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NEWPORT NEWS DAILY PRESS (VA)
3 February 1982

Phony Firm Was Cover For CIA

RICHMOND (UPI) — A former Richmond city councilman operated a phony research firm beginning in the late 1950s that was sometimes used by the CIA to train spies. The Richmond News Leader reported Tuesday.

"I did it as a patriotic citizen," John E. Lawler told the paper.

Lawler said he began accepting CIA assignments when he retired in 1950 as special agent in charge of the Richmond FBI office. He was on the council from 1956 to 1960.

Lawler, 73, said he 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 between 1956 and 1960, 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.

An initial inquiry from the paper in April brought a letter saying there was "no record" of the undercover organization. But the News Leader said a subsequent letter in December acknowledged "we should have said that a records search failed to locate any overt records.

"Further, we should have stated that the fact of the existence or non-existence of any documents which would reveal a confidential or covert CIA connection with or interest in matters relating to those set forth in your request is classified."

"By this statment," the letter went on to say, "we are neither confirming nor denying that any such documents exist."