



# Overcoming Fear of Fire

Lessons from the Neolithic Age

BY ROGER WOODWORTH

**S**ome thrive. Others are lost to the ages. What makes the difference? Ingenuity. Or, to be more precise, applied ingenuity. After all, a better idea without action is nothing.

Those more apt to succeed first assess threats based on facts. Then they apply resources in new ways to make things better. Those who do otherwise will certainly weaken and eventually fail.

To illustrate, consider this story about the first known transmission of energy.

## Ingenuity for Survival

Humans in the Stone Age feared fire. Fire was mysterious and unpredictable. Like creatures in the wild, people saved themselves by running away from flames. From today's vantage point, we can see this fear was self-limiting.

Pre-historic records reveal that our ancestors from this time were hunter-gatherers, few in number, small in

stature and limited to warmer climes.

As a strategy for survival, fear of fire made great sense at the time. But then someone figured out a better way. Our representative for this new era is Ötzi, the Tyrolean Iceman.

For those that haven't heard, Ötzi lost his life on a glacier in what we know today as the Otzal Alps near the Austrian-Italian border. His mummified remains were discovered by German hikers in 1991.

In an ironic twist of fate, one of those hikers later lost his own life to the same glaciers.

The South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology in Bolzano, Italy retains Ötzi for study. Carbon dating placed his time of death at about fifty-three hundred years ago, the

Copper Age of the Neolithic Period.

Much about him was well-preserved. His body, the clothing he wore, the weapons and tools he carried. All these offered an unprecedented window to life in that time.

Scientists have since then pieced together a fascinating story of Ötzi's life. For example, his wounds suggest he was in a severe fight. He succumbed on the glacier, perhaps his route to escape.

Among the intriguing items found with Ötzi were two pouches. Each was crafted from rolled birch bark. The first harbored tinder and flint tools. It was a kit for starting fires.

The other was lined with maple leaves and juniper needles as insulation and contained blackened charcoal. Proof of the first known transmission of energy, Ötzi carried embers of energy as he moved from one camp to another.

Those pouches, a technology of sorts, made it safe to carry embers. And easier to restart a fire in any location. Fire for warmth and for light to settle new regions. Fire for cultivating the land for agriculture. Fire for cooking for better diets. Fire for boosting the odds of survival.

People of Neolithic times most certainly still ran from wildfire, as do we. But they did something their Stone Age predecessors did not do. They assessed the threat and reimagined what was possible.

And they figured out ways to use resources differently to make things better. They applied ingenuity to command fire to their purpose. They changed the course of life for all.

## Technology as Fire

Much has changed since the Neolithic Period. What persists is our fear of uncertainties and things we don't take time to understand. Just like fire was to our Stone Age predecessors.

For example, consider the dramatic shifts in the policies and economics

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## Does your utility, commission, or agency run in fear of these fires?

of energy. Tally the growing number of new regulatory requirements of utilities. And pause in awe of how consumer expectations have moved.

What underpins so much change in so few years? In part, new technologies and thought leaders who reimagine and advocate ways to make energy service better.

Such tech-driven change will persist. You need not look far for new things that might alter the utility landscape. Two were in the news this past month.

The California Energy Commission is studying use of piezoelectric crystals in asphalt to get power from cars using roads. And AT&T has revealed Project AirGig, a radically better and cheaper powerline carrier technology.

These are fires in the making.

As a leader, the choices you are making now will determine the fate of your organization. Does your utility, commission, or agency run in fear of these fires?

Will your leadership leave those who follow in a weakened state, perhaps lost to the ages? Or are you leading the way to first understand the implications of emerging technology and imagining how things could be better?

A vantage point in the future is no different than our look back from today. Those who honestly assess perceived threats are more apt to understand and command fires of any kind.

They'll be the ones best able to imagine ways to leverage new technologies with existing resources. And they'll be the ones who make things better for all. The lesson is clear. Those who apply ingenuity will thrive. **PUF**



Cartoon drawn by Richard Cline. Permission granted by The New Yorker and Conde Nast

*“I took him for what he was worth,  
but it was all in utilities.”*

In the last issue of Public Utilities Fortnightly before Thomas Edison's death in 1931, PUF reported he lighted the Menlo Park grounds with gas lamps.

