

Operations - Searches Will Be Delayed Due to Collyer Mansion Conditions

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A "**Collyer's Mansion**" is a modern firefighting term for a dwelling of hoarders that is so filled with trash and debris it becomes a serious danger to the occupants and emergency responders. It is common for a FDNY Incident Commander to transmit "**Searches will be delayed**" over the department radio when these type of conditions are found. Collyer type conditions can be found anywhere in New York City. When these conditions are found firefighters must perform thorough extinguishment, overhaul and search. The large amount of clutter can make final extinguishment and searches very difficult and time consuming.



The **Collyer brothers** are often cited as an example of compulsive hoarding associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), as well as disposophobia or 'Collyer brothers syndrome,' a fear of throwing anything away. For decades, the unemployed men lived in their home at 2078 Fifth Avenue Manhattan. They obsessively collected newspapers, books, furniture, musical instruments, and many other items, with booby traps set up in corridors and doorways to protect against intruders. On March 21, 1947, Homer Collyer was found dead in the Harlem brownstone. On April 8, 1947, a workman found the body of Langley Collyer just ten feet from where Homer died. The brownstone contained over 100 tons of rubbish that they had amassed over several decades.

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'Collyers' Mansion' Is Code for Firefighters' Nightmare

By ANDY NEWMAN

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Correction Appended

On the West Coast, some firefighters call it a "Habitrail house." In the Midwest, it is often a "packer house." In parts of Nevada, it is a "multiple waiting to happen," meaning a multiple-alarm fire.

But in New York City, and along much of the East Coast, a dwelling jammed rafter-high with junk is referred to by rescue personnel, with dismay and no small degree of respect, as a "Collyers' Mansion." As in, primary searches delayed because of Collyers' Mansion conditions.

The phrase, as many New York history buffs know, refers to the legendary booby-trapped brownstone in Harlem in which the brothers Homer and Langley Collyer were found dead in 1947 amid more than 100 tons of stockpiled possessions, including stacks of phone books, newspapers, tin cans, clocks and a fake two-headed baby in formaldehyde.

The Collyer Mansion is not just a slice of urban lore and a monument to what psychologists now recognize as obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is, in New York, an official term of art, taught in the Fire Academy to cadets learning the potential dangers that can await in burning buildings.

So, on Monday, after 14 firefighters were injured putting out a three-alarm apartment fire in Sunnyside, Queens, Deputy Chief John Acerno described the scene this way: "They tried to open the door, and they couldn't get it open because of all the debris that was behind the door. In Fire Department jargon, we call that a Collyers' Mansion. There was debris from the floor to the ceiling throughout the entire apartment."

The apartment's tenant, Vyacheslav Nekrasov, was in critical condition last night at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell hospital.

The Breaking News Network, a service run by scanner hounds that some news outlets subscribe to, has sent out reports of "Collyers' Mansion conditions" at least 10 times in the past three months.

Once upon a time, the Collyers were routinely invoked by frustrated parents. "Every time my room was a mess when I was a kid, my mom would say, 'My God, this looks like the Collyer brothers' house,'" said John Miller, the head spokesman for the F.B.I., who said he heard the phrase sometimes when he worked for the New York Police Department as a deputy commissioner.

But as 1947 recedes ever further into the past, the facts behind the lingo are fading. A spokesman for the Fire Department, Allan Shaw, who has been a firefighter for eight years, recalled learning about Collyer conditions at the academy, but punted when quizzed on just what the Collyers' Mansion was. "Collyer, I believe, was one of those people who, I guess, at some point, had a house like that," he offered.

However widespread knowledge of its origins may be, the term itself continues to spread. An Internet search turned up references to Collyers' Mansions in news and fire department sites in Manassas, Va.; Clinton, Md.; and Cochranton, Pa. The Fire Department Web site in Clearwater, Fla., nearly 1,200 miles from Harlem, noted that at a

trailer and house fire this past April, "Companies inside were experiencing Collyers' Mansion conditions as the fire intensified."

Thomas Von Essen, a former New York City fire commissioner, said that the term communicated crucial information to new firefighters. "What's dangerous is that all this stuff could fall down," he said. "Or it could weaken the floors, and when you put water on it you could have a collapse. You could fall into it and then you have a hard time getting out. You could get caught behind it; your mask could get tangled. I could guarantee you that people have gotten hurt in those kinds of situations."

Calls to about a dozen fire departments across the country yesterday yielded a few regional variants on the Collyers' Mansion, though most department officials said they knew of no special phrases.

Carl Kietzke of Seattle, the president of the International Fire Buffs Associates, said that up and down the West Coast he had heard the phrase "Habitrail house," referring to buildings there that firefighters have likened to rambling, unkempt rodent cages.

Firefighter Scott Salman, a spokesman for the Boston Fire Department, said that while the official term for excessive clutter was "heavy debris," firefighters privately refer to "pack rat" conditions.

By whatever name, said Jeff Crianza, an emergency medical technician in Queens who moonlights at the Breaking News Network, Collyers' Mansions lurk behind many more doors than the average civilian would suspect.

"I see it every day in E.M.S.," Mr. Crianza said. "It's a wonder more people aren't injured in those places."

Correction: July 7, 2006

An article on Wednesday about the phrase "Collyers' Mansion," used to refer to a dangerously cluttered dwelling, misstated the authenticity of an artifact found in the Collyer brothers' Harlem brownstone, the jam-packed building that spawned the term now often used by firefighters. Although some of the artifacts recovered, like musical instruments, were determined to be fakes, a two-headed baby in a jar of formaldehyde found in the house was actually real.

Correction: July 14, 2006

A picture caption on July 5 about the cluttered Harlem brownstone in which the brothers Homer and Langley Collyer were found dead in 1947 misstated the departmental affiliation of an unidentified inspector shown pointing to a stairway piled high with boxes and newspapers. He worked for the Police Department, not the Fire Department. The inspector was identified when the same picture was published on Dec. 31, 2003, with an article in some copies about the pathology of compulsive hoarders. But the caption with that picture misspelled his surname. He was Thomas V. Boylan, not Boyland. Anthony Ramirez contributed reporting for this article.