

Long Grove History

LONG GROVE LIVING
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Spies and *Vice*

A J. Edgar Hoover order, a short-wave radio, a concertina, an unmarked sculpture in Highland Park — and a small German road-house on Milwaukee Avenue that managed, in its 80 years, to be all of the above.

By **Aaron Underwood** · Long Grove Historical Society

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
THE DIRECTOR

CONFIDENTIAL

DATE 09 JUN 1942
FROM J. Edgar Hoover, Director, F.B.I.
TO Lake County, Illinois — County Sheriff & Field Office
SUBJECT STILLER, BRUNO — German alien

SUBJECT IS PROPRIETOR OF "THE GREEN DUCK INN," PRAIRIE VIEW. IMMEDIATELY APPREHEND ON SUSPICION OF ESPIONAGE. SEARCH PREMISES FOR SHORT-WAVE TRANSMISSION EQUIPMENT. EXPECT TRANSFER TO INTERNMENT FACILITY PENDING REVIEW.

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J. E. Hoover
DIRECTOR, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

With the Long Grove area's deep German heritage, did you ever wonder if there was a question of allegiance during the World Wars? On the date above, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover notified Lake County authorities to immediately apprehend a German alien, Bruno Stiller, proprietor of "*The Green Duck Inn*" in Prairie View, for suspected espionage. Authorities descended on his home and imprisoned him. During the raid, they uncovered short-wave radio equipment.



Who was Bruno Stiller?

Bruno had been drafted into the German military at age 13, and fought for the Kaiser's army in the First World War. He came to America in 1921 to work at his uncle's battery factory in Philadelphia, and eventually moved west to Chicago where he made musical instruments — he was an accomplished concertina player. (Think accordion, if you're not familiar.)

He met his wife Alice, also a musician, at a company concert where they performed an impromptu duet. They married in the late 1920's and opened a music shop together in Cicero — the *Alice Music and Radio Shop*. Relocating to Prairie View a few years later, they opened a road-side gas stop, which eventually became a tavern and restaurant called *The Green Duck Inn*. They were green ducks — amateurs — when it came to this sort of business.

PROPRIETOR · CONCERTINA

Bruno Stiller

Drafted at 13 into the Kaiser's army. Arrived in America 1921. Concertina player, electronics hobbyist, road-house keeper, and — per Mr. Hoover — suspected spy.

CO-PROPRIETOR · LETTERS

Alice Stiller

Met Bruno performing a duet. Ran the inn alone for the war years while raising three children. Wrote to Bruno almost daily — letters preserved by their grandson.

No trial. Camp McCoy.

There was no trial. FBI agents had researched Bruno and determined it was in the country's best interest to have him imprisoned, and he was sent to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin — one of several camps in the country set up to house prisoners of war, many of whom were Japanese or German citizens whose loyalties were questioned. Alice continued to operate *The Green Duck* by herself and raise their three young children — quite an accomplishment, when you think about that era.

She wrote almost daily to Bruno during the war. Sixty years later, Bruno and Alice's grandson, **Robert Nightingale**, published these letters as a book: *Camp Letters: 1942-1945*, available on Amazon if you're interested. The letters offer a fascinating glimpse of life in the area during the 1940's.

What happened to these prisoners of war when the war ended in 1945? Each prisoner received a hearing where his or her conduct in the camp was judged, along with the evidence that originated the imprisonment. Most were judged to be no longer a threat, as Bruno was, and released. Was he really a spy? Most certainly not. He was simply in the wrong circumstance at the wrong time — and maybe a hurtful patron or competitor slipped some falsehoods to the authorities to egg things on. The short-wave radio? He was an avid electronics buff, and was simply trying to hear news of his family still living in Germany.

The second life of the Green Duck.

Bruno and Alice sold The Green Duck in 1955 — the same year Bruno officially became a U.S. citizen. They opened the Stiller Nursery and Gardens in Indian Creek, which stayed in operation until 1990. Alice passed away in 1993, and Bruno in 1998.

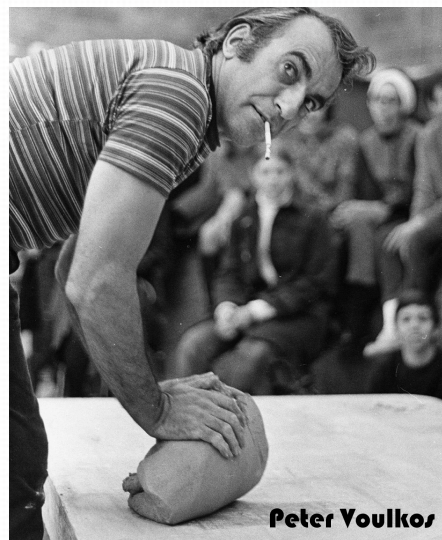
The Green Duck's infamy was just beginning. In the mid-1970's it was known as *The Roman House*, and featured nude dancing. The Roman House closed in 1985, when one of Chicago's top mobsters — ironically known as Joseph "Mr. Clean" Ferriola — was convicted of running a prostitution ring out of the club.

Miss Nitro, untitled.

According to local rumor, you can still find an homage to the old Roman House in the form of an abstract sculpture that sits in front of the Highland Park library. The artist commissioned for the piece — **Peter Voulkos** — reportedly took a liking to one of the House's dancers, and used her as the inspiration for the work, titled *Miss Nitro*. The nameplate mysteriously disappeared after city officials discovered the connection. You'll find it listed as "untitled" in the city's guide.

Alice at the Organ.

Bruno and Alice's daughter — also named Alice — shared their musical abilities, and was an accomplished organ player. At some point in its history, the Green Duck / Roman House property became a music store known as *Alice at the Organ*. There seems to be some confusion amongst old-timers as to whether the music store preceded or succeeded the Roman House. If the latter, one can only wonder if it caused some confusion amongst the Roman House's former patrons. The younger Alice passed away in 2010.



**PETER VOULKOS · STUDIO
DEMONSTRATION**

Mid-century American sculptor Peter Voulkos — commissioned, per the rumor, to make a Highland Park piece using a Roman House dancer as his muse.

Bruno was no spy. Voulkos may have been — though only of a more local kind.

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