Obsessive Compulsive Foundation, Inc.
Compulsive Hoarding Website

Langley Collyer: The Mystery Hoarder Of Harlem

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On March 21st, 1947, at 8:53 a.m., the New York City police department received a phone call from a man giving the name of Charles Smith, notifying them that he believed a man was dead inside a decaying building on Fifth Avenue in Harlem. Officers arrived on the scene by 10 a.m., and cordoned off the house in order to hold back the crowd that had gathered. The police removed an iron grill-covered basement door from its hinges, only to find the entrance completely sealed off by a solid mass of debris. Thus was thrust before the public one of the best-known and most mysterious compulsive hoarding cases of all time.

Compulsive hoarding is a form of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), a neurobiological condition, most likely genetically based. OCD comes in a wide variety of forms, of which hoarding is only one. Compulsive hoarders may collect only certain types of things, or they may indiscriminately save everything. We are not talking here about collecting things that are valuable or important such as art, coins, or stamps.

hoarders generally tend to save things that are of little or no value, or if the things they save do have real value, they tend to save them in ridiculously larger quantities than would ever be necessary. One of the main obsessive thoughts that causes sufferers to do this is their worry that if they throw a particular item away, it will be lost forever, and they may one day be in need of it in order to be able to use it, to be able to remember it, or something connected with it.

They seem to have difficulty discriminating between what is or will be useful, and what is not. Some hoarders can freely admit that the things they are saving are currently broken or damaged and unusable. They will stubbornly insist, however, that they will someday repair or refurbish the items and either make use of them or give them away.

Another reason for hoarding resembles the type of thinking seen in hyper-responsible obsessions. It is the idea that each thing they save and/or repair might be useful to others (rather than themselves), and that the hoarder would be responsible (and therefore blameful and guilty) for another person not having this vital item should the need arise. They may also rationalize that what they are doing is actually "recycling," and are performing a community service by conserving resources. Throwing away something that could possibly be reused is seen as being highly irresponsible. In actuality, there really is no need for what they have saved, there is no one to give the items to, and the only result is that the hoarder is burdened with a house full of junk.

Some of the things most commonly saved include newspapers, magazines, lists, pens, pencils, empty boxes, pamphlets, old greeting cards, junk mail, old appliances, outdated books and even assorted labels, string, rubber bands, plastic containers, bottles, and bottle caps. In the most extreme cases, people have been known to save such things as empty matchbooks, used tissues, old cigarette butts, bird feathers, old cars, discarded paper cups, used aluminum foil, paper towels, lint, and hairs. Some of these sufferers will even rummage through other people's trash, and bring home obvious junk that to them, seems quite useful or repairable.

Compulsive savers can accumulate large amounts of things, creating storage problems and fire or health hazards. Their houses can take on the appearance of having been ransacked, with floors waist-deep in trash and debris, rooms filled wall-to-wall with overflowing paper bags and cardboard boxes. Many sufferers can only make their way around their homes by creating aisles around and through the trash. Problems with municipal authorities are not uncommon, and hoarders are sometimes evicted or charged with violation zoning or public health laws. Ironically, the majority of people who save things compulsively rarely use or look at these things. Their security comes from merely having the things around "just in case" and in not having to make what seem like difficult decisions about what to discard.

Let us now return to our story.

Its main figures are two brothers, Homer Lusk Collyer (b. Nov. 6th, 1881), and Langley Collyer (b. October

3rd, 1885). The Collyers were part of one of New York's oldest families, a branch of the well-known Livingstons. Their ancestors had come over to America on the ship "Speedwell" in 1664, about a week after the Mayflower. The family had been members of the congregation of Trinity Church since 1697. Their father, Dr. Herman L. Collyer was a successful and renowned gynecologist, and his father, William Collyer, was said to have been one of the leading shipbuilders in America. In 1909, Dr. Collyer moved his family from Murray Hill to a fine upper middle class home in Harlem. It was a three-story brownstone located at 2078 Fifth Avenue (at 128th Street). Beyond his fame as a physician, the doctor was known to be a bit eccentric, paddling a small canoe to work each day at City Hospital on Blackwell's Island in the East River. He would subsequently paddle home at the end of his day, and then carry the boat on his head back to his house.

Dr. Collyer's two sons seemed destined for successful lives of their own. Both attended Columbia University, where Homer earned a law degree, and his younger brother graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering and chemistry. Homer went on to practice admiralty law, but Langley, so far as is known, never held employment, and spent his time playing the piano. He is reputed to have won prizes as a concert pianist, but this cannot be verified. Perhaps Langley's inability to establish a career was an early sign of personal difficulties he may already have been experiencing.

It was probably a warning of things to come when in 1917, the brothers had their telephone disconnected, after being billed for long distance calls they claimed to have never made. This may have been the beginning of what would become a growing isolation from the outside world. Six years later, in 1923, Dr. Collyer died. Several years prior to his death, for reasons unknown, he had moved from his Fifth Avenue home to one at 153 West 77th Street. His sons remained at the family home with their mother. It is possible that a family breakup may have occurred.

Life seems to have taken an abnormal turn for the two brothers in the year preceding the death of their mother in 1929. It appears that their gas was shut off in 1928, and they also seemed to have given up the convenience of running water and steam heat, and began using kerosene to light their home and to cook with. Water was obtained from a public fountain four blocks from their home. This was all clearly out of step for people of their education and social status.

Despite all this, nothing appeared out of the ordinary to those in the outside world. The brothers were said to be courteous, cultured, and shy. The only sign that something might be amiss was that no one was ever permitted to enter their house. Around 1928, Homer worked for another attorney, John R. McMullen, who later became the family legal advisor. Homer next worked for City Title Insurance doing research in the New York City Hall of Records. He was described, at the time, as being courtly, and dressing in 19th century attire, presenting a rather Victorian appearance. He was said to resemble a gentleman of the 1880's.

In 1932, Homer purchased a building across the street at 2077 Fifth Avenue for $8,000. He planned to divide it into apartments and to rent them. This plan was never realized, as he suffered a stroke in 1933, becoming blind as the result of hemorrhages in both of his eyes. With one exception, he was reportedly never seen outside of his home again. Langley then gave up his music to take on the job of nursing his brother back to health. No physician was ever consulted. Langley apparently believed that the cure for his brother's blindness was for him to eat 100 oranges a week, and to keep his eyes closed at all times, in order to rest them. The brothers possessed a large library of medical books, and it would seem that Langley felt he had the information and knowledge necessary to treat his brother.

At some point in the 1930's, the West 77th Street home where their father had lived was sold, and the new owner, a Mrs. Peter Meyer, discovered an intact Model T Ford in the basement. It is not clear how it got there. Mrs. Meyer is said to have paid a workman $150 to disassemble the car and put the pieces in the street. This somehow came to Langley's attention, and for reasons known only to him, he carried the car piece-by-piece back to the basement of his Fifth Avenue home. It would appear that along with the loss of their other utilities, the brothers had no electricity, as Langley apparently tried to connect a generator to the car's engine in order to provide power, but was unsuccessful.

The brothers eventually came to the attention of the general public when they were mentioned in an article written by Helen Worden, a reporter for the World-Telegram. A real estate agent named Maurice Gruber was attempting to buy some farmland in Queens that belonged to the brothers. Their refusal to respond to his letters or to answer the door when he tried to see them in person resulted in Gruber keeping a vigil at their home. In her article, Worden referred to Langley Collyer as "the mystery man of Harlem," and included in it, a whole range of sensational rumors that had been circulating about the brothers and their home. It was said to contain all sorts of rich furnishings,

a vast library of books, and huge amounts of money that Langley would not trust to banks.

Worden, herself, kept a watch on the Collyer's home, and finally caught up with her elusive quarry one night, as he was leaving the house to go on what was one of his regular after dark shopping trips. She questioned Langley about a boat (his father's) and the Model T Ford said to be in their basement. Langley confirmed these stories. Rather than clearing up the mystery, Ms. Worden's article seemed to have only increased the speculation and rumors about the brothers, and during the 1930's other articles were written about the brothers in the New York papers. The brothers were depicted as wealthy hermits, living in a storehouse of money and valuables. People visited the house, banging on the doors or attempting to see them, while neighborhood children committed various acts of vandalism that included breaking windows. As windows were smashed, Langley systematically boarded them up instead of replacing them.

Throughout this time, and most likely the result of a case of compulsive hoarding, Langley was hard at work filling the once attractive home with huge amounts of newspapers, cardboard boxes, barrels, metal cans, tree branches, scrap metal, and other assorted trash. In the case of the newspapers, it is said that he believed that his brother Homer would someday regain his vision, and would then want to catch up on the news he had missed. He was known to prowl the streets at night, gathering items from curbside trash piles and bringing them home. No one knows how many years he had been actively engaged in this collecting. His foraging resulted in all three floors of the house being filled with literally tons of things he had collected. Perhaps it was his knowledge of engineering that enabled him to arrange the boxes and packing cases in interlocking arrangements that concealed a maze of tunnels that only he knew.

Langley was said to harbor fears of being burglarized, and there had, in fact, been several attempted break-ins over the years by those perhaps lured by the tales of stockpiled riches. The home became a sort of fortress for the brothers, with booby-traps constructed of great piles of debris rigged with the aid of trip wires to fall on unsuspecting intruders. This, of course, only served to increase the brothers' growing isolation. If their goal was to keep the world out, they were succeeding.

Although the brothers were by no means poor, Langley is also said to have regularly rummaged through garbage cans seeking food. He went begging at butcher shops for scraps, and was known to have walked as far as Williamsburg, in Brooklyn to purchase stale bread at the lowest possible cost. The Collyers again appeared in the newspapers in April 1939, when, armed with a court order, a city marshal together with representatives of the Consolidated Edison Company entered the brother's two Fifth Avenue buildings and removed the gas meters, which had been in a state of disuse since 1928. A crowd said to be as large as 1,000 people gathered outside their home to see what was happening.

Homer's last appearance outside the house is said to have occurred a number of months later on January 1st, 1940. Sgt. John Collins, a city policeman from the 123rd Street station who was familiar with the Collyers, spotted the two brothers carrying a large tree limb from across the street into their basement. Langley guided the branched end, while Homer held up the other end.

Although the brothers did everything they could to avoid public scrutiny, it had its own way of intruding into their solitude. Ironically, it was their reluctance to encounter the outside world that continually brought the world to their doorstep. It appears that not paying taxes and other bills was a symptom of their reclusiveness, and it caused them no end of trouble. The most highly publicized example occurred in August of 1942, when the Bowery Savings Bank foreclosed on a mortgage that amounted to $6,700 plus interest (no interest had been paid since 1940).

After going to state Supreme Court, the bank obtained permission to evict the brothers from their home. The very same day, however, the Collyer's attorney, John R. McMullen, met with bank officials with an offer by his clients to repurchase the property. As the house was seen to be in very poor condition, it appeared that the Bowery Savings was not all that eager to repossess it. Mr. McMullen had never actually been allowed in the brothers' house, so instead, Langley, who almost never appeared in daylight, had walked all the way to his attorney's office on Park Row to discuss the matter. Mr. F. Donald Richart, vice president in charge of real estate for the bank, consented to give the brothers "a generous amount of time" so that they could work out the details of the repurchase.

There were growing rumors on the street, around this time, that Homer had died and that his body was still in the house. Sgt. Collins of the 123rd Street station (mentioned earlier), took it upon himself to look into the matter. He encountered Langley, and somehow got his permission, despite some reluctance, to enter the house through the basement door. In a surreal journey through a labyrinth of tunnels in the trash and homemade booby-traps that lasted

a half hour, Langley led the officer to the bedroom where Homer was to be found. What happened next is told in Sgt. Collins own words. "I switched on my flashlight, and there was Homer sitting up like a mummy. He was on a cot, a burlap bag beneath him and an old overcoat on the foot of the cot, and he spoke directly to the officer. "I am Homer Collyer, a lawyer. I want your shield number. I am not dead. I am blind and paralyzed." Langley subsequently made a complaint to the police department about the incident, but no action was ever apparently taken on the matter.

In the matter of the Bowery Savings Bank, it seems that no repurchase offer was ever worked out, so in October, Supreme Court Justice Bernard Botein signed an order permitting the City Sheriff to evict the brothers from their brownstone. This same judge's decision, which had been issued in August, was now about to be carried out. The bank, still trying to not have to resort to force, repeatedly mailed eviction notices to the brothers, who never responded.

The Bowery Savings Bank was not to be put off indefinitely. As the new owner of the building, they were required by the city to make repairs to the property according to the city's building and sanitary codes. At the end of September, they dispatched a crew of workmen to the house to begin carrying out the repairs that had been ordered by the Department of Health. A number of police officers and patrol cars were sent to the scene to manage the inevitable crowd that had gathered, as it always did whenever any activity took place at the Collyer home. As the workmen went about repairing a falling stone cornice, replacing missing window panes, and removing piles junk from the rear of the property, Langley Collyer called out to them from an upper story window, demanding to know by what right they were trespassing on his property. The contractor was then forced to stop work and obtain a copy of the city order, in order that the repairs might continue.

On November 19th, following the brothers' repeated refusal to respond to various notices, the bank requested that the city sheriff carry out the eviction order and enter the house by force, if necessary and remove the brothers. In short order, at 10 o'clock, there showed up at the Collyer's door two deputy sheriffs, Herman A. Murray and Gillespie Anderson, police captain Christian Zimmer of the 128th Street Police Station, Dr. Marshall Rose, sheriff's physician, John Redfield of the Bowery Savings Bank, and Joseph and Herman Cohen, a father and son, respectively, who were both locksmiths. Mr. McMullen, the Collyer's attorney, met them there. The group took turns pounding on the door for over an hour, but the only answers were echoes. A crowd collected on the sidewalk, hoping to get a glimpse of what was going on at the "haunted house," as it had come to be known in the neighborhood.

The locksmiths then tried for another hour, in vain, to force the lock on the large wooden front doors, but were unsuccessful because of all the rust and corrosion. Going to the rear of the house, they were able to remove an iron grille-covered door leading to the basement with the help of the two deputies. Here, they found themselves stymied again, as they found their way barred by a mass of wire netting, behind which was a solid mass of crates, barrels, and large tin canisters from floor to ceiling. Seeking another entrance, they next moved on to another rear door, and tore away its rotted boards, only to find a further wall of garbage cans, trunks, crates, and pieces of rusted iron. Breaking in yet another rotted door next to this one, they were met with a similar obstruction.

Covered with dust, and feeling frustrated, the team returned to the front of the building to form a new plan of action, and decided to now make their way into the building via a window. One of the locksmiths, Joseph Cohen, swung up from the top of the front stoop and made his way to the ledge of one of the building's high north windows, where he forced open the shutters. He then broke a windowpane with a hammer, and climbed in through the now empty frame. His son Herman stood outside the window on the ledge and peered in at his father, who by this time was half-choked with dust.

As with the other parts of the house encountered thus far, the room was filled to overflowing with various and sundry items -- heaps of old sheet music, gilded picture frames, Christmas ornaments, broken plaster cherubs, piles of books, garden baskets, etc. Joseph Cohen finally managed to work his way downstairs to the front entrance where he and deputy Murray were able to open a path near the door. Clouds of choking dust enveloped them, making the going difficult, and breathing an effort. They eventually opened a parlor door and made it into a hallway where they encountered further barricades. Suddenly, they were greeted by a weary voice from out of the gloom, asking, "What is the meaning of this?" Deputy Murray replied, "I have an eviction notice." Langley then asked him, "Is Mr. McMullen here?" McMullen, who had by now worked his way to the barricade called out to his client, "They will put you out, Mr. Collyer, unless your keep the agreement." Langley replied, "Do what you think best." Following his attorney's advice, Langley then borrowed a pen from the deputy, and signed a check for the full amount, thus ending the invasion.

But the Collyer's troubles were not yet over.

They came in for some further unwanted attention in February 1943, but this time from the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS was now pursuing Homer for what it claimed was $1900 in income tax arrears plus interest that had accumulated over the previous twelve years. Homer was notified that unless this sum was promptly paid, the house he owned at 2077 Fifth Avenue would be sold at auction on February 3rd. This was the building across the street he had purchased with the intent to divide into rentable apartments. The ever-patient Mr. McMullen hoped his client would come through at the last minute, as had happened previously, although the attorney had been unsuccessful in his attempts to contact the brothers.

On the day of the auction, the IRS representatives waited for over an hour beyond the scheduled auction time, and finally, the property was put up for bid. When no bids were offered, and with Mr. McMullen present, the government took possession, although it was not eager to do so due to the poor condition of the property. It was so rundown, that it hardly seemed worth the effort. Beyond the building being of little worth, there were also the problems of the cost of the auction itself, not to mention the $3,000 in back taxes on the property owed to the City of New York that had been unpaid since 1938. According to the rules, the government would have to hold onto the property to allow Homer the chance to pay what he owed and get his property back. He never paid, and it does not appear that the government ever went any further in the matter of taking possession of the building, as will be seen.

Over three years later, the Collyers once again found themselves in the news.

On July 23, 1946, two police officers, Daniel Pesek and John Killoran, while on radio car patrol, heard noises coming from 2077 Fifth Avenue. Upon further investigation, the officers discovered two men stealing plumbing and electrical fixtures from the building. The two patrolmen tussled with the vandals, capturing one of them, a homeless man named George Smith, aged 25. Officer Killoran hurt his leg when he fell through a hole in the floor. The officers then attempted to contact Langley in order to get him to swear out a complaint against the thief, but speaking to them through his locked door, he refused to do so. Despite his lack of cooperation, Langley was named as the complainant, and notified that if he did not appear in court, the city would issue him a subpoena. He still refused to cooperate, but after officer Pesek tried several times to serve him with the subpoena, he relented. It seems that time and again, only the threat of legal action could pry loose the reclusive Langley from the decrepit building he and his brother called home.

On July 27th, dressed in turn-of-the-century garments, he appeared in the city's Felony Court as complainant against Smith. What was particularly unclear about all this was that technically, the Collyers no longer owned 2077 Fifth Avenue. Langley clearly did not accept all this, and prior to signing the complaint, he stated, "My invalid brother, Homer Lusk Collyer, and I still own that house and we have the keys to it." He added, "The government seized the property on the contention we did not pay income taxes, but we are going to sue and get that property back, because the government can't demand income taxes from us when we had no income." The brothers had, in fact, never surrendered the keys to the building. He went on to relate that this was the third incident in which he had had to go to court to swear out a complaint against criminal intruders at his home.

The last time either of the Collyer's was seen alive, was the result of yet another tax problem with New York City. It seems that the brothers owned two land parcels in Queens County, which they had inherited from their father. The city had wanted this land for new streets and other purposes, and Langley, together with Mr. McMullen, had a meeting about this with the city's Corporation Counsel the previous October. After Langley refused two summonses to testify before Supreme Court Justice Charles C. Lockwood, the land was condemned by the city, and the brothers were awarded $7500, which was substantially less than its appraised value. Unfortunately, they would see none of this award, in any case, as the city claimed the brothers owed it $27,000 in back taxes. Interestingly, a news article about this in the New York Times mentions that the brother's only regular means of contact with the outside world was a crystal radio set.

Which brings us back to the beginning of our story on the morning of March 21st, 1947, with the police receiving the phone call from the mysterious Mr. Charles Smith.

The police had received a number of such calls over the years, but as usual, they were obliged to respond. An officer was dispatched to the scene, but was unable to open the front door. He then put out a call to Police Emergency Squad 6, which arrived on the scene at 10:00 a.m. They began by cordoning off the Collyer's house in order to hold back the crowd of curious onlookers, which grew as large as 600 people. The officers began their search by using crowbars and axes to try to force an entrance into the house. They broke their way through an iron grille-covered door to the basement in the front of the house, but as had happened in the past, they immediately found themselves confronted by the usual floor-to-ceiling wall of crates, newspaper, furniture, and odd pieces of junk.

For their second attempt to gain entry, the officers obtained ladders from the Fire Department and tried the windows on the upper floors. Unfortunately, many of the shutters on the windows couldn't be opened, and it wasn't until 12:10 p.m. that a patrolman William Barker was able to make his way through a second story window. Patrolman Barker was not seen for several minutes, and on his return to the window, called to his fellow officers, "There's a DOA here." In response, Detective John Loughery made his way up the ladder in order to view the body, as other officers began to batter in the wooden front doors with axes. They were again faced with another massive obstruction of neatly tied bundles of newspaper, as well as cardboard boxes filled with assorted contents. Although they tried to tear down the wall of debris, they were forced to admit defeat. Meanwhile, Detective Loughery related what he had seen - the emaciated body of a white-haired man dressed in a tattered gray bathrobe, sitting upright, and tentatively identified as Homer Collyer. The medical examiner, Arthur C. Allen, arrived at 3:45 p.m., and declared that the individual had been dead for approximately ten hours.

The next order of business was to locate Langley, who was nowhere to be found on the premises. It was reasoned that if he were within the house, he would have made an appearance by this time, as he usually did. Police were perplexed about how Langley was able to enter and leave the building, but neighbors stated that he regularly entered and left on his daily shopping trips via the front basement's iron-bound door. After their own struggle to enter, the officers refused to believe that this was possible.

According to the New York Times, the entranceway past the basement door contained "... an old stove, several umbrellas, numerous packages of newspapers, a gas mask canister, an old stove pipe, and a broken scooter." There were also numerous rats seen darting around and through the piled trash. An inspection of the rest of the premises through various windows and around the second floor where they had entered revealed that the entire house was packed with debris of various kinds. It appeared that the building was riddled with a maze of tunnels through which Langley had moved, pulling bales of newspaper in behind him, to prevent intruders from entering. The police also found tin cans and piles of heavy debris wired together to form booby traps, in which the cans would sound an alarm, and a mass of junk would fall on the unsuspecting invader.

Homer Collyer's body was taken away in a body bag to the police van that would transport it to the morgue. An autopsy was to be conducted to determine the cause of death, although foul play was not suspected. The crowd, milling around on the sidewalk hoping to see what was going on inside, and trading stories about their unusual neighbors, and the fabled wealth that was rumored to be hidden in the house. Some believed the numerous cardboard boxes that filled the house were stuffed with cash. As they searched further, police found newspapers lying around that dated from as far back as 1915. Strewn everywhere were such things as hats, boxes of Christmas cards, a folding chair, a broken sled, and automobile seat, part of a piano frame, etc.

The police were careful to put everything back in place, including the materials they had removed to be able to enter the building. They then boarded up the house at 5 p.m., at which time, Attorney McMullen arrived on the scene. He took charge of all papers, notes, and letters discovered there by the police, and stated to the press that he was sure his elderly client would soon be in touch with him. He also quoted Langley as having said that they were entitled to live their own lives.

The next day's papers puzzled over the missing Langley. No one had any idea of where he might be found, with the exception of Mr. McMullen, who told reporters, "Your guess is as good as mine, but I think he is in the house, myself." Detectives from the 123rd Street station thought that he might still be out on one of his shopping trips to Brooklyn. These were sometimes known to last as long as twenty-four hours, because he made the trip on foot. Deputy Inspector Christopher Salsieder announced that if Langley did not show up by 1 p.m. on March 24th, a missing person's alarm would be issued. In the meantime, it was decided to not perform an autopsy, as the cause of death was believed to be the result of "ateriosclerotic heart disease," which, it was said, could be determined by external examination. Later reports seem to indicate, though, that an autopsy was finally performed.

Of course, the usual publicity-seekers were quick to come out of the woodwork.

William Rodriguo, a sometime Democratic politician from Harlem, came forward, claiming to be the "Charles Smith" who had phoned the police, touching off this latest incident. He stated that he had used a false name due to not wanting to get involved, but had later changed his mind. He added a further touch of mystery to the story, telling police that he had been told of the Collyers' deaths by an unknown man he had met in front of their house the morning of his phone call. The next day, on the 23rd, the crowd outside the decaying brownstone had grown to several thousand people. Langley had still not appeared, and the curious were hoping for a glimpse of him, or failing that, his remains.

One man showed up with a shovel and began digging in the building's front yard, but was removed by the police. A stream of autos from as far away as New Jersey and Connecticut crawled by the building in a regular procession. The daily papers thirsted to know about the contents of the house, rumored for years to contain numerous grand pianos, a Model T, and a boat.

Inspector Joseph Goldstein of the Tenth Division speculated that a thorough search of the entire house would occupy a police emergency squad for three weeks. They were to begin work later that day, following an inspection by the Department of Housing and Buildings and the Board of Health. The strategy would be for police officers to begin with a search of the top floor, dumping the contents into the backyard. It was decided that the items removed would not be taken away until the Public Administrator or an heir of the Collyers gave approval. A relative of the brothers, William Collyer of Yonkers, turned up at the house that day, relating to reporters that his mother and sister had visited the brothers in 1928, and noted that the house, at that time, contained no furniture, but was already filled with quite a bit of debris.

The clearing of the building began the next day on the 24th. This first stage of the operation, the clearing of the top floor, began that afternoon, headed by Inspector Goldstein.

After Mr. McMullen declared Langley missing at 1:15 p.m., and after officials from the two city departments declared the building safe to enter, the officers of Emergency Squad 6 began their task by sending over a ladder from an adjoining rooftop. After climbing across, they broke open several skylights and a roof trapdoor, through which they entered the building. Once inside, they smashed windows in order to get some badly-needed ventilation. A large crowd, whose numbers now ran as high as 2,000 watched the spectacle from the street, windows, fire escapes, and rooftops, cheering each time a sizable object was thrown into the yard below. Among these items were a gas chandelier, the folding top of a horse-drawn carriage, a rusted bicycle, a child's chair, an automobile radiator, dressmaking dummies, a sawhorse, a rusted bedspring, a kerosene stove, a doll carriage, a checkerboard, and numerous bundles of newspapers. A team of sixteen men inspected each object as it was thrown out, looking for valuables and important papers to be saved. They found enough ledgers, correspondence, and legal documents to fill eight crates which were taken to the West 123rd Street station to be looked over by someone from the Public Administrator's office.

At 3 p.m., Inspector Goldstein called off the search for Langley for that day, and sent his men to check out the basement. They found the walls lined with ceiling-to-floor bookcases containing over 2,000 dust-covered volumes, among them numerous books on the law and engineering. Reporters and a family member were allowed to have a look around, and among the newspapers and cardboard boxes there were as many as five pianos. With much effort, the officers cleared a path to a stairway, but were unable to open up the stairway itself. While clearing this area, they stumbled on a generator, which may have been used to produce electricity.

Some of the debris removed was piled in the front areaway, and included a kiddy car, three women's hats, a box of curtain rings, a green toy bus, some lead pipes, and a Metropolitan Opera program from 1914. At 4 p.m., the Emergency Squad forced their way into the first floor. Aided by searchlights powered by a portable generator, they made out a mahogany mantelpiece containing a large cracked mirror resting against a wall, an old RCA radio in a corner, and a large pile of furniture covered with dust standing in the middle of the floor. The windows were covered with a filthy green drapery.

At this point, the search was ended for the day, with the police boarding up the windows, and piling the collected debris in a section of the yard surrounded by a tall iron fence. Langley had still not been found, but the police were determined to return and finish their search.

The following morning at 10 a.m., the officers resumed their search. It was now March 26th, with still no sign of the missing brother. The day was particularly windy, blowing some of the old newspapers down the street, where they were snatched up by the ever-present crowd as souvenirs. The overwhelming mass of debris the police removed from the house consisted largely of old newspapers, cardboard boxes, magazines, and pieces of wood. Among the other assorted things uncovered that day included a nursery refrigerator, a beaded lampshade, a box of toy tops, and a toy airplane.

In the basement, they found the chassis of the fabled Model T Ford, thus confirming one rumor. Important documents and papers continued to turn up, and these were removed to the 123rd Street station. Any useless material that could be combustible was carted away in two truckloads by the Department of Sanitation, to be burned in its incinerators. The first load weighed 6,424 pounds, and the second a bit less.

One rumor that was put to rest was the existence of a secret basement tunnel connecting the brother's two buildings. In addition to discovering a further maze of tunnels, several new booby-traps were found, consisting of things such as cans, or large tree limbs (as large as twenty inches in diameter), set to drop on unwary intruders.

The police were becoming increasingly convinced that Langley was not to be found alive on the premises, but they were determined to continue their search of the entire house. Inspector Goldstein stated that the work would continue, "... until we are sure Langley Collyer is not in there, dead or alive." One theory was that his body might yet be found stuck in one of the booby-trapped tunnels. Assistant Chief Inspector Frank Fristensky, Jr. told the press that it would take them several more days before they had a clear picture of what the interior of the building contained. Attorney McMullen had already become concerned about the brother's tangled finances and their numerous bank accounts. He estimated their worth to be in the six-figure range, not including the real estate they owned.

Work continued on the 26th, much as it had the day before.

The Emergency Squad began work at 10:00 a.m., halting briefly at noon when some confusion arose over whether proper legal authorization for their work had been obtained.

At 2:30 efforts to clear the top floor resumed, with the searchers tossing large amounts of material from the windows. Relatives watching the operation from the street complained to the police that they were being less than careful in discarding things, and risked discarding items of value, as well as important papers. This resulted in the officers being somewhat less energetic in clearing things out. One particular item that attracted attention was the discovery of a .22 caliber pistol and holster, along with ammunition of various types. This was turned over to the Police Ballistics Bureau.

A report submitted to the Public Administrator of New York County by Deputy Chief Inspector Conrad Rothengast stated that it was believed that Langley Collyer was dead based upon the facts that the brother had never been away from his home for more than twenty-four hours, and that the death of Homer would certainly have been cause for him to have at least contacted his attorney or his relatives.

The next day, the New York Times reported that the Surrogate, a Mr. James A. Delahanty, was unable to appoint Francis J. Mulligan, the Public Administrator as temporary administrator of the Collyer brother's estate. While everyone in the case agreed that Langley Collyer was most likely dead, Mr. Delahanty felt that definite proof was required for such a move to be made. Various affidavits from such people as John R. McMullen and William Rodriguo were due to be submitted to Mr. Delahanty.

As of the 27th, police searchers still had been unable to turn up any trace of the missing Langley, although they did turn up a cigar box containing three more revolvers, a sixteen-gauge shotgun, a .22 caliber rifle, a .30 caliber rifle, a two-foot long bayonet, and a three-foot long cavalry saber. Near the spot where Homer's body had been discovered, they found another old cigar box containing thirty-four bank books from various savings banks. Eleven of them had been canceled, and they showed savings totaling $3,007 dollars.

By March 28th, the police were having their hands full following up on numerous tips they were receiving, concerning the whereabouts of the missing Langley.

Officers were dispatched to the Borough Hall-Jay Street Station in Brooklyn after a conductor reportedly saw him board the subway there. They also searched a group of boarded-up summer hotels and bungalows in Asbury Park, New Jersey; a place where the brothers had spent time between 1901 and 1907, and where it was thought Langley might be hiding.

In the meantime, Surrogate Delahanty finally appointed Francis J. Mulligan as temporary administrator of Langley's estate, in addition to being made administrator of Homer's. Following these appointments, police halted their intensive search for Langley in the Fifth Avenue home, and decided, instead, to begin shipping the contents to an unused school building at 67 Rivington Street on the 31st, where they would be inspected for valuables and important papers. Items of obvious value were to go to this location, while things that were obviously trash would be removed by the Department of Sanitation.

On the following day, Mr. Mulligan, as administrator, visited the city morgue to claim the body of Homer. Funeral arrangements were set for April 1st, to be held at Cypress Hills Cemetery in Queens, where the family owned a plot. Police were still hard at work tracking down various leads. Their latest took them to New Jersey. A waitress in

Tuckerton reported to police that she had served food to a customer who appeared to fit Langley Collyer's description, which by then, had been widely distributed. She added that the man had subsequently boarded a bus headed for Atlantic City. Police in that city then proceeded to make a sweep of hotels and rooming houses.

Police recommenced their search on the 31st as planned, beginning at 8:30 in the morning. It appeared that they would be able to clear about one room per day, and there were an estimated twelve rooms in the building. The workforce at the house now consisted of two detectives and five laborers hired by Mr. Mulligan. Their work concentrated on the front basement room, which was found to hold 3,000 books, numerous telephone directories, a Steinway piano, a horse's jawbone, a Model T Ford's engine block, numerous campaign buttons, and large amounts of newspaper, as usual, tied up neatly in bundles.

Homer Collyer's funeral was held on April 1st, but of the fifty-three people who were present, only two actually knew him. Both were neighbors. Seventeen cousins of the Collyers were also in attendance.

John R. McMullen also attended, hoping that perhaps that Langley would appear at last. Said Mr. McMullen to the press, "I had hopes until the last minute that Langley would be here if he were alive." When questioned if he believed Langley was still alive, he replied, "One guess is as good as another." The police search for the missing brother continued. They sent out 500 pictures of him to every New York City police precinct, and also to the police in eleven states. Efforts to clear the house were now in the second day. The detectives and laborers continued their methodical work. By the end of that day, nineteen tons of trash and objects had been removed. The bulk of this came from the first floor hallway.

It was decided by the Public Administrator that Langley's estate would pay for the use of a school building where valuable items from the home were being stored. The Department of Housing and Buildings, meanwhile, ruled that the house would eventually have to be repaired or demolished. On the 3rd, it was thought that the mystery of Langley's whereabouts had been solved when a body resembling his description was discovered floating in the East Bronx in Pugsley's Creek, but the excitement ended abruptly when the body was identified as an elderly man who had recently disappeared from a houseboat.

By the 7th of April, workers had removed approximately 103 tons of rubbish from the home, with twenty-two tons having been removed on that day alone. Among the more interesting items found at that point were five violins that were to be sent for appraisal. It was estimated by the supervising detectives that it would take another week to ten days to clear out the structure.

Down at the Missing Persons Bureau, Detective Charles Meyers offered the theory that "Everything points to Langley being dead in the building." He added that the results of an autopsy on Homer indicated that there had been no food or liquid in the invalid's stomach. Detective Meyers concluded that, "Homer died for lack of care." It simply did not add up that Langley would have allowed his brother to die unattended, or simply not show up at his funeral.

It would ultimately turn out that Detective Meyers was correct, as on April the 8th, Langley's body was finally discovered, pinned by one of his own booby-traps in that same room on the second floor where Homer's body was previously found.

The work of clearing the house that day had proceeded as usual, with workers from the Public Administrator's office and police working their way through the second floor. By 3:30 that afternoon, about seventeen tons of material had been removed and loaded onto Department of Sanitation trucks. Shortly afterwards, a detective, Joseph Whitmore emerged from the building and asked reporters waiting on the scene to follow him. He led them to a corner drugstore. Placing a call to his headquarters, he reported, "We've got him." He went on to explain that he, and detective John Loughery, had located Langley's body. Loughery added, "We were scraping around in the rubbish when we saw a foot sticking out."

Within an hour, as word spread of the discovery of the body, a crowd of around 500 locals who had gathered to watch the day's work at the house, swelled to over 2,000.

Police higher-ups, including Commissioner Arthur W. Wallander, soon arrived on the scene. The commissioner commended detectives Whitmore and Loughery for their work in the investigation. Thomas A. Gonzales, the medical examiner, spent a half hour examining the corpse. He estimated that Langley had been dead at least two weeks, and possibly as long as four, and that the cause of death was either starvation or suffocation.

Langley's body lay on its right side, inside one of the two-foot-wide tunnels that was part of the maze he had created, his head turned toward the area where his brother's cot had been, only eight feet away. The room, itself, was filled with piles of newspapers, books, old furniture and tin cans. The materials that had apparently trapped Langley were a suitcase, three metal bread boxes, and bundles of newspapers. One particularly unpleasant detail was that the numerous rats that infested the house had gnawed at his partially decomposed body.

Jacob Iglitzen, who also happened to be the druggist from whose store the phone call had been placed, subsequently identified the body. He stated that he was able to recognize Langley's face, although it was somewhat decomposed. He also identified Langley's clothes. Overall, the evidence appeared to indicate that Langley had been killed by falling debris, and that his invalid brother, Homer, died from dehydration and malnutrition.

Attorney McMullen, told the press that he planned to confer the next day with Joseph A. Cox, an attorney for the city's Public Administrator, concerning the handling of the brother's assets, which were now estimated to be in the range of $100,000 distributed among various bank accounts and real estate holdings. This finally laid to rest the popular notion that the brothers were multimillionaires.

The next day, on April 10th, the medical examiner concluded that Langley Collyer had been smothered by the debris, which had collapsed upon him, and had been dead for at least a month before his brother, Homer. A funeral was held the next day on the 11th at Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn. The Reverend Dr. Charles T. Bridgeman, the assistant pastor of Trinity Church presided. There were forty persons in attendance, including many cousins. The saga of Langley Collyer was not quite finished, however.

A month later, the Commissioner of Housing and Buildings, Robert F. Wagner, Jr., announced that the house at 2078 Fifth Avenue still contained substantial filth and garbage, and that it remained "a distinct menace to health." He requested that the public administrator in charge of the brother's estate, Francis J. Mulligan, clear out the building, in order that the property could be surveyed. Findings would then be sent to the state Supreme Court so that the city could receive permission to demolish the building. On June 30th, Supreme Court Justice J. Edward Lumbard signed the order for demolition.

An inspector from the Department of Housing and Buildings had noted that the "roof beams were water soaked, rotted, and defective," and that all the floors throughout the entire building are sagging and defective." The city would next seek bids on the demolition of the building, and sometime after, the Collyer mansion was no more.

As a final chapter, the lot at the corner of 128th Street was publicly auctioned on March 1, 1951.

Unfortunately, Langley Collyer lived in an era when problems such as compulsive hoarding were regarded as eccentricities; something to be laughed at or ridiculed. Assuming that even had he been able to come to grips with the fact that he had a serious problem, there is little that would have been done for it at that point in history. Back in the first half of the 20th century, problems such as OCD were treated with psychoanalytic-type talk therapies, which produced little in the way of results.

Even today, we still read reports of individuals whose trash-filled properties have been condemned, or who were forced by law to clean up dwellings, which have been declared public nuisances or even health risks. Municipal governments and the media still seem to not understand what is going on in these situations, and that these are individuals in serious need of help. Sufferers of O-C disorders can be found to have varying degrees of insight. They may differ in their ability to recognize that they have a disorder, or that their behaviors are not those of the average person. It would appear that Langley Collyer, if he in fact had OCD, might have been one of those with a lower level of insight into his problem. It may well be that he believed his hoarding behaviors served a valuable purpose of saving money; an ironic notion, considering that the brothers were relatively well off for the era they lived in.

It would also seem that in terms of reclusiveness, Langley and his brother became caught in an insidious loop. That is, as their behavior moved further and further away from the norm, and people's reactions to them became more critical and judgmental, they pulled in their boundaries and cut themselves off even more. This, in turn, would most likely have served to make them seem even more abnormal to outsiders, resulting in even more harsh treatment by the outside world.

Nowadays, compulsive hoarding is regarded as treatable via behavioral therapy and medication. Sufferers can learn to clean up their dwellings, and to keep them that way.

In behavioral treatments for OCD, individuals are encouraged to gradually confront situations that cause them to feel anxious, while at the same time, resisting the performance of the compulsions they ordinarily use to relieve their anxiety. This approach is known as Exposure and Response Prevention.

In the case of hoarding, we are talking about gradually sorting out and discarding things that have been accumulated. This may be done under the direct supervision of a therapist working on the scene, or by giving the individual weekly or daily homework assignments. Before the actual work of therapy begins the therapist makes a thorough behavioral analysis in order to determine what is being saved, how it is being saved, and where it is being saved. This may involve either a home visit by the therapist to directly observe the scene, or the patient may bring in photographs showing views of all areas of the home.

Clutter and trash may be dealt with either by location or category, and in either case, is approached by first working on things that are easiest, and then working towards those that are more difficult. For instance, the therapist may pick a particular room, closet, or area for the individual to begin clearing out, and then, over time, assign tasks designed to accomplish this. Alternatively, as some people tend to save only certain types of things, therapy may start by earmarking these particular items for removal, wherever they may be found.

One example would be people who save excessive quantities of newspapers, magazines, etc. having to bundle and put out a certain amount of them each week. Or in the case of those who have accumulated large amounts of clothing (old or new), having to throw out or donate a set number of articles between therapy sessions. In addition to this activity, the therapist will work with the individual to establish a set of rules for what can and cannot be saved, and in the case of saved items, how to store or arrange them in a neat and organized fashion.

Some therapists will set up a rule governing how long an item may be kept without being used, before it is considered in need of disposal.

With my own patients, I have always used what I refer to as my "Three Year Rule." Under this rule, any item that has not been used in any way during the previous three years must be discarded. There can be exceptions, of course, as in the case of family heirlooms, antiques, valuable collections, family photos, or useful tools, etc.

Where people's lives and dwellings have been disorganized for long periods of time, these rules are necessary to establish some kind of order, and to prevent the person from falling into chaos again. In all cases, the ultimate goal is to get the sufferer to take personal responsibility for the state of their dwelling, and to accept that they really do have a problem.

Some people seem to think that the ultimate solution should be to descend upon a sufferer's home, and forcefully clean the place out. While this might remedy the immediate problem, nothing else really changes, and within a period of time, the dwelling will fill up with things again in the same way as before. In addition, the anger and anxiety on the part of the sufferer that would result from such a remedy would probably only push them away from seeking help in the future.

The story of Langley and his unfortunate brother remains as a cautionary tale -- an example of just how serious hoarding can become when left untreated. With appropriate therapies, however, such extremes of behavior can be prevented from engulfing the lives of otherwise intelligent and potentially productive human beings.

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