

HOMER COLLYER, HARLEM RECLUSE, FOUND DEAD AT 70

Police Require Two Hours to Break Into 5th Ave. Home, Booby-Trapped With Junk

BROTHER FAILS TO APPEAR

Investigators Think, However, He May Be 'Charles Smith' Who Summoned Them

By **HAROLD FABER**

Homer Collyer was found dead yesterday in his decaying brown-stone house at 2078 Fifth Avenue, but the legend of the two recluse Collyer brothers still lives on.

His brother Langley, devoted to the aged and crippled Homer, may still be in the three-story house, their home since 1909, although it is now boarded up. He was last seen there on Thursday morning, sitting on the front steps. There was no sign of him yesterday, despite the police activity at his home.

The circumstances surrounding the death of 70-year-old Homer, blind as the poet he was named for, were as mysterious as the life the two eccentric brothers lived on the unfashionable upper reaches of Fifth Avenue, in the middle of Harlem.

Believe Brother Gave Tip

A mysterious telephone call to Police Headquarters yesterday morning reported that there was a dead man at 2078 Fifth Avenue. The caller gave his name as Charles Smith, but the police believe it may have been Langley.

A patrolman went to the address, tried the front door, but could not get in. He called Police Emergency Squad 6, which came to Fifth Avenue and 128th Street at 10 A. M. A crowd of neighbors, which at times during the day numbered as high as 600 persons, already had started to gather.

The policemen used crowbars and axes in trying to force their way into the building. They opened an iron grill door at the basement in front, but their way into the decrepit house was barred by neatly wrapped packages of newspapers and assorted junk. They tried the rear basement door, but the passage again was blocked by junk the Collyers had been saving carefully.

They used Fire Department ladders to reach the windows on the upper stories. They could not force the shutters of some of the

Continued on Page 3, Column 2

AS POLICE FORCED ENTRANCE INTO HOME OF RECLUSES



Attempting to get into brownstone house of the Collyer brothers at 128th Street and Fifth Avenue

HOMER COLLYER FOUND DEAD AT 70

Continued From Page 1

windows and tried others. It was 12:10 P. M. before Patrolman William Barker forced his way through the middle window at the second-story front.

He disappeared from view for several moments, then returned to the window and called down, "There's a DOA [Dead On Arrival] here."

Detective John Loughery climbed up the ladder to inspect the body while other policemen started to tear down the front door with axes. The front hallway was completely blocked by the neat newspaper packages and half-empty cardboard crates tied with strings. After throwing several packages into the dirty areaway below, the police stopped. They couldn't go any further.

Detective Loughery reported that the dead man was in a sitting position, wearing only a tattered gray bathrobe. The emaciated body was tentatively identified as Homer by William Rodriquo of 1 West 127th Street, Democratic co-captain of the Ninth Assembly District. At 3:45 P. M. Medical Examiner Arthur C. Allen reported that the man had been dead ten hours.

There was no sign of Langley in the building, no indication of how he entered and left his cluttered home on his heretofore daily shopping trips to buy food for his ailing brother. The neighbors insisted that he came and went through the front basement door, but the police said it couldn't be done.

The areaway near the basement door was filled with junk. The entrance contained an old stove, several umbrellas, numerous packages of newspapers, a gas mask canister, an old stove pipe and a broken scooter. It was hard to see how anything other than the numerous rats in the area could squeeze through.

As far as could be seen, it was the same on the upper floors. Not only was the main entrance blocked, but through the window on the first floor the entire room was seen full of papers and other debris. The front room contained two bookcases filled with books on mechanics and the sea, reflecting Homer's interests as an admiralty lawyer.

Among the volumes were "Building and Machinery," by Kimball and Parr; "Safe Building," by L. DeC. Berg; "Navigation and Compass Deviations," by Muir, and a complete set of the International Correspondence School reference library.

The police made a cursory inspection of the building through the windows and on the second floor, where the body was found. They said the building was honeycombed with tunnel-like passages through the piles of newspapers and debris. Langley moved through these mazed tunnels in getting about the house, they said, placing packages behind him to block the way for intruders.

In the rear of the building the police found tin cans rigged to wires and to piles of debris, forming sort of a booby trap for unwelcome visitors. The tin cans would make noise to alarm them and the wires would pull the junk on top of them.

But there were no signs of the seven pianos on which Langley, a former concert pianist, was reputed to play to his brother. There was no automobile in the basement. All that could be seen through the grated windows were the omnipresent piles of newspapers, three straw hats, a box from shredded wheat and some cracker boxes.

Homer's body was removed from the building at 3:53 P. M. in a khaki police body bag. It was taken in a police wagon to the morgue, where an autopsy will be performed, probably today. No foul play was seen in the death, however.

Meanwhile John R. McMullin, lawyer for the legendary brothers for fifteen years, claimed three unopened letters that the police found at the house. One was from the Centennial Fund of City College, from which Homer was graduated in 1902. He later studied law at Columbia University.

The neighbors crowded around the old brownstone house, eager for a view of the interior, about which so many tales have been spun. All they saw was a sampling of the contents, thrown out by the police as they tried to get into the building.

The front areaway was filled with debris. The piles of newspapers included New York papers, ranging from The Evening Tele-



A police sergeant looking at barricade of boxes behind front door which had been smashed.

The New York Times

gram of Nov. 24, 1918, with a story headlined "Reds Kill 500 While Russians Fight for Food," to The Daily News with pictures of the second Louis-Conn fight last June 19.

Haphazardly tossed about were a broken sled, an automobile seat, a box of Christmas cards, a metal folding chair, part of a piano frame and two soft black hats.

"Don't touch any of that junk," warned Inspector Joseph Goldstein, in charge of the police. "They might say it's worth \$1,000."

The neighbors were more interested in the millions that the Collyers were reputed to have hidden in the house. They thought some of the money might be in the cardboard boxes. But the police allowed no one to touch anything. They carefully put everything back into the house in the late afternoon, before boarding up all entrances.

"I'm sure Langley is in the building," protested Mr. Rodriquo, who said he knew both the Collyers. "I'll tell you where he is. He's in a little room on the third floor."

The police were inclined to doubt it. "If he was there, he would come out," said Inspector Goldstein.

The police boarded up the building at 5 P. M., shortly before Mr. McMullen arrived on the scene. The lawyer said he did not know where Langley was, but he was sure the elderly recluse would get in touch with him.

Mr. McMullen related that the Collyers had about forty living relatives, one an uncle in Beacon, N. Y. They also had "wealthy cousins" in Brazil, he added.

He described the brothers as good scholars, well educated, with plenty of money, and "at all times rational." His account of their wealth agreed with the neighborhood legends, but his description of their balance was at odds with the stories told about them.

The brothers have been Harlem's

most fascinating mystery for thirty-nine years. They lived alone, with no gas, water, electricity or sewer connections. They admitted no one to their home. As Mr. McMullen put it, "Langley said they were entitled to live their own lives."

Their decision to live alone brought them into frequent brushes with the law. In 1939 representatives of the Consolidated Edison Company, accompanied by a city marshal, entered the house to remove gas meters unused since 1928. In 1942 the Bowery Savings Bank tried to foreclose a \$6,700 mortgage. As the house was besieged by sheriffs, lawyers and policemen, Langley reluctantly signed a check for the amount.

The brothers came into the public eye again last year when Langley appeared in Felony Court against a man who had attempted to break into their house. At that time Langley evaded questions about their age. It is believed that Homer was 70 years old and Langley, 65.

According to the younger Collyer's story then, his ancestors came to this country in 1620, on the Speedwell, a week after the Mayflower arrived. He said both he and his brother had studied at Columbia, but the university said it had no record of Langley's attendance.

The neighbors said Langley left the house every evening after dark for a walk, sometimes as far as the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, to buy food for his brother. Langley, himself, at one time, said his brother was ill, but that they would not call a doctor.

They were acquainted with the medical profession; their father was Dr. Herman L. Collyer, gynecologist at Bellevue. In addition, they had a library of 15,000 medical books. With this background, the brothers decided to try their own cure: diet and rest. The diet consisted of a hundred oranges a week for Homer. He rested his eyes by keeping them closed all the time, his brother said.