

What they found was this:

Photo via Shorpy.

Descending through the opening made by the wheels of the truck, the searchers stood in a passageway high enough and broad enough for a man to walk with ease. The tunnel was perfectly constructed and an architect who viewed it said its proportions were correct. One of the most astounding features of the place was the fact that the walls were carefully, even artistically formed of white enameled brick, pronounced valuable by builders.

On the ceiling were pasted numerous copies of German newspapers dated during the summer of 1917 and 1918. Dimly seen in the feeble rays of the electric torches, it was possible to discern in the newspaper articles frequent references to submarine activities then employed by the imperial government of Germany. Cryptic signs and engravings in cipher defaced the papers to some extent.

Other German periodicals and scores of empty bottles were brought to light by the investigators. (Post, 9/26/1924)

Reports indicated that the tunnels were long and extensive — that they may have reached as far as Rock Creek Park. Some electric lighting was discovered inside. For days, wild theories abounded. Was it a Confederate soldier hideout? A stop on the Underground Railroad? A liquor depot for bootleggers? A counterfeiter's lair? Or maybe a secret laboratory for "Dr. Otto von Golph's" experiments?

None of the above.

The Smithsonian Institute's mosquito-expert entomologist, Harrison G. Dyar, let the public spectacle go on for a couple of days before admitting to city newspapers that he himself had dug the tunnels from about 1906 until 1916, at which time he moved away to California. Why? "I did it for exercise," he said, "Digging tunnels after work is my hobby. There's nothing really mysterious about it." (Post, 9/27/24)

Harrison Gray Dyar. Photo from
the Washington Post archives.

Dyar told the Washington Star that the urge started when he dug a flowerbed for his wife around 1906. "When I was down perhaps 6 or 7 feet, surrounded only by the damp brown walls of old Mother Earth, I was seized by an undeniable fancy to keep on going."

Sound implausible? Consider that Mr. Dyar's tunnels were not limited to the area surrounding the property he had owned at 1510 21st Street. When he moved to 804 B Street, SW (now Independence Ave.), his digging habit continued. There, his tunnels were equipped with electric lighting, stone stairways, and cement walls, and went as deep as 24 feet. (Post, 3/4/1942)

Consider also that Mr. Dyar's eccentricities didn't end with his tunnel

digging:

Midway through his career, Dyar encountered problems in his personal life that had serious effects on his professional life. His marriage to Zella Peabody ended in 1915 amid charges of bigamy, and he was dismissed from the USDA for conduct unbecoming a government employee. It became known that in 1906 Dyar, using the alias Wilfred Allen, had married Wellesca Pollock, an educator and ardent disciple of the Bahá'í faith. They had three sons, whom Dyar legally adopted after he and Allen married legally in 1921. He became active in the Bahá'í faith, a movement that accepts the divine inspiration of all religions and seeks to reconcile science with religion. Dyar edited *Reality*, an independent Bahá'í journal, from 1922 until his death, but his unorthodox opinions, voiced in the magazine, were rejected by mainstream Bahá'ís. In *Reality* Dyar published a fascinating series of short stories replaying central themes in his life—including bigamy.

(For an even deeper look into the craziness of Dyar's personal life, check out this court case filed by his second wife, in which she attempts to divorce the fake husband created to hide her relationship with Dyar: *Allen v. Allen*, 193 P. 539 (1970).

Of course, Mr. Dyar's story doesn't explain all of the mysteries surrounding the tunnels. Where did the German newspapers dated from 1917 and 1918 come from? What about the liquor bottles? Mr. Dyar told the *Post* that he didn't know anything about those things, and that he was in California during those years. Maybe during the early days of WWI, someone read the little news blurb about Harry Wardman's discovery, and bootleggers or German spies actually did move in for a while. Maybe strange old Mr. Dyar's weird life was really hiding a double life as a spy. He certainly had the ability to keep a secret.

The Pelham Courts of Dupont Circle are long gone, and the property now houses the Hotel Palomar. Apparently, the tunnels there have been sealed off in concrete. The property where Mr. Dyar lived in SW now houses the FAA. There's no telling what they may have done to that labyrinth.

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