

Retired fireman's identity mired in 40-year-old fudge

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Bill Cattorini is not a terrorist. I feel reasonably sure of that.

If he's a sleeper agent, he's got a really good cover: 33 years with the Chicago Fire Department, now six years retired.

He was born and raised here -- or so he claims. He's got a birth certificate and accent to prove it, although I suppose he could have forged the former and faked the latter.

Somehow, though, I doubt it, having known him for quite a few years myself. Let me put it this way: If he's a terrorist, he's fooled a lot of people for a long time, including all the people who supported his successful efforts to build a memorial to fallen Chicago firefighters at the old entrance to the Chicago Union Stockyard.

Still, Cattorini has managed to run afoul of one of our new federal anti-terrorism laws, the Real ID Act, which has him real frustrated -- so frustrated that he called me.

In one respect, as you will see, Cattorini is a victim of a bureaucratic snafu that he correctly surmises must be affecting many other people these days. In another respect, though, the problem is of his own making.

Either way, it's a cautionary tale worth telling.

For Cattorini, the problem started Jan. 3 when he went to an Illinois Secretary of State facility to renew his driver's license, which was due to expire on his birthday, Jan. 17.

When he finally got to the head of the line and submitted his paperwork, Cattorini learned there was a problem: He could not renew his driver's license because there was a discrepancy between the year of birth listed on his license, 1944, and the year of birth on file with the Social Security Administration, 1943.

Now on an expired license

Since the beginning of this year, he would learn, the Secretary of State's office has been crosschecking driver's license data with Social Security records to verify their accuracy. It's part of this federal Real ID Act, which is supposed to improve national security by requiring states to verify the information submitted by driver's license applicants.

Cattorini says his actual birth date was in 1944, which meant he would have to go to the Social Security Administration to clear up the error. He headed there the next day with a

copy of his official birth certificate, which he'd picked up from the Cook County Clerk's office.

At Social Security, he was told his birth records would have to be verified before the agency's records could be changed. As I say, that was the beginning of January, and Cattorini is still awaiting a resolution.

What seemed almost amusing at first has become a constant aggravation. He now has been driving on an expired license for two months, which has him jumpy.

"I'm paranoid now, every time I'm driving. If I get stopped by a cop, I'm going to jail," he told me. "My whole life is in limbo."

I'm sympathetic, because I know for a fact that suspected terrorist or not, Cattorini is a good guy, kind to both wayward dogs and broken-down firefighters.

But I started him off with a tough question anyway: So what did you do, lie about your age to get a job?

Well, as a matter of fact, that's exactly what happened, Cattorini admitted.

Change would delay benefits

When he was 20 years old, the Fire Department held an entrance exam. But the minimum age for applicants was 21, so Cattorini fudged his age on the application.

"I didn't want to wait eight years" for another exam, he said.

He was newly married, working on the railroad, not sure where he was headed in life. It would be another four years before he got the call to come to work. He came to love the job and doesn't know where life would have led him otherwise, so he can't really have any regrets about what he did to get in the door.

It wasn't really a surprise to Cattorini, therefore, that the Social Security Administration had his birth date wrong. He said he always figured it was no big deal, that he'd straighten it out when it came time to file for benefits. He notes that the change he now seeks would result in him having to wait an extra year to collect those benefits, which he sees as an indication of his honest intent.

'To be doubly safe'

Dave Druker, a spokesman for Secretary of State Jesse White, said the driver's license-Social Security crosschecks have yielded discrepancies for other Illinois license applicants, although he added, "I don't think it's been an overwhelming amount."

"The concept here is to be doubly safe," Druker said, noting that the federal initiative is aimed at identity fraud as well as security.

Tina Milhouse, a public affairs specialist for Social Security, said she could not estimate how long it will take to straighten out a situation such as the one in which Cattorini finds himself.

While I realize Cattorini is not blameless in this, I was hoping to help spur the bureaucracy into action. And in the meantime, I thought he could carry a clipping of this column in his wallet to explain to police why he doesn't have a valid license.

Yeah, like that would help.

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