

Merry-Go-Round *SFChronicle* **APR 27 1971**

Mystery of Buried Cash in Florida Keys



Jack Anderson

MY ASSOCIATE Les Whitten has just returned from a treasure hunt for buried CIA cash in the Florida Keys where pirates once stashed Spanish gold.

He found one cache where thousands in molding \$20 bills had been buried. But someone had reached the secret site ahead of him. All Whitten found were six weathered, matted \$20 bills that apparently had been dropped about 200 yards away.

In an earlier column, we reported that the Central Intelligence Agency had delivered bales of \$20 bills to Cuban exile leaders to finance clandestine operations against Communist Cuba.

Assassination teams, sabotage squads and commando units were sent against Castro after the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion. These missions apparently were halted after President Kennedy's assassination. But the CIA continued to slip infiltration teams into Cuba to gather intelligence.

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THE CIA paid all expenses, apparently, in cash. Huge sums were turned over to exile leaders, who gave no accounting of how they spent it.

Bradley Ayers, a former Army captain, who was on loan to the CIA in 1963-64 to train Cuban assault teams, learned enough from his former trainees to figure out where some of the CIA money might be hidden. He told us he discovered a half-buried suitcase full of molding, mutilated \$20 bills.

The suitcase was in a remote spot that he was confident wouldn't be discovered.

He took out a dozen bills to make sure they weren't counterfeit. The banks redeemed all but two badly weathered \$20 bills.

Then Ayers' house was mysteriously broken into and records of his find were taken. Fearing the CIA or Cuban exiles were watching him, he dared not return to the cache.

However, he told us his story and showed us the bank records.

Whitten, Ayers and Ayers' wife flew to an air strip on upper Key Largo.

For two days, they chugged through the creeks in a shallow-draft 18-foot skiff.

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FINALLY, they came upon the Bramble-cloaked site where Ayres said he had discovered the suitcase. The soil at the hiding place had been turned up and sifted for ten yards in all directions. The underbrush and sea grass were tramped as if by many feet.

The suitcase full of currency was gone. Disappointed, they combed the area. Within a quarter mile, Whitten spotted a tattered \$20 bill. Ayers found two more, then Whitten discovered a sheaf of three bills matted together with mud and grass.

The bills were near scraps of a road map, which Ayers said had been used as a wrapper for the suitcase bills.

There is no way to prove this was part of the money which the CIA continued to provide anti-Castroite exiles. But the stories that led to the cache came in part to Ayres from Cubans he helped train for the CIA.