

Legacies

The 20 people who most shaped the American fire service in the 20th century

Inquisitive instructor William Clark

While attending an NFPA meeting (at his own expense) in Cincinnati in 1956, Bill Clark persuaded a couple of friends to walk with him to nearby Newport, Ky., and visit the fire department there. An unremarkable way to spend an evening, perhaps, but on the other hand, how many New York City fire captains with almost 20 years on the job would be trying to see what they might learn from a small suburban fire department? But that was Bill Clark, taking every chance he could to learn even more about the fire service.



1914-95

Clark had begun his career as a firefighter in 1937 in New York. Following service in the Marine Corps during World War II, he returned to FDNY and eventually rose to battalion chief. Following his retirement in 1957, Clark worked as fire chief for a major industrial plant in northern New Jersey. He then left industry and took his New York accent and quick wit to Wisconsin, and a position as state director of fire training. After getting a strong program established there, he moved to Prince George's County, Md., where he served as the director of the county's large combination fire agency.

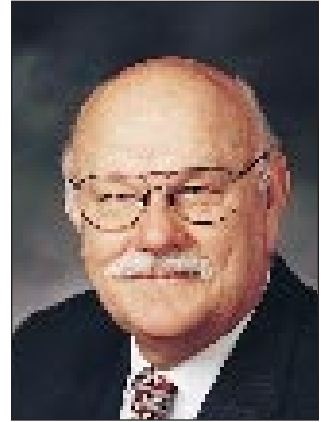
In 1970, Clark was appointed director of the Florida State Fire College, an assignment that let him use his many talents to direct training for the career, part-paid and volunteer departments in that major state. Some years after his retirement from the fire college in 1978, he was commissioned as the consultant on fire training structures by the architects for the current facility. In recognition of his work in Florida, and his contributions to the national fire service, the main assembly hall of the current Florida State Fire College is dedicated to his memory.

A founder and president of the International Society of Fire Service Instructors, Clark also served on the first three Wingspread conferences. He wrote over 50 articles for national fire service publications and spoke to fire service meetings in 40 states and seven foreign countries. He was the author of "Firefighting Principles & Practices," which is still in print today.

As chair and member of several NFPA committees, Clark set the pace for others to follow, but he was proudest of his 58 years of IAFF membership. His friends remember his one-liners, and also his love of painting, architecture and travel. Clark's lifelong commitment to fire protection was exemplified in his lectures on smoke explosions and similar topics to the Institution of Fire Engineers in the United Kingdom in 1995, only a few months before his death. — J.C. (Robbie) Robertson

Philosopher-chief Ronny J. Coleman

Ronny J. Coleman quotes OSHA regulations, Alexandre Dumas and 19th-century Italian economists with equal ease. He's a study in contradictions: a teen runaway with a master's degree; a small-town chief who led one of the world's largest firefighting forces; a visionary who cherishes the fire service's traditions.



1940-

Coleman sows the seeds of revolutions: He thrust forward residential sprinklers, fire service accreditation and boot camps for new fire chiefs. And he personifies "prolific." Through public speaking, writing (textbooks, manuals and more than 200 columns for FIRE CHIEF), and TV and video projects, he has changed attitudes about the very nature of fire service management.

Time and again, by combining political savvy with indisputable data, Coleman accomplished what others only talked about. Gerard Hoetmer, a former International City/County Managers Association public safety director, cites Coleman's early success with residential sprinklers. "In the early '70s, he was the first to push before his city council home sprinkler systems." Hoetmer heard about the project and invited Coleman to write about it for the ICMA's journal of innovative programs.

"The idea of residential fire sprinklers had been around since the early 1900s," Coleman says, "but the thing I'm most proud of is I made it work. I actually got them installed."

His peers call Coleman "driven" and "tenacious." One stand-out example: fire agency accreditation. Hoetmer recalls first meeting about the topic with Coleman in January 1986. "Ron in essence was the father of the accreditation program," Hoetmer says. "Ron realized that if there was an accreditation system that both fire chiefs and city managers and mayors could agree on, you wouldn't have this constant, annual struggle of the fire chief trying to explain why he needed additional equipment or staffing."

More than 10 years later, in August 1997, Coleman was on stage to congratulate the first five fire agencies ever accredited. "Hundreds of people contributed to the accreditation program," says Hoetmer, "but Ron was the leader. Without him, it would not have happened."

Coleman's 39-year public fire service career included a term as president of the IAFC and culminated with his position as California's fire marshal and chief deputy director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Now a force in the private sector, he continues to build both his leg- — Tim Elliott

Francis Brannigan
Alan Brunacini
John Bryan
Percy Bugbee
William Clark
Ronny J. Coleman
Robert Gain
David Gratz
Warren Isman
Warren Kimball
Keith Klinger
Lloyd Layman
Howie McClellan
James Meidl
James O. Page
Ray J. Pence
Ralph Scott
Fred Sheppard
Gordon Vickery
Lou Witzeman