Debunking the Bunker

I first heard rumors about a bunker right after moving to West Virginia in 1977 but before I worked at The Greenbrier. A young woman said to me, “Do you know why there is such a large airport in Lewisburg?” I did not. “Because,” she answered, “there is a bomb shelter underneath The Greenbrier, and in case of war high-ranking government officials will fly into the Lewisburg airport.”

A year or so later, after I was hired as the resort’s historian, I approached Luther Way, the chief engineer for The Greenbrier, and asked him about this bunker story, calculating that if such a thing really existed surely he must know about it. Luther Way was a fine gentleman, greatly respected, and he simply dismissed my question as “that silly old rumor.” He said that a new West Virginia Wing was built in the early 1960’s at the height of the Cold War when many fallout shelters were being constructed, and people simply jumped to erroneous conclusions. They knew that the government had been involved at The Greenbrier during World War II, that President Eisenhower and other high-level government officials had visited the resort, that the hotel includes a large Presidential Suite, and they put all this information together and speculated that there must be a bomb shelter at The Greenbrier. “We have never been able to successfully put that rumor to rest,” he said.

I believed Mr. Way because he was clearly a man of integrity. It did seem pretty outlandish that there would be a secret bunker amidst the lavish opulence of The Greenbrier. During those early months of my employment in 1978, I was rapidly learning the resort’s incredible history. Organizing an archive for the resort introduced me to the transformation of that fashionable 19th-century summer watering place into a major American destination resort. Apparently rich and famous guests had always been the norm. Amazingly enough “enemy alien diplomats” representing Germany, Japan, and Italy were interned in the hotel at the outbreak of the Second World War.
World War. Even more amazingly the whole place was later converted into a huge Army hospital for the remainder of the war. If that weren’t enough, a famous New York designer named Dorothy Draper had completely redecorated the building’s interior after the war, and then people like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Ben Hogan, Prime Minister Nehru of India, Prince Rainier and Princess Grace, and members of the Kennedy family were all regular visitors.

This was a lot to absorb for a young man from California who found himself working at one of America’s most famous and historic resorts. And now there were stories of a secret government bunker? I had only recently completed graduate school, and with a fresh degree in American Studies, I had worked at a couple of short-term archives and manuscript collection assignments. The Greenbrier was like no other place I had ever seen in my life, and I was most interested in holding onto this new job.

After I had been working approximately two months, a newspaper reporter from the old United Press International (UPI) arrived to do a story on The Greenbrier’s history. She interviewed me for a few hours but called back the next day with an unexpected question. She said when she returned to her office, people wanted to know if she had asked the historian about the bunker at The Greenbrier. “Is there a secret bunker there?” I froze. Remembering the recent conversation with Luther Way — and not knowing exactly what to say — I simply repeated what he told me. “There is no bunker at The Greenbrier. That is only a silly rumor that has been going around for years.”

When her article appeared most of it concerned details of the resort’s history but the last sentence was something to the effect that “the historian denies persistent rumors there is a secret government bomb shelter at The Greenbrier.” Shortly thereafter the general manager called me into his office, and the public relations director was also there. I, of course, was expecting praise for generating a nice article about The Greenbrier. Instead the manager drew attention to the last sentence and said that we do not ever want the subject of a bunker at The Greenbrier to come up in the press, because whenever it does “we get calls from all sorts of kooks out there.” The longer he talked the more agitated he became. Eventually he banged his fist on the desk with considerable force and said most emphatically, “THERE IS NO DAMN BUNKER AT THE GREENBRIER!” I got the message immediately: Under no circumstances do we ever talk about any bunker. Being something of a child of the 1960’s, however, I instinctively concluded that anything that vehemently denied was probably true.

A month or so later, I thought that perhaps I could track down records of the architectural firm of Small, Smith & Reeb in Cleveland. They did design work at The Greenbrier from 1928 to 1962, their last project being the West Virginia Wing. Someone with the local American

Luther Way was The Greenbrier’s chief engineer for more than 20 years, until his retirement in 1979. Although he consistently denied all rumors of the bunker’s existence, he was in fact involved in the construction and maintenance of the secret facility from the very beginning of the project.

Fritz Bugas was the on-site manager of the congressional relocation center from 1971 until the facility officially closed in July 1995. Locals knew him as the manager of Forsythe Associates, an audio-visual consulting company. Once the bunker closed he supervised bunker tours. Photograph by Dan Dry.
Institute of Architects told me that the firm was out of business, but he knew a woman in town who used to work for them. I called her.

Not long into our conversation, she started to tell me how back in the early 1960’s members of the firm would come back from The Greenbrier with stories that a huge hole was being dug in order to build a very large government bunker. Oh, it was a giant project, she said, and it was all part of building the West Virginia Wing. I remember feeling quite nervous as she went on. When I hung up the phone, I stared into the distance and thought to myself, “What am I going to do with this information?” She had told me things I was not supposed to know.

A couple of days later, I was sitting in the employee cafeteria. As everyone else left the table, I was soon sitting across from Jack Horton, a senior Greenbrier executive. Jack was always one of my favorite people, and we shared an interest in history. Once we were alone he said, “Bob, we don’t call Cleveland.” I had made a couple of long-distance phone calls without using the toll-free line, so I thought this was a reminder to follow correct telephone procedure.

He repeated, “Bob, we don’t call Cleveland.” It then dawned on me that he was referring to the call with the woman who told me the bunker stories. I am sure I blushed, and I started to stammer about how I was just interested in tracking down architectural drawings from the 1920’s. That is, I was just doing pure historical research. (Which, in fact, was true). He proceeded to tell me that the woman called the office of the Chessie Railroad (which owned The Greenbrier at the time) in Cleveland and told people there that some guy from The Greenbrier had called her with a lot of funny questions about past construction projects. I stammered some more. He repeated, “Bob, we don’t call Cleveland.” I got the message one more time: We will all be a lot better off around here if you just stop pursuing that subject.

One day I was walking around the grounds trying to determine where certain 19th-century buildings once stood, and I found myself near a family cemetery on a remote section of the property. A road led up to a wide, green wall with a metal door and a sign on it, “Danger High Voltage.” This wall and door were out in the woods not close to anything. I stood there staring for a few moments, wondering if this had anything to do with that secret bunker I kept hearing about. I remember thinking, “I am not supposed to be seeing this.” I simply turned around, walked away, and tried to forget I ever saw it.

Every now and then I would meet people who seemed to know something about the bunker. A fellow employee told me tales how a friend of his was involved in bringing in some communications equipment during the West Virginia Wing construction. This was not, he said, equipment that a hotel would ever use. The person telling the story had been in the U.S. Navy and said this was the sort of communications equipment you would see on a battleship.

Another man’s father had worked...
for the telephone company. The system installed here, he said, was clearly more than anything necessary for a hotel. No doubt, he said, it was for the secret bunker.

I met a young man once who asked about the bunker, and when I responded with the usual denial he said, “I am the grandson of L.T. Nuckols.” I recognized that name as the man from the C&O who had supervised the building of the West Virginia Wing. So I stopped denying and asked him what stories he had heard. He said that his grandfather talked openly about it. This conversation was taking place right in the hotel’s lower lobby, and again I was afraid someone might overhear what we were talking about.

Most bunker rumors indicated that access was via elevators servicing the West Virginia Wing. As the stories went, the elevators could go much further down to wherever the bunker was located if you inserted the right key in the control panel. One person told me how limos carrying government officials could come from the Lewisburg airport, enter the hotel’s massive Exhibit Hall, drive through some doors into a freight elevator, and be taken down to the bunker.

When Ted Gup, the reporter who later broke the bunker story in the Washington Post, arrived at The Greenbrier in early 1992, he wanted to talk to three people: Ted Kleisner, the president of The Greenbrier; Fritz Bugas, the man rumored to be in charge of the bunker; and me. Mr. Kleisner stopped by my office and told me that if asked questions about “what is under the West Virginia Wing,” I was to say how it was just an old rumor generated by World War II stories, Eisenhower visits, the Presidential Suite, etc. In other words, he said I should repeat exactly what engineer Luther Way had told me 14 years earlier.

Ted Gup did call, came to my office, put a tape recorder on my desk, turned it on, and said point blank, “I’m here to talk about what is under the West Virginia Wing.” I repeated what I had been told to say, “There is nothing under the West Virginia Wing, etc.” Mr. Gup looked at me and I looked at him, and it was abundantly clear that he did not believe one word I said. I had shot all my ammunition, and I had no clue what to do next. So I offered to let him look through all my historical files and he would see that there was no information about any bunker.

He spent about an hour looking through material from the 1959 to 1962 period, including old issues of the Brierchat, an employee publication. From those pages he selected the names of people who worked here then, got out the local phone book, and started calling. He also found a Greenbrier publicity brochure, which inadvertently showed more available public space within the Exhibit Hall area than supposedly existed. A few photographs indicated a balcony around the Exhibit Hall that had been boarded up over the years. These little pieces of evidence indicated that there was more to the Exhibit Hall area than met the eye. Although Ted Gup never showed me any of his evidence, it was clear from his questions that he arrived at The Greenbrier knowing quite a bit about the whole bunker story.

Several days later I traveled to Marietta, Ohio, to speak at a Rotary Club luncheon. When I finished with my slide presentation of The Greenbrier’s history, I asked for questions. A gentleman way in the back stood up and almost shouted, “What about that secret bunker down there?” One more time I repeated what chief engineer Luther Way told me, only now I was
denying the existence of a bunker knowing, following my encounter with Ted Gup, that it was only a matter of time until the story appeared in the press.

On Thursday, May 28, 1992, Dorothy Miller, a long-time secretary on the staff, told me to stay around because there was going to be an important meeting that afternoon. She said it was going to be about the bunker. I had never heard anyone in anything remotely approaching an official position say that word “bunker” out loud except when denying its existence.

The meeting was changed to the next morning. When I entered Ted Kleisner’s office, there was a curious mix of people there. I noticed Fritz Bugas sitting quietly off to the side. Mr. Kleisner proceeded to announce that The Greenbrier was acknowledging a 35-year secret partnership with the federal government and explained that the story would be in the press that afternoon. Stunned and flabbergasted are the only words that describe my reaction. Fritz Bugas stood up and said that in fact what his company, Forsythe Associates, really did was “shelter maintenance” for the U.S. government. I thought I would fall over.

I spent that afternoon showing a reporter around the property, acting like I knew the whole story when I was repeating information I had only learned a few hours earlier. When the full Post story appeared on May 31, I read it with my mouth open not so much for what it said but simply for the fact that it was in print at all. After all those years of abiding by the unwritten we-don’t-talk-about-that-around-here rule, the story was right there in black-and-white for the whole world to see. This was simply unimaginable.

Reaction in Greenbrier County ranged from a shrug — one employee remarked, “I never knew it was a secret in the first place” — to bewilderment among those who had never even heard rumors. Of course there were those who claimed that they knew about it all along, but most people felt that this only confirmed years of speculation. Many were highly offended that the press would reveal the secret after the local population had kept it under their hats for years. But most of all everyone wanted to actually see this mysterious entity for themselves.

That didn’t happen for three years, until the government had moved out and all the legal complexities with The Greenbrier and its owner, the CSX Corporation, were resolved. Since I give tours as part of my job, it fell to me and a few others to guide the first tours that were offered to Greenbrier employees. Although no one said so in so many words, these initial tours were a kind of unspoken “thank you” to employees for years of deflecting questions about the rumored bunker.

The vast majority of Greenbrier employees had the same reaction I did upon entering and seeing the facility for the first time. The bunker was huge, considerably larger than anyone had imagined. The wider plan within which it functioned — a movement of the entire U.S. Congress and staff members to this site where they could continue to work as a legislative body in the face of catastrophe — was much more complex than any rumors had indicated. It was a curious sensation. Here was an unusual case where reality was much larger and indeed much more interesting than all the preceding rumors and speculation.

A few days later public tours opened to an overwhelming response. Hundreds of people stood in lines for hours to enter the immense secret vault. The media descended in droves to film and interview. Over the next few years interest did seem to wane as Cold War memories faded. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, awakened a seemingly insatiable curiosity about emergency planning, and now, 15 years after the bunker’s closure, tours are going strong.

Having given many a tour and many a media interview, I have concluded that this intense interest is also driven by the stunning incongruity of a bunker at The Greenbrier, best expressed by a visitor who said: “In West Virginia we always thought of The Greenbrier as the height of civilization. Then we come to find out that on the same property there was a facility for the end of civilization.”

Bob Conte today, with the main entrance of The Greenbrier over his shoulder. Photograph by Tyler Evert.