

Ruth Young Watt
Chief Clerk
U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, 1948-1979

Preface
by Donald A. Ritchie

The investigatory functions of Congress provide some of the most dramatic moments in Senate history. Investigations have served both as a means of gathering information and of sharing it widely with the nation. Often held in the ornate Senate Caucus Room, reported on by armies of the press and by network television, these hearings have captured public attention and focused it on the particular problems and legislative remedies of the time.

Prior to passage of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, the Senate and the House created a plethora of special and select committees to handle most investigations. As part of its streamlining of Congress, the reorganization reduced the number of committees and recommended standing committees for investigations. In 1948 the Senate created the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which is now part of the Governmental Affairs Committee. Under such chairmen as Homer Ferguson (R-Michigan), Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin), John McClellan (D-Arkansas), and Henry Jackson (D-Washington), the subcommittee conducted many memorable hearings: the “Five Percenters” investigation of the Truman administration; the Army-McCarthy clash; the investigation of Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters; the TFX investigation; and numerous others.

Serving as the subcommittee’s chief clerk during those turbulent years was Ruth Young Watt, who joined the subcommittee at its founding in 1948 and remained until her retirement in 1979. As chief clerk, Ruth Watt managed the hearing rooms, made arrangements for witnesses and investigators, took care of the subcommittee’s finances, issued its subpoenas, supervised its records, and in general handled its paperwork. On television and in countless newspaper photographs she could be seen hovering behind the senators, passing documents to witnesses, and making sure that the proceedings moved smoothly. She worked closely with the subcommittee chairmen and with a staff that during the course of her service included William P. Rogers, Roy Cohn, Robert F. Kennedy, Pierre Salinger, and Carmine Bellino. Her candid reminiscences about them, and about such witnesses as Howard Hughes, Jimmy Hoffa, Vito Genovese, and Joe Valachi, make these interviews a colorful history of the subcommittee’s first 30 years.

Ruth Young Watt was born in Brooks, Maine on February 26, 1910. She first came to Washington in 1930 to attend The George Washington University, and stayed in the city as a secretary to the director of Children's Hospital. In 1947, when the Republicans organized the 80th Congress, Senator Owen Brewster of Maine hired her as clerk of the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program (popularly known as the "Truman Committee" after its first chairman, Harry S. Truman). When the special committee disbanded in 1948, she became the chief clerk of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, a post which she held until her retirement in 1979. From 1957 until 1960 she also served as chief clerk of the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor-Management relations (the "Rackets Committee"). After her retirement, Watt returned to Maine where she died on June 16, 1996.

"As the most senior member of the staff," Senator Charles Percy commented at the time of her retirement, "Mrs. Watt was also the most knowledgeable about the inner workings of the subcommittee. During executive and public sessions, there was never a time that things did not run smoothly. To a large extent this was because of her careful preparation beforehand. There were times, during the subcommittee meetings, where Mrs. Watt was asked to recall for the members previous precedent on a Procedure; her memory was practically photographic and her good judgment impeccable."

About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie is associate historian of the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of C.C.N.Y., he received his PhD in history from the University of Maryland. He has taught at the University College of the University of Maryland, George Mason University, and the Northern Virginia Community College and conducted a survey of automated bibliographical systems for the American Historical Association. A member of the Oral History Association, he is an officer of OHMAR (Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region).

A Note from Ruth Young Watt

People unfamiliar with Capitol Hill rarely think about the personal element of those working there. That is, the attachment and friendships made over the years.

Frequently, as in my case, I almost forgot there was an outside world away from “The Hill.”

Friendships which have been my good fortune to keep have varied from immediate office personnel to contacts in other offices in the Senate.

Dorothe Scott, Administrative Assistant in the Office of the Secretary of the Senate, has been a close friend for over 30 years, as has Dorothy McCarty, Chief Clerk in the Sergeant at Arms Office, and Macil McGilvery, Secretary to Senator Long, and Rosemary Woods, who worked with former President Nixon from 1949. We have seen little of each other in the last few years, but I feel we will pick up where we left off.

Angie Novello, Carmine Bellino, Rosemary Kennedy, LaVern Duffy, Rosemary Steward, Alice Dearborn, Georgia Imeber, Mary Robertson, Howard Feldman, to name a few, I feel are close to me.

Jim and Bette Juliana have been like family these many years. Jim worked on the Subcommittee from 1953 to 1959. Since that fall of 1953, Walter and I spent every Christmas Eve with them and their growing family until three years ago when driving at night was a problem for Walt.

Senator and Lola Aiken have remained close friends over the years.

The McDaniel family also are like family. Helen grew up and married Nick Joe Rahall, who is about to campaign for a third term in Congress. Now the McDaniel and Rahall families are close friends.

All of these wonderful people (and many more) helped me over the most difficult period of my life, the death of my mother on April 4, and Walter Watt on April 14, 1980, after a week’s hospitalization with congestive heart failure.

Jeannine and Mickey Ragland—Jeannine who was Senator McClellan’s private secretary—those two were among the closest friends we had and during the great loss of Walter Watt, helped me over many a difficult hour.