

The Automatic Fire Fighter

I stared at the smoking apartment complex, clutching a blanket around my shoulders. A neighbor stood beside me, muttering softly, secretly, about how his entire stamp collection had been most likely destroyed in the saffron conflagration. The Maryland wind whipped by us, trying to steal the blanket from my shoulders, trying to entice the flames to begin again. The courageous firefighters had been punctual, arriving in that monstrous vehicle they call an engine.

And I waited.

The fire had begun at night when most of our building was asleep. We still had no understanding to how the blaze was initiated. Many believed the fire began electrically, or someone in our complex did not tend to their *filet mignon* as meticulously as they should have. No one mentioned arson—no one reckoned such a thing.

Casually, the fire chief exited our building, taking off his gloves as he did so. He removed his helmet, and I wondered why he was not covered in soot as you see on television. The man approached our congregated group of smoking apartment refugees confidently, smiling. His grey eyes intuitively scanned his audience.

“You all have Henry to thank. The fire didn’t spread, courtesy of those sprinklers. Not much was consumed.”

We celebrated, not as neighbors, but as dear friends, knowing such a trying event had brought us closer. By morning, we were allowed to return to our abode, thanks to the automatic fire sprinkler. My neighbor once again smiled at his impressive stamp collection. I grinned at the sight of my laptop and superfluous college textbooks.

Our town’s library and I were companions. That afternoon, taking a break from my abundant assignments, I reflected on what the fire chief relayed to us the night before. *You all have Henry to thank...*

I was always eager for new information, new knowledge, because I knew I could never have enough. Using both my wireless Internet connection and the books available at the library, I researched the history of the automatic fire sprinkler.

I learned during my curious session exploring these sprinklers that in the big industries, textile mills and such, perforated pipes were used as the basic shield against the sword of fire. This protection, spanning from the 1850s to the mid-1880s was not automatic, not done involuntarily. What if no soul was around to trigger the systems? I surmised the entire mill would go up in a fiery ball of flame, an inferno. Somewhere close to the 1860s, inventors began to amuse themselves with an automatic sprinkler idea. In Massachusetts, Phillip Pratt patented the foremost automatic sprinkler system in 1872.

I realized that Henry—the Henry the fire chief spoke of—was Henry Parmalee of Connecticut, a piano factory owner. Parmalee enhanced Pratt's apparatus, installing the sprinkler heads in his industrial unit in 1874. Naturally, as time crawls forward, most inventions become more advanced; Frederick Grinnell, in 1881, improved Piano Parmalee's sprinkler, and nine years later, he produced the glass disc sprinkler—basically the sort protecting our apartment.

So what exactly did they—Pratt, Parmalee, and Grinnell—design? These inventors essentially constructed a sprinkler head, attached to a water pipeline, that, with liberal heat, would break open the sprinkler seals, compelling a sound spray of water to enter a room or hallway. It is commonly thought that all of the sprinklers activate at the same time...no. The sprinklers react individually to the flames; each head has a heat-sensitive cap.

Chewing on a pen, I considered this: is the automatic fire sprinkler a necessary addition to hospitals, lodgings, schools, nursing homes and other public facilities? After more research, I answered my own question with an affirmative 'yes'. In many places, I have read that the automatic sprinkler "represents the single, most significant aspect of a fire management program" (Artim). The adage "less is more" correlates directly to these sprinklers, when speaking on the subject of impact. These shower-like devices discharge almost ten times less water than fire hoses, but still manage to suppress most fires. The sprinklers stimulate more rapidly as well, instigating lower damage to property.

These sprinklers, obviously, have a reverberating impact when it comes to their benefits. I mulled over these few: enhanced life safety, reduced heat and smoke damage, immediate alert to

occupants, immediate identification, flexibility of the sprinkler design, enhanced security, and a decrease in insurance expenditures (Artim). What building would not want to own a collection of these automatic fire management tools? Art galleries and museums, hotels and motels, schools and hospitals should not be forced to install these life and property-saving mechanisms. The sprinklers' installation should be—shall I say?—automatic.

After researching their history and their influence, I keenly recommend them. These sprinklers are in the same league with German Shepherd guard dogs or the Brinks Home Security system. Would hotels leave their doors unlocked, for anyone to amble inside, possibly to produce ill? Then should those same hotels—Ramada Inn, Holiday Inn, you know the like—leave their guests unguarded against ravaging flames that could conceivably create a greater debacle? I should think not.

You all have Henry to thank... Yes, I thought as my feet guided me back to my apartment complex in the imposing mountains of western Maryland. Yes, I sure do. I have Phillip Pratt, Henry Parmalee, and Frederick Grinnell all to thank. If it were not for them, their brilliance, their ingenuity, their *common sense*, my building would not be standing as it is now, in front of me.

And to think of it, neither would many others.

References

- Artim, Nick. "An Introduction to Automatic Fire Sprinklers." WAAC Newsletter. 16 (3) (1994): 20
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