

# Ruth Young Watt

Chief Clerk, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, 1948-1979

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## **Preface**

by Donald A. Ritchie

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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 thirty years.

Ruth Young Watt was born in Brooks, Maine on February 26, 1910. She first came to Washington in 1930 to attend 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."

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**About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie** is associate historian of the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of C.C.N.Y., he received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. He has published several articles on American political history and oral history, including "Oral History in the Federal Government," which appeared in the *Journal of American History*. His books include *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (Harvard Press, 1980); *Heritage of Freedom: History of the United States* (Macmillan, 1985); *The Senate* (Chelsea House, 1988); and *The U.S. Constitution* (Chelsea House, 1989); *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Harvard University Press, 1999); and is editor of *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Democratic Conference, 1903-1964*, recently published (Government Printing Office, 1999) and available online in [Text](#) and [PDF](#) format. He also edits the Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series) (Government Printing Office, 1978). A former president of the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), he received OHMAR's Forrest Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.

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