

What's inside?

Concrete 'vault' in old Capone hotel creates stir

By LARRY GREEN
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CHICAGO — A dank basement under an abandoned and debris-filled 10-story building south of the Loop business district may turn out to be Chicago's equivalent of King Tutankhamen's tomb.

A long concrete "vault" believed to have been built by the late Prohibition-era gangster Al Capone has been discovered by workers in the ruins of the building, a former Capone headquarters. Workers also have uncovered hidden stairways, including one leading to the building's basement near the vault.

"I feel like I'm on an archaeological dig," said Patricia J. Porter, executive director of the Sunbow Foundation, the building's owner.

Speculation about what — if anything — the so-called vault holds ranges from booze to bodies. The structure of crudely poured concrete is 6 feet wide, 6 feet high and about 125 feet long, under the sidewalk in front of the old Lexington Hotel, which was a 400-room brothel in the Capone era.

It has been suggested that the vault could hold gold or even an automobile. One well-known treasure hunter — the Internal Revenue Service — already has laid claim to whatever is inside. The IRS has placed an \$800,000 lien on its contents to satisfy a payment of \$201,347.68, plus interest, still owed by Capone's estate after his death in 1947. The agency has warned Porter that she must inform the

IRS before the vault is opened.

"They sent me this letter and then sent these two agents over. They must think there's money in there," Porter said.

Some construction experts who have examined the structure think it is solid, she said, but others disagree.

"We can find no structural reasons for this thing being there," Porter said.

Before anyone tries to open the vault, she said, a company that X-rays concrete will attempt to determine what, if anything, is inside.

"I was thinking bodies more than anything else at first," Porter said. "But what I'm hearing from cops and relatives of cops that used to hang around here, (is that) there could potentially be money or gold."

"The cops tell us that Capone in the '30s brought in immigrants to dig tunnels to try to link the hotel up with the city's underground system of railroad tunnels, and that he did link up ... and then sent them back to Italy."

Railroad tunnels formed an elaborate network under Chicago's central business district and were once used to move coal to furnaces of downtown offices and stores. Later, steam pipes were laid through them. Now they are being converted to house fiber-optic cable.

Porter said she believes the tunnels were also used to transport bootleg liquor during Prohibition in the late 1920s and early 1930s and

as escape routes. They also could have provided Capone with underground routes to City Hall and other key city offices.

"Old-timers claim Capone could empty out the hotel in 15 minutes without anybody ever going into the streets," Porter said.

She said sewer workers told her that in the past they had found gold coins and a diamond-and-sapphire stickpin in a sewer under the building.

The hotel, built on South Michigan Avenue in 1891, housed visitors to the 1893 World's Fair. Capone took over the turreted building with its banks of bay windows in 1928.

An entire floor was reserved for him, while his mistress lived in the quarters directly above. Sunbow workers this year found a stairway behind a medicine cabinet in what was believed to be Capone's bathroom leading to the room directly above. Porter speculates that this was how Capone and his mistress traveled between floors to avoid sentries and bodyguards who patrolled the hotel, protecting the gangland boss.

The hotel now is situated midway between Chicago's Chinese business district and the giant McCormick Convention Center.

The Sunbow Foundation's plan is to rehabilitate the building, using and training low-income women as construction workers.