

Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job

Ceremonies that Stoke the Flames of Tradition

by Rick Lasky

Our fire service is rich in tradition and has a history so fascinating that as a firefighter young and old, the more you dig into it, the more you can't get enough of it. From how it all started in this country to all of the many different changes and directions it has taken over the years, to where it is right now. Many of the changes were and have been good and have brought us to new levels, but a few have and are still today whacking away at the very foundation that supports it all. I'm not saying that change is not good, some of it is, but a lot of it depends on how you go about it. It's just so hard to watch some in our profession work so hard to take the firefighter out of the firefighter and the firehouse out of the firehouse. When in fact, and we've said this before, we should be trying to put them back in. There's nothing wrong with a firehouse looking like a firehouse instead of one of those hurry in and out lube and oil change places. There's also nothing wrong with letting our firefighters dress and act like firefighters. So many seem to be trying to remove these things, turn us into a "business" and hide us from the public. I'm not saying that there isn't a business side to what we do, quite the contrary, there most definitely is. I'm just saying that if you're looking into why you can't get your guys to do something for you or can't understand why it seems like they've lost their love for the job, maybe by bringing back some of the "traditions" that we use to have, well, just might be that method you need to stoke those fires they have within them. Maybe that's all you need to get them back to acting and looking like firefighters and maybe just maybe you could rekindle their love for the job. Trust them, they're extremely smart and talented; they're professional and will do a great job if you let them love the job just a little.

The Right Tradition is Not a Bad Thing

Often the first thing you hear from some people when you mention the word tradition is that the only thing tradition does is keep us down. That tradition opposes change, it's stubborn, close minded to new ideas, and it's tradition that gets us hurt and killed doing the same wrong things over and over again and falls into that "we've been doing it this way for twenty years why change it now." The fact of the matter is that when it comes to hurting and killing our own, WE DO NEED TO CHANGE the things that get us into trouble. We should try to change and implement anything that will keep our firefighters healthy and safe. When I speak of tradition I'm not referring to the habits that have hurt us in the past. I'm talking about the kind of tradition that celebrates our heritage and what we're all about, the traditions that come with the greatest profession in the world. There are a lot of great and wonderful things that have been going on in the fire service for decades and decades and we should reach out to them because if we're not careful, they'll keep slipping away one by one until they're all gone. That kind of tradition is good. At our Fire Department we often refer to our department as an extremely traditional fire department that is very progressive. You can have it both ways!

As you begin your trip back in time looking for and learning about our fire service history, what you start to see is throughout it all there have been a variety of ceremonies and celebrations. So many so that it would be difficult to describe them all in just one article. A lot of people have asked about them so that they can bring that type of tradition in or back to their department. So let's take a look at a handful of them. Let's look at just some of the ceremonies that promote pride and ownership in the fire service. That provide an avenue for that love for the job.

The New Firefighter

First and probably one of if not the most important ceremony is the swearing in of a new firefighter. This is where it all starts. This is where we have to make an impression and have an impact. This is where we set the tempo for what's coming up in their new career. Some departments hold this ceremony when they hire a new member and some wait until they have finished and are graduating from the fire academy. Either way, either situation, there is a reward for doing this one. First of all we're confirming to the new firefighter that they are about to become part of a very special family. Second, they know right from the beginning that they're going to be held accountable. This is where we let them know that it is a privilege and an honor to wear our badge. Make them raise their hand and swear to do the right thing. To honor those around them and to carry on our tradition. Too many departments just hire someone, tell them to report for duty and then later wonder why they have problems with them not caring about or appreciating their job and the department. This is also a time to celebrate. For them and us. For us because we're adding to our family. For them because they are entering the most fascinating and most rewarding job anywhere. It's a time for their family to be proud as well. This is how we handle this one and obviously you can add to it whatever you feel will make it more special:

- 1) We set a date and time for the ceremony that works scheduling wise for both the new hires and staff.
- 2) We hold it at our Firefighter Memorial (weather permitting). It provides a very special backdrop and serves as a reminder of those that have sacrificed and gone before us and for what we owe them.

- 3) As many stations attend as possible and staff members are to wear Class A Uniforms.
- 4) The new member's family and friends are invited and the family members are asked to stand just to right and just behind the member being sworn in. This is a big day for them as well and it's nice to have them share in the moment and participate.
- 5) The ceremony starts with an introduction and welcome by the fire chief and when possible with our chaplain providing an invocation.
- 6) Next the City Secretary has them raise their right hand and take the oath of office. And just to make it easy on some, she provides the oath in writing for them to hold onto and read along. At times a little bit of nervousness will make all kinds of words and noises come out of your mouth so this helps some times.
- 7) After the oath of office is conducted, the Mayor pins their badge on them. What also can be a nice touch at this point is if their father, mother or a family member is a current or retired firefighter, allow that family member to pin them. So we would have the mayor shake their hand and hand the badge to the person that is going to pin them. It's a really nice touch and really brings back that family feeling again.
- 8) We also provide a printed program of the event. If you would like a copy to set as a template I'll have that information at the end of this article. And lastly, take lots of pictures.

The Promotion

With the promotion of one of our members we follow the same format as was described with the new firefighter above but we add one very special additional step. After the Mayor or family member pins their badge, we conduct a “collar pinning.” This is the time we allow the member being promoted to invite that special person or persons to assist them by pinning their collar insignias. This could be their spouse, their children, a family member, a friend or mentor. It’s a big day for family as well as for the member being promoted. We had one where the member being promoted was being promoted to captain and had his long time captain pin one of his collar pins. And when it was over there wasn’t a dry eye in the house. It is really a special moment and adds just a little more class to the event. And when the ceremony is concluded just as it is with the new firefighter swear in, the department provides cake and coffee and a reception area for those that attended to gather, visit, take pictures and offer congratulations.

Retirements

This is another that needs to be; no it has to be special. When one of our members gets to the point that they can retire, it should be celebrated and they should be congratulated. To not wish them well is just not the right thing to do. Now I know that there are a lot of firefighters that say when that time comes they want to slip out like they slipped in. No parties, no tributes or speeches, just that they want to quietly leave. I can respect that but I always warn them that they’re going to miss it down the road. They’re going to miss saying good-bye. And often, not having something for them is rough on the troops as well. When they don’t get to say good-bye or wish them well it leaves them with this hole or void. So many departments don’t do anything for a retiring member

and that's a shame. After all that this member has put into the department, the lives that they have affected, the impact they have had on their brothers and sisters, it's only right to do the right thing and honor them and thank them. We owe it to them! The following is how we try to do it in Lewisville.

- 1) Plan to hold it on their last day and at head quarters.
- 2) Take their company out of service during the ceremony and try to bring in as many stations and companies as possible. The retiring member and staff wear their Class A Uniforms.
- 3) The fire chief starts it off with an introduction and welcome and the chaplain provides the invocation.
- 4) If the member is an officer, it is at this point where all members of their shift, or company, or in the case of a chief officer, as many from the department as possible, line up and come to attention (while wearing their Class A Uniforms) and we have the retiring officer flanked by the chief of the department conduct a final walk by and inspection. When he or she reaches the last firefighter, the order is given to present arms, all members salute, the retiring member renders them a salute, they order arms and the honor guard or a chief officer presents them with a flag that was flown over their station on their last day.
- 5) At this point the station paging tones for his or her company or all call tone for a chief are activated and an announcement is given, announcing their retirement, thanking them and wishing them well.
- 6) At this time everyone is dismissed and asked to gather in an area or room where presentations can be made. This is the time that gifts and tributes are given and

finishes with everyone getting that chance to say thanks and wish them well. It's the perfect opportunity for some good stories as well.

Graduations

This one is fairly easy. Give your fire academy or community college a call and ask them for their line-up. They've been doing it for a long time and after gathering a few you should be able to put something really nice together. One key point here is to get a good keynote speaker. There are so many talented people out there that could get them fired up and have them sitting on the edge of their seats. This is a great way to send them out with a bang. It's also a good time to remind them what's it's all about.

Awards Ceremonies

Whether you hold it as a banquet or in the firehouse, this one is very special. One of the hardest things to do in our business is recognize a firefighter for a job well done. Their immediate response is always, "no thanks chief, I was only doing my job." And that's not bad but we still need to recognize them. To be honest, I know it's our job to do the things we do but when an incident or action is above and beyond or has impacted someone in a special way, we need to recognize those for their efforts. Just keep in mind that if we don't, no one else is going to. Below is how we handle our awards ceremony.

- 1) We have an awards committee that plan the event, make the award selections and really put in a lot of hard work getting the whole thing put together. There are many variations to this process and most are very good so it doesn't take looking far to get a hold of a good one. We hold it as a banquet but having it at a firehouse with refreshments also works well.

- 2) A date is set, a location determined and we ask for station coverage from our neighbors. In our case, those that are on duty still staff their companies but because of the station coverage by other departments they don't have to push out on every call, but if needed they can respond or take in a structure fire but this arrangement allows them to join in with the festivities. This is not a problem for on-duty members because alcohol is not served at our ceremony.
- 3) All members wear their Class A Uniforms.
- 4) After everyone is seated, the fire chief welcomes those attending and one of our assistant chiefs introduces any of our special guests (the mayor, council members, visiting chiefs, retirees, etc.) and our chaplain provides an invocation.
- 5) At this point dinner is served. As soon as dinner is over a keynote speaker addresses the group.
- 6) After the keynote speaker concludes we show a music tribute video highlighting our personnel with footage of the past year's calls, events and activities. Each member is presented a copy of the video as a gift which when you think about it, after about twenty years a member will have a pretty good documentary of their department and their career something we never really did before.
- 7) Next is the presentation of the awards starting with years of service, then honorary mentions, awards of exemplary action (our award for civilians, police officers, etc.), company citations, commendations, awards of merit, the medal of valor and finished with our rookie, firefighter, paramedic and officer of the year awards.

**One nice touch. Every now and then we invite a victim usually a CPR save to the banquet. We don't tell anyone they are coming and when it comes time to

recognize that company we have this person join us on stage and help us present the awards. The victim really enjoys it because they get to say thank you one more time and it demonstrates to all just how special our people are and just what kind of an impact they can have on someone's life.

- 8) Then our master of ceremonies raps things up, thanks the committee for all of their hard work and wishes everyone well. Some other nice touches are asking if any of the spouses would like to keep their table center piece, having a photographer on site to take photos of the troops, companies, families, etc., and just making sure everyone feels comfortable and at home. It's a great night for our families.

New Apparatus and Firehouses

As you dig deeper into our history, you discover that we have always had ceremonies when it came to placing a new rig into service. From giving it its first bath or a wetting down to actually pushing the rig into the firehouse like in "the olden days." But it seems that over the years we let this one go in a lot of places just like we stopped taking pictures of the rigs or worse yet, we take the pictures but forget to put the guys in them. This one in particular really reestablishes the whole pride thing again and if done right, can get some firefighters back to understanding why we take care of our rigs in the first place. Here we go with this one.

- 1) First you can send out the notice of the event.
- 2) Next, again, have the chief welcome all and introduce any special guests and have your chaplain provide the invocation.

- 3) At this point you can “wet down” the rig before pushing it in, usually having the company officer handling this.
- 4) Then have your dispatch office activate that station’s paging tones and announce the retirement of the old rig and welcome aboard the new one.
- 5) Then the fun part, pushing the rig into quarters. One note, with the weight of rigs today, it works well to have a driver in the rig backing it in slowly with all pushing simulating the push. Then it’s cake and coffee time.

Our Fireboat

When we dedicated our fireboat, we did number 1, 2, 4, had our chaplain bless the fleet, and instead of the “push” we announced and revealed the name given to the boat. Then we christened the boat with a bottle of Champaign.

New Station

A new firehouse dedication is a special event for more than just us. It’s special for the neighborhood it’s going to serve. So when we dedicated our last firehouse we also held a mini fire prevention week open house with a variety of activities and events for the families and businesses that surround the firehouse. Following was the chain of events for that ceremony.

- 1) Same as all of the previous mentioned, the fire chief gave a welcome and introductions were made. A short speech was given in an effort to acknowledge what the opening of the firehouse is going to do for the community.
- 2) All of our special guests were asked to line up in front of the bay doors for the ribbon cutting but instead of cutting a ribbon, we conducted a “hose uncoupling.” The mayor and fire chief stood across from each other in the middle and at the

coupling and the mayor was asked to uncouple the hose while the rest of the guests held the hose at waist level creating that “ribbon” that you usually see at a dedication like this.

- 3) As soon as the mayor began to uncouple the hose, the station alert tones for that station were set off and an announcement was read welcoming that station and it’s personnel aboard and wishing them a safe journey. Then we commenced with the open house.

As we discussed earlier, these are just a few, and I must emphasize very few, of the ceremonies that are out there and that have been conducted throughout the years and there are many variations on how they can be conducted. Whether it’s any of the above or a firefighter memorial dedication or one where you make someone an honorary chief or firefighter, they’re all important. They’re out there if you look. I’ve been blessed to have had many friends that have shared their ceremony processes with me and that’s something that we all should be doing. It’s through these types of events that we can continue to strengthen our foundation. Because if we don’t, I guarantee you they will all disappear. And once they’re gone, they’re gone and they are hard to bring back. We’ve gotten to a point that the only time we have a ceremony is when we lose a firefighter. We’ve kind of got a few things mixed up a while back. The time to honor someone is not when we’ve lost them, that’s when we pay tribute to them. The time to honor them is when they’re still with us, next to us, right in front of us. Let’s not wait until they’re gone, let’s do it now. So celebrate, provide ceremonies for all of your special events and steer your firefighters back into the right direction that will rekindle that love for the job.

If you would like some examples of the various program flyers, announcements and forms so that you can maybe use some of it for your own ceremonies (hey that's what we did...) please email me at rlasky@cityoflewisville.com

Be safe!