

Benson House A Secret Revealed

by Ray Batvinis (1972-1997)

It is nothing more than a dirty block of concrete stuck in the dark and dank basement floor of a hundred-year-old house. Tucked under a narrow, cruddy window next to a stack of heavy shelves, it is not that easy to spot. A close examination reveals no handwriting, nor markings of any kind offering hints about what it is and why it is there. The only curious thing is the four rusting bolts sticking-up at each corner.

For nearly seven decades, who knows how many people have walked right by and ignored it. Perhaps some, after pausing briefly to look at it, simply returned to their normal business, erasing that singular moment from their minds.

Today, one can only speculate about their reaction had they known the unique role this simple object once played in a highly-classified FBI operation, which confused and deceived the Axis Powers about Allied plans and intentions throughout World War II.

Maybe we should start at the beginning. For the FBI, the case began in late fall of 1941, just weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, when Special Agent William Gustave Friedemann, sat down with a Spaniard who had a fascinating tale to tell. The choice of Friedemann to handle the interview was a good one. A lawyer and an Oklahoman from a German family, Friedemann spoke perfect German: an essential requirement when facing someone who spoke only Spanish and German. Since his reassignment to the New York Office less than two years earlier, he had received intensive on-the-job counterintelligence training with his assignment to the Frederick Duquesne investigation. Even today, the case ranks as the largest one-time arrest of espionage subjects (thirty-three in all) in American history. Friedemann spent hundreds of hours attached to earphones, listening to conversations between the FBI's double agent William Sebold and ring members, which he later committed to paper. (Recordings were not permitted for use as evidence at that time.) Following the arrests in June 1941, Friedemann repeatedly testified in Brooklyn federal court as Sebold's corroborating witness.

The mystery Spaniard was Jorge Mosquera, a forty-six-year-old businessman, originally from Argentina, who had spent the last twenty years living in Germany. Without any hesitation or concern Mosquera explained that he was a German espionage agent sent to the Western Hemisphere to spy for the Abwehr, the German military intelligence service.

As Friedemann sat quietly listening, Mosquera described his ownership of a successful company that over the years imported and exported goods between Germany and Argentina. During the 1930s, however, life in Germany began to change. First, there was the dramatic growth of German militarism, followed by new Draconian finance laws that made him increasingly wary for his future in Germany. In the end, he sold his business in anticipation of starting a new life in relative safety back home in Buenos Aires. The sale, however, presented a new and more serious concern for Mosquera, when Nazi authorities refused to allow him to leave with his money. Instead, the Abwehr ratcheted up the pressure by ordering him to work for them as an intelligence agent in America. In return,



Photo of road leading to Benson House taken 75 years ago by Dick Miller



Driveway today



Dick Millen 1942



Ray Batvinis (1972-1997) and Jim Millen (1969-2001), son of Dick Millen (1938-1966), with the concrete block

he would receive his escrowed funds (with interest) following Germany's final victory. With his options now at zero, Mosquera agreed to the deal, simply to escape the European calamity that he saw coming.

Mosquera had no intentions of spying. In August 1941, after making his way out of Nazi occupied France, over the Pyrenees Mountains and across Spain to Portugal, he boarded a ship bound for South America. His first stop upon arriving at Montevideo, Uruguay was the American legation where he told his story and volunteered his services. Within days the FBI funded his travel to New York as its new double agent. By November, he was sitting with Friedeman.

Friedemann faced a critical question: was Mosquera genuine or was he an Abwehr provocation? In effect, the question answered itself in a short time as he began exposing the smorgasbord of German intelligence needs that he was to acquire. They included everything from military/industrial statistics and production data for aircraft, ships, weapons and ammunition to details on merchant convoys, forming up at secret locations near Newfoundland for the treacherous journey to England through the U-Boat infested Atlantic Ocean. For American military officials, this information was a gold mine.

The next question was his communication methods with his German masters. Consistent with the Abwehr's previous instructions to Sebold, Mosquera was ordered to set-up a secret radio somewhere in the New York area to broadcast and receive information from a site in Germany, which later was identified as Hamburg. The FBI's seal of approval for Mosquera's use as a double agent came when a laboratory examination of the microdots that he carried with him confirmed his statements.

One day toward the end of one of his many interview sessions, Mosquera began recounting a strange conversation in Germany with his Abwehr handler, the significance of which Friedemann probably didn't fully grasp. The officer named Hans

Blum asked him to hunt for information about revolutionary new weapons systems, especially experiments performed in the U.S. regarding the "shattering of atoms." Then in a terrible breach of security, Blum shared the fact that German military planners were anxious to develop high explosives from atom sources that they believed would weigh no more than a pound or a pound and a half. In reporting this curious tidbit to Washington, Friedemann unknowingly offered J. Edgar Hoover a premonition of the future four years hence with his description of Blum's warning that "the victorious nation in this war will be the one which has accomplished the task of shattering atoms and applying the results thereof." (Mosquera's microdots also confirmed German interest in U.S. atomic research.)

The FBI wasted no time in setting up Mosquera's radio station. Starting in December, New York agents together with a technical agent from Washington, named Richard Millen, began searching for a site on eastern Long Island. Millen was highly qualified for this role. He was a trailblazer in the new specialty of radio engineering with degrees from the University of Indiana in physics and mathematics. Little more than a rookie agent with barely three years on the job, Millen had been one of the team leaders who set up Sebold's highly successful radio site in Centerport, New York just nineteen months earlier. For the new site, Millen had two essential requirements. First, atmospheric conditions had to be optimal for uninterrupted trans-Atlantic high-frequency radio communication. Second, but equally important, it had to be isolated and remote.

How Millen found the site remains a mystery today. What is known is that during the first two weeks of January 1942, Millen led a team of engineers installing sophisticated radio equipment in a lonely four-story house perched on a high bluff overlooking Long Island Sound, a mile or two from the tiny fishing and farming village of Wading River, New York and more than seventy miles east of New York City. As it had to be self-sustaining at all

Meet the FBI Historian

Dr. John F. Fox, Jr., has served as FBI historian since 2003, and we are pleased to work with him through the Society's Historical Committee. Dr. Fox played an integral role with the Benson House commemoration featured in this issue.

Dr. Fox earned his doctorate in modern American history from the University of New Hampshire in 2001, and his master's degree in political science from Boston College in 1993. He co-authored *The FBI: A Centennial History*, and his articles have appeared in the *Journal of Government Information*, *Studies in Intelligence*, the *Law Enforcement Executive Forum* and the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. In addition, he has contributed numerous pieces to the FBI's website. Additional publications include chapters in the books *The Gouzenko Affair: Canada and the Beginnings of the Cold War*, and *Vaults, Masks, and Mirrors: Rediscovering US Counterintelligence*. A frequent liaison with media, entertainment, and academic communities, Fox has also appeared in a number of documentaries and participated in television and radio broadcasts about FBI history.





Benson House then



Benson House today

times, every conceivable piece of backup equipment from spare parts (vacuum tubes, radios, dials, wiring etc.) to pencils and paper were jammed on to shelves in every nook and cranny.

High frequency radio communications required large antennas and placing one on or near the house was out of the question, as it would draw the attention of nosy locals. Today, we don't know where Millen placed it. From photos taken by him at the time, however, it appears that he erected it deep in the woods, yet close enough to wide open Long Island Sound for proper line of sight.

Millen had other security headaches. High frequency radios running twenty-four hours a day need a lot of power. The problem was that excessive power usage by a seemingly quiet young couple living in a lonely farm house would quickly raise eyebrows of the local power company. Solving this challenge meant devising a way to offset the electricity coming into the house, thus making everything appear normal. Millen devised a very clever solution. A diesel engine in the basement could supplement power coming in from the street. To muffle the engine noise, Millen jerry-rigged a Buick car muffler to it and a hose for venting the fumes out through the basement window. But what about vibrations? No one wanted the engine walking across the floor. This problem was solved simply enough by bolting it to a concrete block that the agents cast to the floor. It worked like a charm for the entire war.

With the technical issues resolved, the next question was the cover story. The solution was the assignment in February 1942 of Donworth Johnson to manage the day-to-day operations. Johnson was an FBI agent with previous service in the Navy as a radio man. He also had another unique quality that made him ideal for the job. Johnson was tall, angular and lean with a "tubercular appearance" — perfect for a young man who required peace, quiet and open air. His "communicable disease" would also frighten off the curious while deflecting questions concerning why he was not in uniform. Accompanying him in his new assignment was his young wife, Betty, his year-old daughter, Vicki Jean, and "Clifford," the family's, always nasty, seventy-pound German Shepherd. Clifford played the dual role of watching over Vicki Jean while terrifying strangers. For the next three years, the Johnson family together, with two or three other radio operators and Clifford,

continually lived and worked at the house with no respite.

So what was daily life like for the Johnson family and the radio staff who were forced to live and work together at such a lonely outpost? Today, more than seventy years later, they are all gone, having taken the secret of their strange adventure to their graves. Pulling the curtain partially back for insights, however, requires us to examine the documentary evidence that still remains. In this case, it is a long-forgotten confidential memorandum prepared for J. Edgar Hoover in April 1943 summarizing the FBI's Western Hemisphere radio operations. The Wading River project's "highly confidential" nature, Hoover learned, involved several radio operators posing as "enemy agents" who had "perfected this impersonation almost to the ultimate point." Accomplishing such an extraordinary feat meant living "in an isolated cottage under difficult conditions... for 24 hours a day, six or seven days a week." The Johnson family and their radio colleagues remained "absolutely under cover in order that no suspicion as to the activities being carried on at this station will leak out to unauthorized persons in the vicinity." It was a situation that made it impossible to leave the site even occasionally "to go into the next town for meals."

A few weeks after the first successful contact with German radio operators at the end of February 1942, Johnson's team sent a reminder to the Abwehr about the struggle underway to collect atomic research information. Germany's reply the next day emphasized the great importance of this pursuit. (This was the first and only time when a response of any kind was received so quickly.)

Gazing back over more than seven decades, we can better understand the world historic importance of Johnson's special contribution to history. First, there were Mosquera's November 1941 revelations to Friedemann about Blum's orders and the potential of atoms for military use. Then there was the corroboration found in his microdot instructions, followed by the critical German radio message pressuring Mosquera to immediately start looking for anything on U.S. atomic progress. What we know now, that the FBI did not know then, was that three months later this information, added to other U.S. and British evidence of German pursuit of an atomic weapon, in fact, tipped President Franklin Roosevelt's May 1942 decision to start development of the atomic bomb.

Over the next two years, working with British and U.S. deception planners on both sides of the Atlantic, Johnson's team fed the Germans an imaginative diet of truths and lies which the supposedly brilliant Mosquera acquired from his four very highly placed informants: all figments of the Bureau's healthy imagination. One was "Wasch," a senior civilian official working for the War Department in Washington, who occasionally became infuriated when the Germans questioned his information. "Nevi," a secretary working for a navy admiral, routinely supplied juicy gossip, hints of emergency high-level meetings together with extracts from confidential documents. The other two were "Rep," an employee of the Republic Aviation Corporation in Farmingdale, New York and "Officer," a worker at the vitally important Brooklyn Navy Yard, the world's most important ship repair facility and the largest supplier of convoys for every Allied battle front. The Germans loved the whole cast of characters devouring every morsel fed to them until the end of the war. So convincing was Johnson's crew, that the Abwehr both congratulated them while at the same time urging caution for fear of alerting the FBI. (Modern scholarship into German records indicates that German intelligence was terrified of the FBI.)

Two years later, beginning in the winter of 1944, as Allied troops prepared for the invasion of Europe, the Bureau's radio station became part of the famed "Bodyguard" deception scheme conceived to mislead the Nazi leadership about when and where the attack would fall. (The codename derived from Prime Minister Winston Churchill's famous remark that "in wartime, the truth is so precious she must always be attended to by a bodyguard of lies.") Until the end of the summer of 1944, while Allied forces firmly established a foothold on the continent, the little cottage continued to support the lie that a larger and far more powerful force remained in England poised to attack in the Pas de Calais, or possibly into Norway, or maybe through the Baltic Sea into Denmark.

In an interesting twist of wartime serendipity, Johnson's crew also deceived the Japanese. Throughout the war, Abwehr officials routinely passed intelligence back and forth with Japanese officers based in Berlin. Right up to the final days of the war in Europe in early May 1945, the Wading River team successfully radioed Wasch and Nevi inspired lies regarding U.S. Pacific naval movements through the Germans to their Japanese allies.

By the end of June 1945, Hamburg was under British control,

Abwehr radio operators were in POW camps, and the Wading River cottage, once full of radio equipment, was dismantled, leaving little trace behind that it ever existed. As for the anonymous American heroes who lived and worked there, they simply disappeared into obscurity.

The mystery of what happened there was buried even deeper immediately after the war when a wealthy New Yorker named Margaret Benson purchased the house and surrounding property and promptly gifted it to the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, which still owns it. Today the "Benson House," as it is called, is used as an administrative office and retreat center, as part of the larger summer recreation site called Camp DeWolfe.

On June 7, 2014 the Society of Former Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation publicly revealed this seven-decade-old secret for the first time at a ceremony sponsored by the Society, working in close partnership with the diocese and the Suffolk County New York Historical Society. The event was held on a beautiful Saturday morning at the Camp DeWolfe conference center just steps away from the Benson House.

Moderating the agenda was the Society's president, Ellen Glasser, who opened the program on the perfect note by leading all one hundred and twenty-five guests in the Pledge of Allegiance and then having everyone rise to honor twenty five World War II veterans who were the Society's honored guests for the occasion. Venerable Hickman Alexandre, representing Episcopal Bishop Lawrence Provenzano, then offered an invocation with special remembrance of Johnson, his team, and the thousands of Allied soldiers and sailors who died seventy years earlier at the Battle of Normandy.

History was also on the agenda in another fascinating way. Both Suffolk County Historical Society Director, Kathryn Curran and Peter Cohalan, the Suffolk County Historian, thanked the Society for the gift of bringing this long-lost secret to the world's attention and the future role it will play in enhancing the understanding of all Long Islanders about their history. John Fox, the FBI's Historian, who came from Washington for the occasion, offered revealing insights into the changing faces of enemies challenged by the FBI through the past century to the battle it wages against new asymmetrical threats today. Then, in a move that startled everyone, President Glasser asked Vicki Jean Johnson, who lived at the radio site during the war as a toddler and today remains the last living witness to the operation, to stand and be



Vicki Jean Johnson, daughter of SA Don Johnson, when she was a little girl with her mother at Benson House



Vicki Jean Johnson, behind her grandchildren, with her family

recognized. There were audible gasps.

The Society was especially proud of the recognition from the many state and local political figures in attendance. They included Mr. Brian Foley representing New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo, three Suffolk County legislators and Brookhaven Town and Riverhead council members who made remarks and gifted special citations honoring the Society's championing of such an important historical event.

Another important highlight of the day was Ronald Twersky, a Special Agent in Charge of the New York FBI office. He opened his remarks with an appreciation for the importance of the FBI-Society partnership as demonstrated by this event and many other joint initiatives. Then, after reading a stirring letter, see inside front cover for letter, from FBI Director James Comey, Mr. Twersky offered his own heartfelt reflections about lessons learned from World War II and the proud legacy that this secret operation conveys to today's FBI agents.

Following completion of the formal remarks, President Glasser led everyone for the short walk across to the Benson House, where she unveiled a bronze plaque commemorating the house and what went on there. Guests were then encouraged to let their historical imaginations run free by walking through Benson House and absorbing some sense of how the FBI staff lived and worked there during those difficult times. After exiting the back of the house, most guests found themselves transfixed for many minutes by the simple beauty of the site, which included a majestic view across eighteen miles of Long Island Sound to New Haven, Connecticut in the foreground. With the formal program, the unveiling of the plaque, the house tour and quiet reflection time



Brian Foley, NY State Governor Andrew Cuomo's representative

behind them, everyone adjourned to the dining facility, where a light buffet lunch and some warm conversation awaited them.

Someone once said that the purpose of recounting our history is not to inform – but to remind. Today, no one remembers that cold block of concrete resting silently in that basement. But for many decades to come, countless passers-by will stop and take a moment to read the inscription on that bronze plaque. A permanent monument bearing simple words that will serve as a reminder of those who sacrificed for our freedom decades ago and the need to remain ever vigilant in the future.

Ray Batvinis (1972-1997) is Chair of the Historical Committee for the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI, and author of the recently published book *Hoover's Secret War Against Axis Spies, FBI Counterespionage during WWII*.

Photos courtesy of Matt Coleman, FBI New York; Ray Becker of the Long Island chapter and Burke Samson.

Benson House

From January 1942 to June 1945 FBI agents and radio technicians secretly living and working at Benson House, broadcasted radio messages to the Germans in Hamburg who believed they were communicating with their espionage agents in the United States. Working closely with military deception planners, the FBI sent hundreds of accurate and fictitious reports designed to confuse and mislead the Nazi leadership regarding Allied military plans and intentions.

Among Benson House's most significant World War II contributions was the receipt of a German message in April 1942 instructing its spies to obtain information about American atomic bomb development; an order that helped influence President Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to pursue an atomic weapon. Messages transmitted from Benson House helped deceive the German high command about the timing and location of the June 6, 1944 Allied invasion at Normandy while others misled Japanese forces about US advances in the Pacific Theater of operations.

This plaque is erected by the Society of Former Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to remember Benson House and to pay tribute to the FBI personnel who worked there for their wartime sacrifices and contributions.

June 6, 2014

