Alice Hamilton and the FBI

Barry Castleman

Garrett Park MD, USA

Introduction

Dr. Alice Hamilton (1869–1970) was a legendary figure in occupational medicine in the United States (US), author of many articles and texts, and the first woman on the Harvard faculty (1919). Her friend from the days with social reformer Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago (1897), Gerard Swope, became President of General Electric (GE) (1922), whereupon he hired Dr. Hamilton to investigate and report to him over the next 12 years on numerous health and safety hazards in GE plants.

One of the hazards discussed in this correspondence was asbestos.¹ The letters and reports were found in the Alice Hamilton archives at Harvard and the General Electric archives. GE has been sued over the past 25 years for failing to better warn and protect workers from asbestos hazards in power plants and ships where GE steam turbines were installed and maintained in the preceding decades.

GE disclosed Dr. Hamilton's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) file in legal discovery calling for all materials reviewed by GE expert witnesses. Perhaps, defense counsel suspected something in the FBI file might be of use to discredit Dr. Hamilton.

Dr. Hamilton's FBI file contains material not previously published. Her 1943 autobiography, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, and historian Barbara Sicherman's book, *Alice Hamilton/A Life in Letters* (1984), say nothing about Dr. Hamilton's personal encounters with the FBI. Sicherman's *Letters* gives some illustrations of Hamilton's active support of free speech, human rights, and peace groups in her later decades: "She gave little credence to the danger of internal subversion and once claimed that the communists could do no more to undermine American life than their opponents had done already." (p. 382)

The FBI's file on Alice Hamilton

Dr. Hamilton drew the attention of the FBI by writing the governor of New York to give clemency to Morris Schappes in 1942. Schappes had been a professor at City College who was fired, convicted, and jailed for one to two years for perjury, after testifying under oath to a state legislative committee that he was not a communist.^{2,3}

In 1944, the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities listed Dr. Hamilton as involved in "communist front organizations" including American Committee for Anti-Nazi Literature, American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom, American Committee to Save Refugees, Russian Reconstruction Farms, Consumers National Federation, Friends of the Soviet Union, and National Council of American-Soviet Friendship.⁴

In 1942, the FBI had noted with concern her association with American Friends of Spanish Democracy, National Committee for People's Rights, American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom, Chicago Civil Liberties Committee, Women's International Congress, and National Emergency Conference for Democratic Rights. "Inquiry at the time failed to produce any information of a derogatory nature," a 1950 memorandum to the FBI Director observed.³

By 1950, the FBI, through informants and reading the *Daily Worker*, had additionally established her as involved with the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, the US Spanish Aid Committee, the Committee of Women of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, American-Russian Institute, and the American-Soviet Science Society.⁵

Her FBI file includes a 1950 letter in which she protested that the FBI had interviewed her neighbors about her "possible subversive opinions" and an FBI man had asked her "shocking" questions – "trivial items, gossip, unsupported libels, suspicions, all sorts of stuff which one would think an important government office would blush to collect."⁶

"I do not see how you can defend a system which forces a Government employee, who wishes to keep his job and avoid the obloquy of an accusation of disloyalty, to withdraw from groups with which he finds himself congenial, give up old friendships, refuse to have anything to do with a cousin who is a radical, go to church for the aura of respectability it confers, even avoid a certain bookstore because it is said to label a customer as a fellow traveler. This is certainly thought control which we have abolished in Japan but introduced here."

She wrote this to lawyer Morris Ernst, author of popular writings defending Hoover and the FBI, who offered to

Correspondence to: Barry Castleman, ScD, Environmental Consultant, Garrett Park MD, USA. Email: barry.castleman@gmail.com

convey materials from her to the Director of the FBI.^{6,7} She replied that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover alone was responsible for the directives under which his agents were operating. The letters became part of her FBI file.⁸

The FBI file also noted Hamilton's involvement with the Stockholm Peace Petition and the American Peace Crusade, which called for a ban on atomic weapons and peace in Korea.⁹

Dr. Hamilton publicly supported "numerous Communist Party front organizations" (memo to the Director, May 4, 1951) and persons persecuted for being in the Communist Party and refused to implicate others. She urged repeal of the McCarran Act, which authorized imprisonment and deportation of aliens without due process.¹⁰

In 1952, she protested to Congressman Horace Seeley-Brown, Jr. about a story in the Times that the "FBI is planning to open four concentration camps to imprison the 50,000 Communists whom the FBI claims to have discovered in this country, so soon as World War III threatens. That there is such a number of Americans who should be treated as dangerous criminals before they have committed any crime is unbelievable."¹¹ Her letter was passed on by the congressman to FBI Director Hoover. Hoover's staff recommended that the letter not be acknowledged but that the Congressman be informed of relevant provisions in the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950. The FBI did not dispute the story's accuracy.¹²

The FBI monitored Hamilton for her association with "communist fronts" including the Civil Rights Congress, National Council of the Arts, Science, and Professions,

Committee for Peaceful Alternatives, and American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born.¹³ In connection with this last group, a memo to Director Hoover noted, in the same sentence, that she "was perhaps the leading authority on occupational diseases in this country and was first mentioned as a Communist Party member (at a meeting in the late 1930s)." This memo noted that Alice Hamilton was 96 years old.¹⁴ The FBI never found evidence establishing her as a member of the Communist Party. Her fearless contempt for Hoover's FBI and its fellow travelers suggests otherwise.

Disclosure statement

The author occasionally testifies as an expert witness at the request of plaintiffs, on the public health and corporate history of asbestos, in personal injury suits in which General Electric is a defendant.

References

- 1 Castleman BI. General Electric. In: Asbestos: medical and legal aspects. (5th Ed.) New York, NY: Aspen Publ; 2005, p. 584–588.
- 2 Letter from J. Rowe to A. Hamilton (Sept. 7, 1942). Attached: various affiliations of A. Hamilton.
- 3 Memorandum from SAC New Haven to Director, FBI (Jan. 12, 1950).
- 4 Report on Doctor Alice Hamilton, by J. Schmit (Nov. 1, 1947).
- 5 Jones M. Dr. Alice Hamilton/summary memorandum (Jan. 18, 1950).
- 6 Hamilton A. Letter to Morris Ernst (Jan. 3, 1950).
- 7 Ernst M. Letter to Alice Hamilton (Jan. 9, 1950).
- 8 Hamilton A. Letter to Morris Ernst (Jan. 13, 1950).
- 9 Memorandum from SAC New Haven to Director, FBI (Nov. 7, 1951).
- 10 Memorandum from SAC New Haven to Director, FBI (May 4, 1951).
- 11 Hamilton A. Letter to H Seeley-Brown, Jr. (Feb. 6, 1952).
- 12 Jones MA. Memorandum "Alice Hamilton, MD" (Feb. 12, 1952).
- 13 Hamilton Dr. Alice. SAC New Haven. (June 17, 1954).
- 14 Letter from SAC New Haven to Director, FBI (Feb. 3, 1966).