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Around the State

Research Firm Used as CIA Front

A former Richmond city councilman and FBI agent confirms he set up a phony business research firm in the 1950s that was used by the CIA as a front to train spies.

"I did it as a patriotic citizen," John E. Lawler, a former Richmond councilman, told The Richmond News Leader in a story published Tuesday.

Lawler said he began accepting CIA assignments when he retired as special agent in charge of the Richmond FBI office in 1950 and became an executive of an insurance company. He was on the council from 1956-60.

He said he set up CIA-backed concerns in Africa, including an airline in Libya. He told the newspaper he was paid only for his expenses.

Lawler, 73, ran a phony research organization dubbed the Old Dominion Research Co. that was a front for a CIA training and payroll operation, the newspaper said.

The firm, which Lawler operated during the four years he was a councilman, fit the pattern of other CIA-backed organizations that posed as foundations to pay students and scholars abroad to collect intelligence.

Lawler agreed to the interview after he donated a large collection of personal papers and documents to Virginia Commonwealth University.

One folder in the collection includes applications for overseas research grants or letters from Lawler approving research projects in the Middle East and Europe, the paper said.

Lawler maintained he never knew

much about what went on in the research corporation and what he did know he has since forgotten.

"It just vanishes in time," he said.

The CIA declined to confirm or deny the News Leader's report.