

# The evolution of propane safety

June 26, 2017 By Jay Johnston

Those of us who have been around a while occasionally take the time to be awed by change, innovation and progress regarding safety in the propane industry.

But then my generation grew up watching “The Flintstones” on one hand and “The Jetsons” on the other, so it’s not like we didn’t expect it. It’s hard to admit that my generation has bridged the gaps from simpler times to social media.



When I first got into the insurance business working with propane marketers in the early 1970s, it was a simpler time, when business communications were achieved through landlines, snail mail and face-to-face meetings. Marketers mostly used Motorola radios from trucks to home base. This was before computers. When putting on safety programs for propane marketers, we used overhead projectors turning plastic pages. I remember utilizing a round slide carousel showing firemen walking into burning tanks with hoses, cooling the tank and knocking down the flame to get close enough to close a valve.

In 1978, I purchased a propane grill from one of our marketer insurance customers. It was still in the box and had the old POL valve. I put the grill together, turned on the tank, lit the grill and went inside for the hot dogs.

When I came out, the hose was on fire, burned off, and I had a roaring jet of flames engulfing my new grill. Somehow, my mind clicked to remembering those slideshows. I ran inside to get an oven mitt, grabbed the garden hose and held the water on the flame as I walked in to turn off the valve with the oven mitt. St. Louis Park, Minnesota, was safer that day for my experience.

This was just one of many experiences that changed my life, my heart and my work in the propane industry. I have developed those safety concerns generated in my early years into active narratives, shared through various facets of my work.

As an insurance agent, my primary safety concerns were with containing marketer financial numbers. Over time, I have learned that when it comes to safety, we all become motivated to see the light when we feel the heat.

A few years later, I joined the **National Propane Gas Association (NPGA)** Safety Committee. It was on the safety committee that I met numerous pioneers of this industry, such as Emerson Thomas, Ray Murray and Jim Meyer – to name a few of many who influenced my understanding of industry exposures and safety solutions.

The safety committee’s work generated the old LP Gas Safety Handbook, which contained more than 90 safety bulletins covering the important areas of LP gas distribution/operations, emergency procedures, safety meetings, residential applications, agricultural applications,

industrial applications, recreational applications and general safety information. Bulletins and updates were published as produced by the committee for insertion in the three-ring binder. My old copy, published in 1992, cost \$15 for members and \$50 for non-members.

Its publication became controversial in the late 1990s, as plaintiffs attorneys were purchasing the book and using our training material against propane marketers in liability cases. It was the beginning of the industry's concerns regarding best-practice concepts taken often out of context to establish liability regardless of relation to actual cause. In 1999, the book was discontinued due to liability concerns.

The industry effectively dealt with cylinder overfilling by developing the OPD valve mandate in 1998, replacing the old POL valve. This is just one example of how far we have come in addressing problems and designing solutions to prevent accidents.

With the formation of the **Propane Education & Research Council (PERC)**, NPGA decided to eliminate the safety committee. I served for years on the Certified Employee Training Program (CETP) Certification Committee, involved with initial development of CETP training modules, as well as on the education committee, which developed programs such as Dispensing Propane Safely and Propane Emergencies.

At about the same time, NPGA sold CETP to PERC, leaving safety mostly in the hands of the propane council. In an *LP Gas* column titled "The Death of the Safety Committee," I thanked iconic members of the committee for their contributions and challenged the wisdom of leaving safety solely in the name of "marketer-driven" PERC.

In 2006, the NPGA Technology and Standards Committee voted to add "safety" to the name, creating the NPGA Technology, Standards and Safety Committee. Today, the committee serves as a great networking opportunity to learn from industry veterans, marketers and suppliers alike.

### **Taking a safety stand**

Taking stands in the name of safety has become one of my hallmarks. Over the years, I have championed issues and challenged the status quo when politics interfered with obvious safety problems.

Cylinder sleeve removal prior to filling and concerns about rust development became a political football and personal challenge. Current National Fire Protection Association code now requires refillers to remove plastic sleeves for cylinder inspection prior to refilling. The change in code established a line in the sand for cylinder exchange operations and refill stations alike to comprehensively examine cylinder conditions prior to filling.

Another stand was with a 500-gallon tank used to refill cylinders 2 ft. from a convenience store wall and 5 ft. from the rear door. My concerns were initiated by the Ghent, West Virginia, tragedy and wake of liability. Oddly, marketer politics took a stand for exception, and it took a year to override objections to get the situation corrected and in compliance.

I encourage all NPGA members and employees to take a stand for safety. The industry cannot afford to live with black eyes caused by safety ignorance. If you see something that is an accident waiting to happen, say something. Your efforts to keep our industry safe can make all of the difference in industry image and profitable results.

Today, marketers and suppliers work hand in hand as stakeholder partners in the safety process.

We have state-of-the-art technology at all ends of the industry, with smartphones, tank monitoring, remote safety controls on trucks, PERC consumer safety materials offered through social media, e-learning modules for industry training and emergency personnel, and consumer education. Still, it takes trained hands and minds to achieve safe results.

When you think of our industry's history on safety, we've come a long way, baby.

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