

By 1950, as American troops fought in the Korean winter and the chill of the Cold War settled over the world, U.S. Army planners had come to realize that they needed to know much more about the icy regions that lay between America and the Soviet Union. Most urgently, they needed to know how to build things – roads, radar stations, underground bunkers, airfields, missile silos – in places where the ground is forever frozen, the ice is a mile deep, and the snowfall never melts. This intensive research program required a special laboratory like no other, and in 1951, the Army found just the right place for it: an abandoned laundry at 1215 Washington Avenue in Wilmette, half a block west of Green Bay Road.

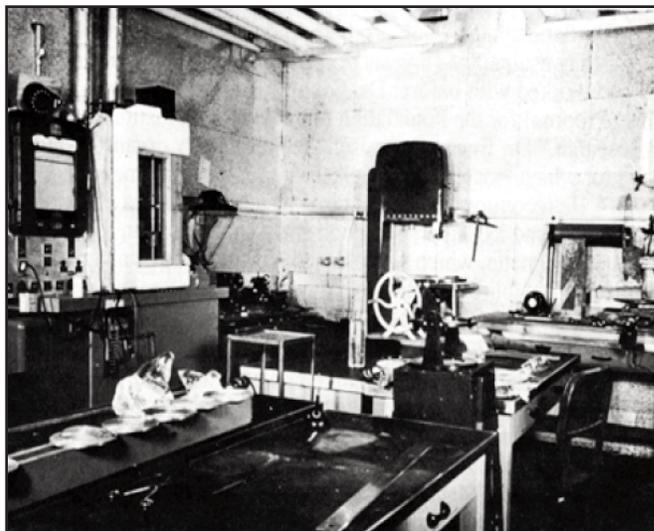
They called it SIPRE – the Snow, Ice, and Permafrost Research Establishment. (Former staff still refer to the place in conversation by its acronym: “sip-ree.”) As a location, Wilmette had the advantage of being within easy reach of researchers at Northwestern University, while the sturdy, three-story structure itself, with its big rooms and alley-side garage, well suited the Army’s purposes. The Washington Avenue building had come into its own in the late 1920s, when Joseph Krauss added a third story and that distinctive brick smokestack in back (you can still read all but the first letter of “Krauss” on the side), and opened it with great fanfare as Krauss Cleaning and Dyeing Company in 1928. The crash of ’29 seems to



1928 ad for Krauss cleaners at 1215 Washington Avenue

have been Krauss’s undoing, but Shore Line Cleaners moved into the space at once and stayed for twenty years. When the Army Corps of Engineers got through remodeling the 11,000-square-foot interior in

1952, SIPRE housed six refrigerated “cold rooms.” Their walls insulated with cork coated with aluminum, the coldest rooms could be kept a steady 58 degrees below zero.



A SIPRE cold room (Photo courtesy of CRREL, U.S. Army)

The SIPRE laboratory stood at the center of a pioneering global effort. For Dr. Henri Bader and the other civilian scientists and engineers who made up SIPRE’s staff, the key to understanding polar conditions lay in the analysis of ancient ice crystals torn from the depths of glaciers. Each summer, teams from SIPRE ventured to some of the harshest environments in the world in search of such crystals. The Greenland ice cap held special treasures, and it was at a base camp there that teams from SIPRE figured out how to drill deep down and retrieve intact “ice cores,” which would then be packed in six-foot aluminum rods and shipped by refrigerated planes and trucks to the lab on Washington Avenue.

In the late 1950s, a young SIPRE geologist named Chester Langway developed ways of “reading” the layers of dust, mold, bacteria, and ancient air trapped in these ice cores, much as one would read the rings of a tree, to decipher thousands of years of climate history. Because of the commitment of Dr. Bader and his team to this kind of basic scientific research, a project created to answer immediate practical questions during the Cold War also opened up entirely new ways of exploring how and why climate change occurs. Today’s scientific understanding of such phenomena as global warming would not have been possible without the research pioneered during SIPRE’s ten years in Wilmette.

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SPIRE expanded in those years, opening office space in the Odd Fellows building next to Millen Hardware, and setting up a lab in Evanston. By 1959 the staff had grown from 17 to over 80. In 1961, SIPRE merged with another agency to become the Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory, moving into larger quarters in Hanover, New Hampshire, near Dartmouth University, where its work continues.

The handsome terra-cotta face of the old Krauss building on Washington Avenue looks much the same today as it did fifty years ago, when specially modified Army trucks carrying arctic ice cores rumbled down the alley into its garage, and scientists around the world followed the discoveries made in its refrigerated labs. Yet few people now recall the special role played by this building and the people who worked there in unlocking the secrets of the Earth's icy past.

Patrick Leary, Curator

I would like to thank Marie Darling of CRREL and Dr. Chester C. Langway, Jr. for sharing their information about SIPRE for this article and the Museum's files.



On Thursday, November 30, over fifty volunteers were recognized at a Volunteer Appreciation Reception for sharing their time and talents with the Wilmette Historical Society and Museum during the past year. Volunteers are the backbone of the Wilmette Historical Society and Museum. They support us in so many different ways. Volunteers serve on the Board of Directors, work with the Museum's collections, staff special events or help with publicity. Others serve on committees to organize fundraising events, conduct group tours or assist us with matters relating to the Museum building. Whatever their role, volunteers are highly appreciated!

Textors Receive Studs Terkel Humanities Service Award

John Textor, WHS president, and Jane Textor, the Museum's clothing and textile curator, are recipients of a 2006 Studs Terkel Humanities Service Award, bestowed by the Illinois Humanities Council.

The Textors are honored with this award for the role they have played leading and presiding over the growth of the Wilmette Historical Society for more than 10 years, for contributing thousands of hours of their time, for donating funds for various projects, and for imparting their passion for and knowledge about local history. As President of the Society since 1994, John has chaired a successful capital campaign to build the museum addition and has lent his time to many less glamorous activities as well. Jane serves as the Museum's Curator of Clothing and Textiles, catalogs new collections, works on exhibits, and assists with programs. Her extraordinary knowledge of the history of clothing and textiles is well-known in the area, thanks in part to the lectures she presents to local organizations. She also served on the Society Board and on the Village of Wilmette's Museum Board for many years.



A cast and engraved medal of recognition from the Illinois Humanities Council was presented to the Textors by Village President Christopher Canning in a ceremony held at the Village Board of Trustees meeting on November 28th. According to President Canning, Jane and John "epitomize the idea of service to the community to promote the history of our Village."