

## Colebrook Trivia

The current interest in Colebrook's historic tours prompted me to compile a list of facts, or trivia in some cases, that we point out while driving around town. Lynne Thibault, the Senior and Community Center director, read some of these to the participants of the nutrition program the other day, and the entry about the Nazi spies caught in Colebrook during WWII aroused more interest than others.

The first case was rather strange, as it never was known what information could have been passed on to their German masters. Around 1942, my father had a contract with John O. Newell, the owner of the estate known as "Upper Gray", to paint and wallpaper several rooms in the main building. There was a man and wife team of caretakers who lived in an apartment on one of the upper floors. The second or third day he was working there, he had a question that he thought either of the caretakers would be able to answer. A search of the first and second floors came up empty, so he knocked on their apartment door. Receiving no response, and thinking they had to be inside, as they appeared to be nowhere else, he tried the doorknob and found it to be open. He stuck his head in and called out, at which point he found himself looking straight at a large Nazi flag, and directly under that a table on which sat a short-wave sending radio.

He received no response to his calls, so he withdrew his head, shut the door and went about his work until eventually the man appeared. He answered my father's question and went about his business. When my father arrived home that evening, he immediately composed a letter to J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, informing him of what he had observed. Within the week, the couple apparently was whisked away, as no one in town ever saw or heard from them again. A few weeks later my father received a personal letter from Hoover, thanking him for his observation and for acting as a responsible, patriotic citizen.

The second incident, and the one that can be observed while driving along Conn. Route 183 in North Colebrook, involved a breach of security within the US Postal Service.

A man who lived in Sandisfield held a very responsible US Government position. He was receiving highly sensitive documents through the mail. Whether or not this policy might be questioned as rather risky, especially during wartime, is a question that will have to go unanswered.

At some point, the recipient became suspicious about the envelopes. I don't know whether or not the details were released at the time, but I remember hearing that he became suspicious that his mail had been tampered with in a most sophisticated manner. He expressed his fears to Washington, and in due time an investigation revealed that the mail was un-compromised from Washington DC to Winsted, Conn. Someone noticed that a vehicle with new tires had been parking at a particular turnout in North Colebrook at a spot far removed from the nearest house and along a stretch of road that received very little traffic. Only state or federal vehicles had new tires during WWII, so that narrowed the field considerably. The land rises steeply at this spot, and the hillside is covered with dense forest. Federal Postal inspectors set up a blind a few yards uphill above the turnout manned by an agent with a camera equipped with a telephoto lens. Before long he took photos proving that a substitute mail carrier was in fact a German

agent. These pictures showed him opening the envelopes, photographing the contents and resealing them.

The third episode happened right in our home. My mother had been a teacher in New York prior to coming to Colebrook. Several of her former students had kept in touch with her, and it was not unusual for us to entertain them throughout the year. This began during the depression years and kept up for several decades.

During the winter of 1941-42 we had a large snowfall, and as a result, there was great skiing locally. One of the former students had made arrangements to come with three friends and spend a weekend. After skiing in the afternoon, everyone congregated in our living room and kitchen. They were soon joined by one of my mother's brothers who lived across the road from our house. Our New York guests must have brought along several bottles of alcoholic beverages, and my uncle set himself up as bartender. As the evening progressed, everyone drank responsibly except for one of the women guests. I remember realizing something wasn't right when she began collecting the desert dishes (with the desert still in them) and tossing them out the front door into the snow for our dog. My uncle, realizing that he had a golden opportunity to have some fun, began mixing special concoctions for Marie to drink. And drink them she did, and praised him as being the best bartender she had ever known. (He had been putting mustard, ketchup, and Lord knows what else into her drinks!)

When it came time to go to bed, Marie was totally out of control, and insisted on going out dressed in her nightgown "for a walk", regardless of the fact that there was two feet of snow outside and the temperature was quite cold. She did go outside, and my father had to go after her. She put up a fierce struggle, ending with him knocking her out and carrying her inert body, slung over his shoulder, back into the warmth of the house.

My parents put her to bed, but as soon as she came to, wanted to get up and get into more trouble. This ended with both of them holding her down for a good part of the night until eventually she fell asleep. But while she was being restrained, she kept up a steady stream of invectives against each of them, the people she had come with, and how Hitler was going to kill every one of them when the German army invaded. She went into great detail just what their fates would be under the Nazi rule, and was especially vocal when it came to the future of the Jews. I can honestly say that this was the first time in my life that I had ever heard anyone single out the Jews (or anyone else, for that matter) in such a prejudicial manner.

As it happened, my mother's former student, with whom she had come as a guest, was Jewish, and of course was deeply disturbed and embarrassed by this turn of events.

The next morning, when Marie awoke, she realized that she might have either done or said something she shouldn't have, and tried to pry information as to what had transpired. She was told not to worry; they had had a pleasant evening, nothing more.

Once more my father wrote to J. Edgar Hoover, and this eventually brought a longer personal reply thanking him for exposing a particularly dangerous Nazi agent.

We found out later that she had been the secretary to the private secretary of the man who headed US Government information gathering within Nazi Germany, and in his office were the names of all allied undercover agents in Germany at that time.

One would never suspect that a small town such as Colebrook would have been involved in the apprehension of not one, but three Nazi spies during WWII.