



Philbrick lecturing at an anti-subversive seminar here two years ago...

Philbrick Lives Fourth Life

By Hank Plante

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"Who am I today?" Herbert A. Philbrick repeats the question. "Just an ordinary citizen."

Twenty-five years after the trial that started it all, Philbrick is living his "fourth life" these days, in suburban Bethesda.

On April 6, 1949, Philbrick testified in a Boston courtroom against 11 alleged Communist conspirators who would all eventually serve five years in prison. The courtroom scenario marked the public debut of Philbrick and the FBI as a counter-Communist team.

"The trial, which started quietly, blew up just as the (Communist) Party was trying to find out who the next government witness was going to be . . . and it was me," Philbrick recalls.

"It was an especially shocking development to the comrades, because they had taken every step to keep security. And now it was like a thunderbolt in the courtroom when I walked in, since four of the 11 (on trial) knew me personally."

What the defendants learned for the first time that day was that Herb Philbrick, advertising salesman and Baptist layman, had been leading what he later immortalized in book form as his "three lives": citizen, Communist, and FBI coun-



... before HUAC in 1949 ...

terspy.

The furor of those days seems far removed.

Today, Philbrick and his second wife, 32-year-old Shirley, live a hushed existence in a brick colonial house just down the lane from the regional Boy Scout headquarters.

"I'm just like everybody else," he grins. The same old Herb Philbrick who, as he wrote in his bestseller, "I Led Three Lives" in 1952, "had no particular distinguishing marks to set me apart in a crowd . . . together, with an extrovert's geniality, it turned out to be my best disguise."

Occasionally, however, snatches of the old vocabulary drift into his speech.

"Corky!" he says firmly to his barking dog. "Corky, stop it! You're a menace, a nuisance, a menace!"

Herb Philbrick came to Montgomery County eight years ago, to watch the antiwar demonstrations from the front lines, to see the changes in government and to use a Washington postal box on his U.S. Press Association newsletter and his Lamplighters Printers' business cards.

His curly hair a little greyer, books on Truman added to the ones on Washington and Franklin, Philbrick at 59 seems very much the professional guy next door.

Fellow Kiwanis Club members pop in and out of the house, ordering small printing jobs and suggesting editorials for his newsletter (1100 weekly circulation). Occasionally, a special favor is asked, like his cutting the ribbon at a recent Kensington antique show after he did the printing.

But he and his associates will tell you that cashing in on the Philbrick name is not part of his life style. Indeed, to this man whose circle of friends barely stretches outside his church, the name can

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"I called a couple of Congressmen's offices this morning for one of my editorials, and they always say, 'Are you the same one?' or 'Are you related?' and I always say, 'Yes, I'm related,' without explaining any more," he says.

"Otherwise, you get into a two-hour discussion about how it was back then . . . I'd never get any work done."

Similarly, his telephone is unlisted, his business cards carry no name other than the company's and airline reservations are made under an alias—but that's for other reasons.

"Yes, we worry about cranks," Philbrick says. "The Bureau used to keep a close eye on things . . . but there's always the Oswald, the Sirhan, that guy that shot Wallace . . ."

Eventually, he says, the family will move back to New England, where he spent nine years gathering information on "youth councils" and other groups that Judge Harold R. Medina's courtroom heard were Communist fronts.

Immediately after the Boston trial, convictions were upheld by the Supreme Court. However, "a fellow named Earl Warren was appointed to the Bench," Philbrick recalls, and the Justices went on to throw out the old Smith Act that made prosecution of the Philbrick Eleven possible.

Warren said we needed an 'overt act' to convict a second string of Communist leaders that the government was then going after," Philbrick says. "Those were his words, 'overt act,' not just talk about conspiracy."

Philbrick says he disagrees with Warren, but he smiles when he gripes. It is his habit to automatically add "I think" to his most positive answers.

"Yeah, that's a tulip tree, I think," he says after having watched the tree bloom for eight years.

The lectures have tapered off to one a week at his own choosing. But Philbrick still attempts to exert heavy influence through his "Washington Exclusive" newsletter. He feels the nation's future demands that he should.

"This is a strange thing, but it is a fact that there are very, very few ex-Communists," he says with authority. "Well, you get a few

on the fringe who . . . expose themselves or something, but you get very, very few. With Marxist-Leninists they come to a point and never come back.

"Communism is much stronger today as part of the whole world movement," he continues. In this country, he contends, it may be less visible but that is because "it is almost entirely underground . . ."

"It's a religion. Like good Christians figure they're going to get to heaven, every good Marxist-Leninist figures he's going to win. Like 'We shall overcome,' heh!"

Some things have changed since Philbrick operated out of the small "secret room" behind his basement furnace that was revealed in his book and a subsequent television series that drew millions of viewers in the 50's.

Philbrick says he has focused his vision on those he calls "people like us. I call them 'people who believe in freedom.'"

There's also cynicism toward the United States' operations overseas.

"I've given up on the American foreign policy," he says in a nasal monotone. "I'm convinced the American foreign policy is just a holding operation. A defensive kind of thing . . ."

"The hope is in the Russian people themselves. There is where it must come."

Perhaps surprisingly, Philbrick adds that he was "appalled at the Communist-hunting tactics of the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy, in the period that the senator's nationally televised hearings spawned."

"He was a politician, I'd say," Philbrick says, referring to McCarthy. "I think he saw a good thing and figured he'd cash in on it. They (McCarthy's committee) wanted me, but I kept very much out of sight."

While he admits bafflement at the Watergate scandals, the one-time superspy is adamant in his belief that what the country needs now is a total rededication.

"How many people have read from start to finish the Declaration of Independence?" he asks. "This Fourth of July, if every town in this U. S. got a person up on a soapbox to read it, this would change . . . this would change the whole world!"