

The Mail-Snooping by CIA and Post Office Told

Washington

A top postal official and a former CIA agent revealed yesterday how the agencies teamed up for over 20 years to open illegally and read the mail of Americans corresponding with persons in Communist countries.

William J. Cotter, the Postal Service's chief inspector, told a House subcommittee that from 1953 to 1973 — when he stopped the operation — the CIA worked with the Post Office in a mail surveillance program in New York and San Francisco.

Cotter, who described the operation as illegal, told how CIA agents opened and photographed letters mailed to and from the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China and Cuba.

Cotter's testimony, given Tuesday in executive session before the Civil Liberties Subcommittee, was made public yesterday, shortly before a former CIA agent told the panel he was briefed about the operation in 1958.

Mel Crain, a San Diego State University professor who left the CIA in 1959, said the FBI also was involved in the mail surveillance, and

mail had been opened in New Orleans by intelligence agents.

"The letters were opened, reproduced, resealed, and sent on their way without interrupting mail flow or their opening in any way being detected," Crain testified.

Crain, who was deputy chief of the CIA's operational intelligence research branch, said all mail to and from the Soviet Union was opened, involving "hundreds and hundreds" of first class pieces.

Federal law prohibits any government agency from opening first class mail without a court order.

Crain said a CIA official told him the operation was "unconstitutional and illegal" but was "necessary to fulfill our mission" to protect national security.

Chairman Robert W. Kastenmeier (Dem-Wis.) said the activity was "in direct violation" of the law and announced he had written President Ford seeking assurances that it has been stopped.

Cotter said he first learned of the operation in the early 1950s when he was a CIA agent, and tried several times to halt the opera-

tion after becoming postal inspector in 1969.

He said he advised CIA director Richard Helms in 1971 to obtain "higher approval . . . or discontinue the project."

Three days later Cotter said he was called by Postmaster General Winton Blount and told to "carry on with the project."

He said postmasters going back to Arthur Summerfield in the Eisenhower administration knew something about the program in various degrees.

"It must not continue,"



UPI Telephoto

MEL CRAIN
Former CIA agent

Cotter said, "and it must not recur. The 'mail must go through' all right, but unopened by spooks."

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