

Tales from the History of East Lyme:

Nazis and Niantic

by Jim Littlefield

In many of the Indiana Jones movies, truth, justice and archaeology fight their way through an arch enemy emblazoned with swastikas, thus producing the perfect dichotomy of good and evil. In the mid 20th century the distance between Berlin and the little berg of Niantic, Connecticut must have seemed great indeed, but was there anything that linked these two places at this most historic time?

In 2008 an archaeological team of seniors from East Lyme High School set out to examine the David Lewis property on Roxbury Road in search of a missing 19th century blacksmith shop. Olive Chendali, the former town historian, had alluded to its existence, and armed with other oral testimony, the class set out determined to complete their mission. Many artifacts turned up but nothing, absolutely nothing, relating to a blacksmith shop was uncovered. Old tools were found but they were more of a general nature and of 20th century vintage. In fact, most articles recovered (bottles, nails, etc.), had a mid 1900's flavor to them, causing great frustration within the ranks. One exciting moment did occur, however, when a student proclaimed that he had "found Jesus". All digging stopped as an oval medallion of the Christian Savior was examined by the class. It too was of mid-1900's construction.

But then it happened! A student working in the northeast quadrant of the dig suddenly announced that he had found something quite unusual.....a thin, flat metal object, shovel shaped, adorned with a swastika and a lighthouse-like building dominating most of its face. The brass piece was five and one-half inches wide by five inches in length, pointed at the bottom. It gave the appearance of a shield of some sort. A quite remarkable and unexpected find!

Upon returning to East Lyme High School, the History Department was asked to contribute any information they might have regarding the object. Two teachers immediately identified the building as a monument in central Germany that was dedicated to an early German emperor named Barbarossa. Later regimes in Germany attempted to link themselves to this red-bearded ruler and Hitler had made the monument the symbol for all the heroic Germans who had fought and died in battle. In other words, what we had stumbled upon was the symbol for the Nazi "Veteran's Administration" or Reichskriegerbund, as it was officially called. This particular arrangement of monument and swastika, we found, was used on shields and hats in 1936 and 1937. For every question answered, however, it was obvious more questions needed to be asked.

Another artifact, found this time in a spot some distance from the original, suggested a possible answer as to who could have brought the piece to this place. A WWII "sweetheart bracelet" with an American serviceman's name and serial number on it was uncovered. Again, one of the history teachers at the high school who collects these romantic pieces of history explained that this was an old custom from many early and even modern wars, where women wore their man's dog-tag information on a sterling silver chain around their wrist. The serviceman's name on the bracelet was Arlon E. Ball. Research showed he was originally from Rhode Island, had enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1941 and died in 1967. Land records showed he never owned property in East Lyme.

Did Private Ball serve in the European Theatre and possibly bring the shield back as a memento? Was his sweetheart living in the area and later lost or discarded the bracelet? Perhaps Mr. Ball and his sweetheart married and rented in the area. Further research has provided no answers. Obviously any information anyone might have regarding this man or this historical artifact would certainly be appreciated.

The class dutifully continued to search for the missing blacksmith shop, but the World War II-Nazi connection surfaced yet again, begging further investigation. How odd that one of the students in the class just happened to be working in the Black Point area of town doing yard work and reported that the owner of the house had told him a Nazi spy once lived there. Now that was a very interesting piece of information and, if true, had many students speculating that the Nazi artifact may have found its way into our town through clandestine means. Investigation of this oral testimony and the Black Point property in question showed no connection to a Nazi spy. However, during our investigation, the town historian, Wilbur Beckwith and Ester Williams, the town clerk indicated that such a story was, indeed, factual and that the home of the spy was in Black Point, although not in the specific area we had focused on.

William Colepaugh, was born in Niantic, went to local schools, ran on the track team, belonged to the boy scouts and sang in a local church choir, yet the class found it to be true that on the cold and dark night of November 29th 1944 near Bar Harbor, Maine, he and another man (a Nazi agent) would come ashore in a small rubber raft. They had just left the German submarine, U-1230, after a long and difficult voyage from Kiel, Germany. Armed with money and a mission, their intentions were far from honorable.

How could it be that a local man could turn his back on his town and his country? Why did William Colepaugh, earlier in 1944 jump ship in Portugal and make his way by train through France to Berlin where he would offer his services as a spy for the 3rd Reich? Was it the strong family heritage tie to the fatherland (grandparents were of German descent) that was responsible? Was it the apparent loneliness he felt as he walked the beaches of Niantic as a child... maybe the poor grades he received in school or perhaps his tall, gangly and awkward physical appearance that set him apart from others? After flunking out of college, a short stay in the U.S Navy did not work out well for William Colepaugh, as he was discharged from the service for disciplinary reasons.

Whatever the motivation, William Colepaugh and Erich Gimpel headed for New York City to carry out "Operation Magpie", an attempt to supposedly get information about American rocket building and airplane development. They carried \$60,000 in cash and 99 small diamonds courtesy of Hitler's Reichbank. The mission failed, however, as Colepaugh had a change of heart and contacted the FBI. Both were arrested, put on trial in February of 1945, found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. President Roosevelt's death delayed the execution and with the war ending, President Truman commuted both sentences to life in prison. William Colepaugh, served 15 years in federal prison, learning the printing trade but did not return to Niantic upon release. In 1960 he went instead to Pennsylvania where he opened a print shop and eventually married.

East Lyme Historian at the time, Olive Chendali, attempted to interview Colepaugh years later but was rebuked. In fact, all historians, movie producers or reporters (even a shipmate aboard the U-boat that brought him to America that fateful night), were denied interviews. Reportedly, he did become active in civic affairs in his new hometown, working with the Boy Scouts and joining the local Rotary. He always flew the American flag from the front of his house and lived quietly until complications from Alzheimer's disease took his life on March 16, 2005.

The former Colepaugh home still stands in Niantic at 164 Old Black Point Road. The current owners are Robert and Barbara Reynolds who bought the house from the William Manwarings in 1997. The Manwarings had originally bought the house in the early 1950's from none other than Havel Colepaugh, the mother of the Nazi spy. Havel Lina Colepaugh had lost the house and practically all she had due to legal fees accrued while attempting to prove her son's innocence. By the time of her son's release in 1960, she was living in Westchester County, New York on public assistance.

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