CIA: Unobtrusive Neighbor

Complex, Employees Blend Into Va. Suburb

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By Bill McAllister
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If you want to see the Central Intelligence Agency's headquarters, go to Pizza Supreme on Old Chain Bridge Road in McLean. Sketched on one wall there is a cartoonist's view of the agency's massive headquarters that are hidden two miles away in the Virginia woodside.

There are some obvious flaws in the drawing: the cartoon building is too tall and is topped by the letters "CIA." But none of the restaurant's customers—many of them CIA employees—has ever complained to pizza shop owner Mike Mansy.

The drawing and the customers' silence are among the few reminders in Fairfax County of something the CIA would just as soon have everyone forget: both its headquarters and a good number of the CIA's estimated work force of 15,000 are nestled away among all the other backyard-barbecueing and lawn-tending suburbanites.

Aside from a half dozen highway signs directing traffic to the CIA complex and a noontime crowd that suddenly appears at a small delicatessen called the McLean Restaurant, there are few other outward (or "overt," as the CIA operatives would say) signs that the nation's spy center is located in the Langley countryside.

"There is nothing... The agency could be in Timbuctoo," said William Ladson, principal at McLean High School.

Fourteen years after the CIA deserted most of its downtown Washington offices for the suburbs, the agency has become an accepted, if not unquestioned, fact of life in Fairfax McLean countryside.

County officials seem only too happy to have what Douglas Harman, deputy county executive, sees as "an excellent employment center" and "a very quiet neighbor." They readily dismiss any negative impact, such as having a large number of county residents who are disinterested in local affairs, as many CIA employees seem to be.

"If you wanted to . . . you could spend your whole life there—from womb to tomb," claimed former CIA employee Victor Narchetti.

Indeed, the agency provides its employees with a myriad of services right inside its compound. There's a knitting and crochet club, ("It doesn't do much for our 007 image," admits one official), a skeet shooting club called "The Sitting Ducks," and two softball leagues that include teams named "The Good Guys," "Ballbusters," and "Wild Things."

"We're probably the only spy organization in the world that has a chorus that sings Christmas carols to its

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workers," said another CIA officer. What's more the agency also has a prayer and Bible study group.

Such programs are part of the agency's traditional, avowed paternalism, but some former CIA employees said the programs alos breed an insularity that they now find distrurbing.

CIA employees are "never tuned into the local scene," grumbles former CIA employee Robert L. Welk, who this month finished last among six Republicans seeking nominations for five seats in the Virginia House of Delegates from the northern Fairfax District.

Welk, who had said he thought his CIA ties would help him in the primary, thinks otherwise now. His CIA colleagues, who he expected might support him, "are completely oriented to Uganda, not Reston," he grouses.

Although the unveiling of highway traffic signs pointing to the CIA complex created a small stir in 1973, the McLean city directory has yet to acknowledge the agency's presence. Many of the town's residents list their occupations as "U.S. Gov't.," which longtime residents say is a sure indication they work for the CIA.

Few county officials let that worry them. "I don't spend any time worrying where they work," says Fairfax County Supervisor Rufus Phillips, who represents a district that includes the agency and once worked for the CIA.

"It means absolutely nothing," agrees County Planning Commission Chairman Edward C. Gurski, who works for the agency in a position he won't discuss.

The CIA's presence in Fairfax "is no different from that of Ft. Belvoir (Army post) or the U.S. Geological Survey (headquartered in Reston)," Gurski says.

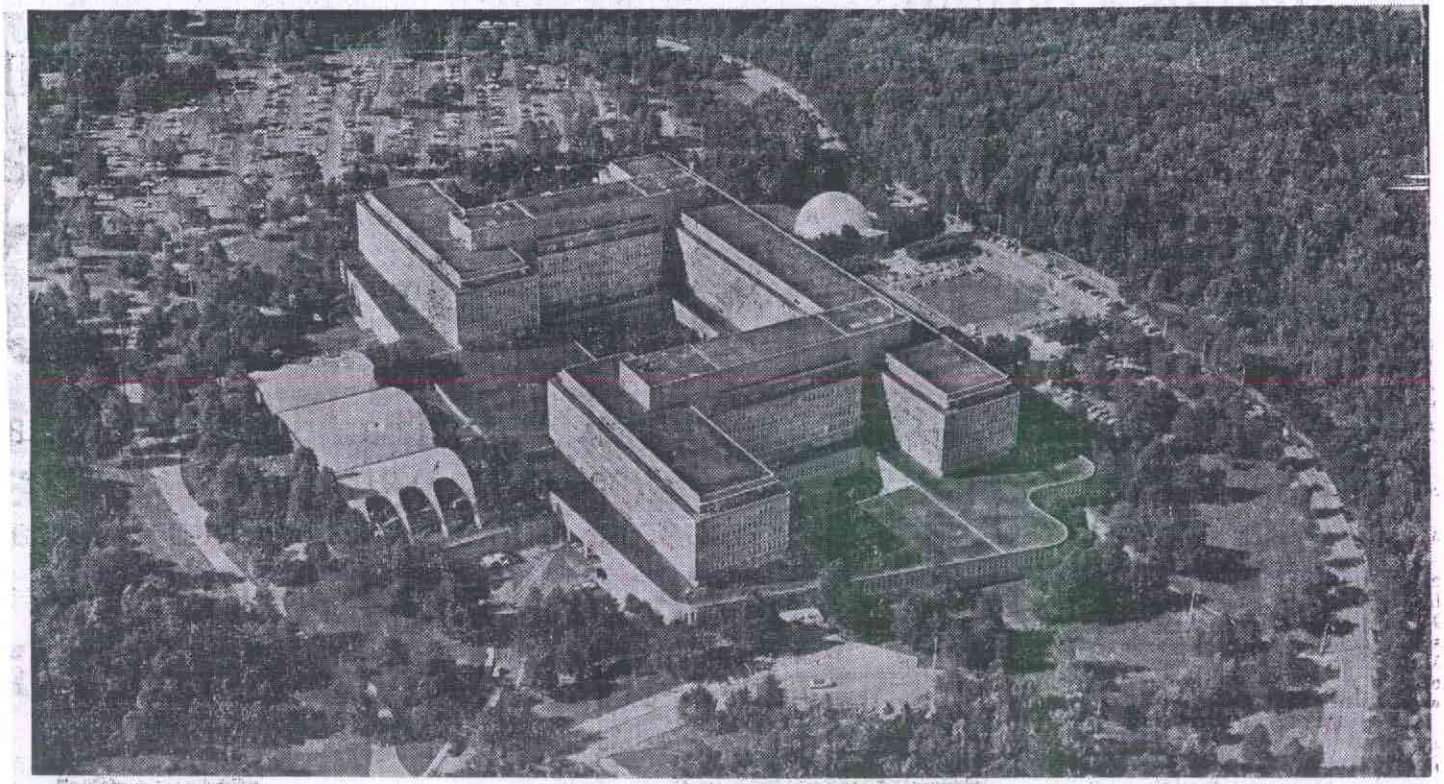
Just how many people in this county of an estimated 557,500 have ties to the CIA isn't known. The agency doesn't release any employment figures and county officials can't recall if they ever asked.

A Falls Church lawyer, arguing for a zoning change in McLean, did ask about 10 years ago and "went through all kinds of shenanigans" before calling the Russian embassy. "I made out as a cab driver and got some figure," recalls Lytton H. Gibson, the lawyer.

Gibson was claiming that the area around the CIA was well developed and that a highrise apartment complex would be in order. Althoulh he can't recall the figure given him by the Russians, county officials granted his client the zoning change.

change. (News reports at the time said the Russian told him the current figure of 3,500 would eventually expand to 11,000.)

Today the CIA is, by all estimates, one of the biggest industries in Fairfax and one county officials concede they know little about. "Really, we have very little to do with them," says county executive Robert W. Wilson.



By Ken Feil—The Washington Post

urrounded by trees, the CIA complex is situated at McLean in Fairfax County, off Highway 123 and the George Washington Parkway.

By law that's the way it's supposed to be. The CIA isn't supposed to be involved in domestic spying but the Rockefeller Commission, which investigated charges that the agency violated its charter, had to look no further than Fairfax City to find a violation.

In 1971 Fairfax City police helped CIA agents break into a photographic studio operated by a former part-time CIA employee. Commonwealth's Attorney Robert F. Horan Jr. has begun an investigation into the break-in which a policeman has said occurred while local officers stood watch outside the studio.

The issue has split the Fairfax City Council, with Mayor Nathaniel Young praising the agency and Councilman Walter L. Stephens demanding resignations from all officers who knew the break-in was being conducted without a search warrant.

Bowing out of the controversy was Councilman Lee H. Wigren, a CIA employee. He said he knew nothing about "the alleged incident" and his duties at the agency weren't linked to it.

The Rockefeller Commission, which investigated the CIA under a presidential directive, reported that the break-in was the only example it discovered where the police actively participated in a CIA operation.

Fairfax City Police Chief Leonard P. Kline, who wasn't in charge of the city police force at the time of the CIA break-in, disavows any ties between his department and the agency. "We never had any relationship with the CIA and we don't now," he says.

Fairfax County police issue a similar disclaimer, but Lt. Col. Kenneth R. Wilson, deputy chief of the force acknowledges the county has "an unwritten policy" of notifying government agencies when one of their employees is arrested in the county. "It would be the same for the Bureau of the Customs, Justice Department or anybody else," Wilson says.

Indeed, when county officials speak about the agency, they are more likely to do so in awe rather than in disagreement. Says one county official who visited a friend at the complex: "It's really well done. What you'd expect from a Fortune 500 company. More than just the security, it's tasteful."

The county tax assessor's office appraises the building, as it does all federal property in the county, but its file on the CIA property contains little specific information. The building is still listed as being on a 581.7-acre site owned by the Commerce Department and shared by a Bureau of Public Roads facility.

According to the assessor's records, the CIA building contains 50 million square feet of floor space and is valued at about $67 million, down from an initial value of $87.2 million. Still, it is the single most valuable building in the county, according to the assessor.

Protected by a force of armed, uniformed General Service Administration guards and surrounded by 12-foot-high barbed wire fences, the complex is designed to allow the agency's employees to lead lives completely removed from public scrutiny.

The agency will help bail its employees out of jail, suggest approved doctors to visit, and even assign an officer to help make arrangements for deaths in an employee's immediate family.

The agency has its own discount store, reserve military units and in-house magazine, which, among other things, reviews spy novels. (The publication, Studies in Intelligence, however, is classified secret and not circulated beyond the intelligence community.)

Visitors are allowed to visit the agency's ground floor, but only in the company of an agency employee and while wearing a badge emblazened with a large red "V,' for visotro. The badges govern access to everything in the building, including its cafeteria which is divided into two sections, one for visitors and overt workers and the other, larger section for covert operatives.

The agency, in what one CIA executive jokingly called one of its "best domestic operations," this week began selling through its employee association tickets to Washington Redskins home football games. The tickets sold for $11.15 each, only 15 cents over the retail price, and because of demand employees had to enter a drawing to determine who could get the tickets.

In typical CIA fashion, the ticket forms distributed to workers noted that the forms were to be considered "secret when filled in."

The agency's blue-covered telephone book is, of course, classified "secret" and, despite the classification, it doesn't list everyone in the building. Covert employees aren't listed, according to a spokesman.

Dissent isn't unknown in the building, although the agency makes no secret of the fact that it prefers the issue to be no more sensitive than the current question of whether to replace the artificial grass in a patio near the cafeteria with real grass. That question is currently pending before the agency's own Fine Arts Commission, which coordinates art exhibits and aesthetics at the complex.

As much as the agency encourages its workers to get together socially, it also tightly governs the type of information they pass to each other. A bulletin board on the ground floor contains notices of homes for sale, biles for sale. But the no- free puppies, and automotices, which must be individually approved by a security officer, list only a first name and a telephone extension. "Call Nick ext. XXXX," the notice will read.

The agency doesn't maintain an off-limits list as some military commands have established and a CIA spokesman sniffs at the very idea of one. "We only hire grownups," he says.

Life in the agency can be rough mentally, according

to David A. Phillips of Corner Rock Springs, Md., who retired from the agency this year after 25 years in its clandestine service. Divorce rates among agents assigned overseas are high, a product of frequent moves and the danger agents constantly face, he says.

Nor is life in the Washington area without its difficulties, Phillips, 52, who was chief of the agency's sensitive Latin American operations, remained under cover months after he returned to Washington from his last assignment.

He was so determined to keep that cover that he would take a neighbor 45 minutes out of his way to drop him off by his downtown Washington office. The neighbor thought Phillips worked for a government agency downtown and never realized he worked for the CIA until Phillips got tired of taking the man to work.

Such deception is encouraged by the agency and accounts for the small number of CIA officials in public positions, former agents say.

"There is sort of an unspoken rule: 'You don't get involved in local affiars,'" says Robert Welk, who retired from the agency in December after 27 years. "It's part of the spirit of the agency.

"The agency does prefer you keep a low image," he says. "They prefer you keep your name out of the paper —and with reason. Why provide the Russians with a three-column biography?"

Unfortunately for someone like Welk, a 54-year-old lawyer who wants to have a political career and lost in the recent Republican primary, that can produce "disastrous" results. "I was not known and I didn't know" the politics of the area," he said.

What offices CIA agents have held in the Washington area have been either nonpartisan ones such as Wygren's seat of the Fairfax City Council or appointive ones such as Gurski's seat on the Planning Commission.

Frank A. Ecker, currently Montgomery County's public advocate for tax assessments, was serving as mayor of Rockville, Md., in 1962 when he was recruited by the agency. He joined with the express understanding that he could remian in office.

"I was unusual at that time," says Ecker, who has since retired from the CIA. He admits difficulty in recalling many other CIA employees who have entered public office.

"You can't run for office and hide where you work," he explains.

If an agent wants to lead an active social life outside the complex, he can, but, according to a former agent, he has to be careful about whom he parties with. The result is that agents frequently tend to do things together, even going into business together.

One of the area's most widely acclaimed restaurants, the Imperial Gardens at the Tysons Corner Shopping Center, was bankrolled by a number of CIA agents and their friends. Although the number of active agents with investments in the restaurant has dwindled, the restaurant remains a favorite luncheon spot for agents from McLean.

Warren B. Harshman, chairman of the restaurant company, estimates that about three out of ten of the luncheon patrons are from the agency. "But how the hell do you know?" he asks. "They don't wear signs."