictions came true—at least from my vantage point. Within a few months of our visit, 3M put the central station business on the block, ultimately selling it to National Guardian. The burgeoning technology has made it a lot easier to get into the central station business than in the days when McCulloh circuits were the only transmission method available. Whether the newcomers can be classified as not understanding the heart and soul of the central station industry can certainly be debated. Some of them have shown a spirit of cooperation, willingness to learn and willingness to become a part of a long-standing and glorious tradition of excellence. Others have not.

One thing is apparent to me. It is far better to live a life of service than it is to live one of self-service. Several times since that day in 1985 when I've had to make a "tough decision" I've thought of George's words. And the fact that his words caused me to stop and think through the issues more carefully makes me profoundly grateful that George cared enough to come to my room for that little chat. □

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