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U.S. Opening Of Individual Mail Detailed

United Press International

The Chief U.S. Postal Service inspector said yesterday that 431 times in the past two years an individual's mail was opened after issuance of a search warrant.

William J. Cotter also indicated that the Central Intelligence Agency may have been involved in mail openings over and above the 431 authorized by court orders, but refused to comment publicly on the number.

After open testimony before a House subcommittee on postal facilities and mail, Cotter gave further information in closed session. When members asked Cotter how extensive past CIA mail opening practices had been, he replied, "I would feel much freer . . . to discuss this if we were in executive session."

During the public part of the hearing, Cotter reviewed current practices on mail openings and mail covers as well as a CIA "20-year project" during which mail to and from the Soviet Union was opened between 1953 and 1973.

Cotter, a former CIA agent, said a mail cover involves recording information from the outside of the envelope, but not actual opening of letters. A cover may be instituted to assist in locating a fugitive, to obtain evidence on the commission or attempted commission of a crime, or to "protect the national security," he said.

At the present time there are 353 mail covers around the country, but during a year there might be 1,000, he said. Cover authority is issued for a 30-day period, but can be renewed.

Only the chief postal inspector can authorize covers in the national security category, Cotter said, and 95 per cent of those requests come from the FBI.

The Postal Service does not open mail unless it is in the "dead letter" category or unless a search warrant has been issued by a court.