

RUTH YOUNG WATT

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Interview #4: Chairman McClellan and the Labor Rackets Committee



Ruth Watt, standing, distributes documents to (left to right) Senator John McClellan, Chief Counsel Jerome Adlerman, and Senator Edmund Muskie. *U.S. Senate Historical Office*

RITCHIE: Today I'd like to talk about the McClellan years through the Rackets Committee, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It struck me that when McClellan became chairman that was the fourth time that the parties had changed since you had been there.

WATT: Yes, there was Senator Brewster, Senator Hoey, Senator Ferguson, Senator McCarthy, and then Senator McClellan.

RITCHIE: But you managed to survive each one of these transitions. To what do you attribute your success?

WATT: I stayed out of any controversy and just did my work. I always felt that if I got involved or played politics, my value to the committee was over. I was handling finances, running the hearings, and getting people on the payroll. As I said, the way I felt about it, because I took care of all of the mechanics of the committee. As far as the meat of the hearings was concerned, I had no part of it.

RITCHIE: Had you always had good relations with McClellan?

WATT: Sure, I always got along with all of them.

RITCHIE: What kind of a person was John McClellan?

WATT: Well, as I said in the beginning, in 1948 when the subcommittee was set up, there were three Democrats: Senators Hoey; O’Conor; and McClellan. The first time I saw him I thought, “Gee, he couldn’t be a senator. He’s a meek little man.” I just couldn’t believe it, because Senator Hoey was six feet four with his wing collar and swallow-tail coat. And O’Conor was a little on the forceful side. He was a person that you paid attention to. So I didn’t pay too much attention to Senator McClellan. Then he went to that hearing we had in Mississippi, but he didn’t take much part. He always came but he didn’t ask questions much. He was just there. He really didn’t come into his own until the McCarthy days when he asserted himself on the J. B. Matthews thing. He was up in arms because he was a Baptist—I don’t know how religious he was—but he was up in arms about the fact that anybody would dare to say that there were any Communists in the clergy (which it was later proved that there were). Then he

was the senior minority member and he and Symington and Jackson got together and resigned. That's when he first became well known. Then, during the Army-McCarthy hearings, he was ranking and was very active. Then people knew who he was and he had become quite a forceful and very fair senator. So when he took over as chairman in '55, he already had a reputation.

RITCHIE: Had he become much more assertive in general about things in general?

WATT: I don't know. All I knew about were the hearings, because you don't have that much contact with a senator on a committee. You go to meetings, they are all business. You don't have any personal contact with them unless they are chairmen, then you can't avoid it. I've never made a point of playing politics anyway, I just do my job and stay out of the public eye as much as possible. The more you get known, the more you are going to find some jealousies. I avoided it as much as possible, but sometimes you can't avoid it. But for the most part I did my job and let it go at that. I also made it a point never to get too friendly with the people in the chairman's office. I always

made the rounds to make myself known in all the senators' offices, because it helps when you call on them when you need to get them to a hearing and so on. If you know the people, you have a contact.

RITCHIE: How would you have compared McClellan to the other chairmen that you have served under, like Ferguson and Hoey and McCarthy?

WATT: Many people have asked me that, and I said, "The only thing they have in common is that none of them had ever smoked." They were all so different you couldn't compare them. They were all different individuals. I had access to their offices when I needed to, and I never made any point of seeing them if I didn't need to. I see their staff and say, "Can you take care of this for me?" A lot of people think they have to see a senator, I don't know whether it's to prove they are important or what, but I never made any point of that. If I went in the office and the staff said, "Well, he's here, why don't you go in and see him yourself?" then I would. When Senator Nunn was down the hall from us they'd say, "Why don't you go in and do that yourself?" I'd say, "I don't need to bother him, just put it on the list." I

know if I'd have been any better off if I had, but it's not my style.

RITCHIE: Does the chairman make much difference in terms of the efficiency of the committee and the effectiveness of the hearings?

WATT: He can be very assertive, but he's only as good as the people he's hired around him, if they've done the legwork and then briefed him on all these things. He has to do his homework to be effective, and listen to his chief counsel and the people that are working on the case. They have conferences and put out a press release for him, and he OKs it. Frequently, he will change it around. But the chairman cannot do the work, he doesn't have the time. He's only as good as the people around him, like the president of the United States but to a lesser degree for committee chairmen.

RITCHIE: Essentially, would you say that the committee continued on the same patterns when McClellan became chairman, or did he make any drastic changes in the way things were done?

WATT: As far as I was concerned, I had a set a pattern of doing things. If they came and wanted something different I would check with the Rules Committee if I could do it. And if I knew I

couldn't do it I'd still go to the Rules Committee so I could show them the citation, because there were many things they asked for that couldn't be done. Sometimes they changed the rules, and there were many times when there were special things that we requested and wrote in a letter to Rules, and they were approved. Then the Rules Committee would come back later and say, "What did you do on such-and-such a case, I think we did this for you?" Because we had so many different things that came up. But I was very, very careful about the finances, and I think that's one reason why I lasted. I knew what you could and couldn't do and wasn't afraid to say so. Also, they had to have somebody from one regime to the other that knew the answers. Of course, I had to brief the chief counsels, when they came aboard. I've always said that I trained Bob Kennedy, because once he knew, why that was the end of it. But that was the same with anybody new coming in.

RITCHIE: You mean that once you told him what was the policy he never came back to you about it again?

WATT: He didn't need to, unless it was something he hadn't heard before. Once in a while

over the past few years somebody would go ahead and do something, I remember one time they did something that wasn't legal and I didn't know anything about it until the chief counsel said, "Why didn't you tell me this, you knew the difference?" And I said, "Well, if you'd have asked me, or if I had known it was going on I could have told you, I wouldn't have hesitated. But you didn't bother to come and find out if it was legal." They all knew that I knew what could be done and couldn't. That's what experience does for you. There are so many things you have in the top of your head.

RITCHIE: You mentioned Robert Kennedy as the new counsel when McClellan became chairman in '53. Earlier, when you talked about Kennedy, you said he left on the dot of 5:30 p.m.

WATT: Yes. Well, he had an assignment, but he was just an investigator. He came in March of '53, and then, when all this controversy came up about J. B. Matthews, he left and went to the Hoover Commission. Then when they had the first minority staff member, Senator McClellan took him as counsel to the minority. I think that was probably in February of '54. So then when the Democrats came back he became chief counsel,

and Jim Juliana who had been on since the McCarthy days stayed on as minority counsel under Senator Mundt until about '59. In the interim after Roy Cohn left, which was August or September of '54, Jim Juliana stayed on as counsel—he was not a lawyer, but stayed on until the Democrats took over.

RITCHIE: Did you notice a change in Robert Kennedy from his earlier years until he became chief counsel? Was he more hard working?

WATT: Oh, yes, very. And very astute. He was a smart, smart man. He had his prejudices, of course.

RITCHIE: What do you mean?

WATT: Well, there were certain people he didn't care for particularly.

RITCHIE: You mean people on the staff?

WATT: There were three over the years that I knew he had no use for. One was Roy Cohn. One was Bobby Baker. And the other was Jimmy Hoffa. Those were his three pet hates.

RITCHIE: And he really showed it.

WATT: Oh yes, he made no bones about it.

RITCHIE: This was when Bobby Baker was still majority secretary of the Senate. What was it that caused their split? What did you see?

WATT: Well, I was not aware of this until later. I knew that he was really out to get Jimmy Hoffa, let's face it. And as far as Roy Cohn, there was no question about his dislike for him when the McCarthy hearings started. Why, I don't know. You asked me last time whether I thought it was because they were so much alike. I don't think there was any resemblance, I think it was just a natural antagonism and where it started, I don't know. Both Bob and Ethel were friendly with Senator McCarthy and Jean, and they were friendly before Senator McCarthy was married. I'm pretty sure that one of the Kennedy girls went out with Joe McCarthy. At that point, Bob was the only one that was married. Bob was married when he came to the committee, I think they had Kathleen and Joe and Bob at that point and I think the next one was David. I have their Christmas cards which showed them as the family grew.

RITCHIE: And McCarthy was godfather to one of Kennedy's children.

WATT: I had forgotten that. I went to two of the christenings later on. One was out in McLean and the other was out on Massachusetts Avenue at that chancellery. Some really old priest

that could hardly hold his head up was christening and a younger priest had to sort of prompt him on what he was saying. And I remember that one of Ethel's sisters was sick and almost fainted. See that was the Skakel family. There was quite a large family of them—Union Carbide. In '56, I believe, Bob and Ethel were on a trip in Russia when Ethel's family were killed in a private plane accident. That was a tragedy. That year they had brought the Skakel yacht up from Florida and had it here for a month or two and they used to take us down on the yacht at night.

RITCHIE: Different members of the staff?

WATT: Yes, and Watt and I went down two or three times. One night they had the press there and they had all these huge lobsters, they had quite a feed. But it was fun. Bob worked very hard but then he made it up to the staff by having a little party for them, when they were at O Street or out in McLean. He said, "Well, you've worked hard and I'm going to have to give you a little respite now," Which was very nice.

RITCHIE: Did Ethel Kennedy spend very much time around the committee?

WATT: She didn't come in the office very often, but during the Rackets Committee when Bob was chief counsel, she came a half day every single day. She came in either morning or afternoon, but half the day she always spent with the children. She was very religious about it. She never neglected those children.

RITCHIE: You mentioned about Bobby Baker. Did you have many dealings with him through the committee?

WATT: Well, Bobby was never on our committee, but you felt his presence. I think the senators depended more on him than on any other secretary of the majority that they've ever had. Because I know when I was in a hearing they'd call me over and say, "Ruth, call Bobby Baker and ask him so and so." And he'd be able to give you the answer like that. Some of the others you'd have to wait. He just had a knack of knowing what was going on, and they depended on him a great deal. If he hadn't gotten so greedy he'd have been still there. He'd have been secretary [of the Senate], and I think he'd have been attorney general with Lyndon Johnson, I really have felt that, because he was going to law school while he was working up there. I liked Bob.

In the early days, '47 and '48, Henrietta Chase was chief clerk of the Banking and Currency Committee, and Bobby and Charles Jones—that was when they were single—they used to come up to Hank's (Henrietta Chase) and play cards, and they'd bring their dates once in a while, but we used to have a lot of fun. They were happy-go-lucky days. Charlie Jones works over in the Radio Studio where they record down near the subway, he's been around all those years. I don't know if he was a messenger then, but he and Bobby were good friends. Then in '49 when Bob and Dorothy Baker—she worked for Senator Lucas—when they got married on a Thanksgiving day, they had the reception over in the District of Columbia room which was later Lyndon Johnson's office, right across from the Reception Room.

RITCHIE: He really was a “child of the Senate.”

WATT: Yes, and loved it. He was good. He could wheel and deal without even being obvious about it.

RITCHIE: But you don't know what it was in particular that Bobby Kennedy didn't like about him?

WATT: No. But I knew that he was one of his three pet peeves.

RITCHIE: You mentioned that Robert Kennedy was one person who came to you for advice when he became chief counsel.

WATT: Well, he called me in and I briefed him the way I had all the chief counsels, on the little things that he had to know, on the finances, and of course, I always made the budget up and then they went over it. What they would do was to say, "We want a budget for such-and-such an amount." So I had to work the budget around that amount, down to it or up to it. Which was fine because I loved finances.

RITCHIE: Basically, McClellan and Kennedy intended to continue the committee as it was going. In fact their first hearing was really a continuation.

WATT: On Irving Peress, because that was unfinished. He was up in the air. He was a dentist, as I remember it. They had the hearings because it was unfinished and it had to be done. As I remember it was a good hearing. Then there was the Fort Monmouth thing. Then after that

they got into some navy issues, there were some shenanigans going on. In '55 and '56, we were having those hearings off and on, of course, we had other things in between. We had Cape Canaveral work stoppages, we had AGVA, American Guild of Variety Artists, we had Billy Sol Estes.

RITCHIE: You also had the Harold Talbott hearings.

WATT: That was just a brief hearing, in executive and one or two public hearings.

RITCHIE: That was one case where Kennedy was accused of being somewhat “ruthless” in his pursuit. Did you ever feel that those charges of ruthlessness were accurate?

WATT: You know, that Talbott case, I remember he resigned but I can't remember too much about it. I never thought about Bob as being ruthless, although he was accused of that. Of course, I remember best all those Mafia types, and you had to be ruthless because we had some real criminal elements. But I admired Bob and enjoyed working with him. I think those years were the highlights of my whole career in the committee, because we worked hard, they were interesting and yet we had our fun moments, too, the lighter moments. He had interesting

people, we had an interesting staff, interesting committee members, the whole thing to me was the best part of my 32 years.

RITCHIE: Didn't you get started on the Teamster hearings while you were still in the Permanent Subcommittee?

WATT: I think it was those hearings on the navy textile procurement. During the period that we were investigating that, this labor thing came up. That's where it got started, and I believe it was Clark Mohlenhoff that kept pounding away at Senator McClellan that they ought to have hearings on labor rackets. Then the Labor Committee decided they were going to do something about it. Then somebody put in a resolution for the Senate Labor Committee to have a special committee to review this thing. Then Senator McClellan got into it for the subcommittee and they compromised and put in to have a select committee with four members from the Labor Committee and four from the subcommittee.

RITCHIE: Was Mohlenhoff around the office a lot in those days?

WATT: Yes.

RITCHIE: Basically trying to find out what you were doing, or was he providing information?

WATT: He was providing, too. He was close to the staff. He was from Iowa and LaVern Duffy was from Iowa, and they were good friends. And he and Bob were good friends, although I think Clark was always a strong Republican. He wrote for the *Des Moines Register*. He was there at every press conference, and he was around all the time. In fact, he wrote one or two books on the committee. He was the one who started pushing to have this investigation into labor.

RITCHIE: When they set up the Rackets Committee you were one of the three staff members who transferred from the Permanent Subcommittee. Did you leave the staff of the Permanent Subcommittee?

WATT: I went on the payroll of the other committee. I asked for a \$500.00 raise and that was unheard of; they said, "We'll give you a \$300.00 a year raise and you can keep it when you go back to the Subcommittee." But in the meantime I handled all of the finances from both committees, and, except for the hearings, I handled both committees. Senator Jackson was acting chairman on the subcommittee,

and Senator McClellan was chairman, but Senator Jackson went ahead with the hearings, the little they had. During that period the subcommittee just had small hearings. And there was only the nucleus of a staff: Maggie Duckett, who was my assistant, went on as acting chief clerk, but I still handled all the finances, made up both payrolls. She had nothing to do with the finances. Senator McClellan had told some senator, who later told me, that if I wouldn't handle the hearings and carry on as I had been with the subcommittee that he didn't want to take it, because he said you needed to have experience to start off with this big amount of money—which was a lot then—and so many other things that had to be done, you couldn't just start off cold. He didn't hire anybody who was inexperienced.

RITCHIE: At one point you had 104 people working on the staff of the Rackets Committee, I read in one of the accounts.

WATT: That's right. We had 46 on the payroll and we had more than that, we had GAO [General Accounting Office] people all over the country. They weren't on our payroll, they were being

paid by GAO, but they were working for us. And we had offices all over the place.

RITCHIE: How did you keep track of all of that?

WATT: I did. But I wouldn't have if I hadn't had all those years behind me. I would go off on vacation and take my checkbook and special delivery stamps with me, because they would call me all hours of the day saying they had to have money, they were broke. I had a revolving fund in the bank and would give them cash advances. Then when their expense accounts came in all checks came to me, always, so that if they got a check they didn't go and spend it until they paid me back and it went back in the bank. Sometimes I got down pretty low in my bank account because there were so many requests, but the Disbursing Office was great because they would try to get the checks as soon as they could, knowing it was a one shot deal—it was supposed to be one year, but of course it lasted three.

RITCHIE: Do you think that Kennedy handled that large staff effectively?

WATT: Yes. He had the knack. And then Kenny O'Donnell came after I don't know what period. Bob hadn't been there too long, maybe three or four months, when Kenny O'Donnell came aboard, because I

remember Kenny was up at Hyannis Port with us on that Fourth of July in '57.

RITCHIE: What was that occasion?

WATT: Bob had part of the staff up at his place at Hyannis Port working on the New York hearing. We went up for the Fourth of July, and Kenny was there.

RITCHIE: What was Kenny O'Donnell's role?

WATT: He was administrative assistant and he sat right outside of Bob's door and he was his memory, because he had a magnificent memory. Bob would say, "We did so-and-so at such-and-such a time, what was his name?" And Kenny could tell you. Of course, Bob was involved with so many things. But Kenny was really his right-hand man. They were a great team together. I had a great deal of admiration for both of them.

RITCHIE: Pierre Salinger also came on the committee staff.

WATT: He was the first on the payroll of the Rackets Committee. He had worked for *Colliers* and had some information on rackets so that he sold Bob on employing him. So they put him on the payroll on March 1st, I think it was.

RITCHIE: It was quite a colorful staff of people.

WATT: Yes, and we had [James] McShane who later became head of the United States Marshalls when President Kennedy came in. He died only a year after he was in. Of course, Pierre and Kenny. Larry O'Brien was never on our payroll, I don't know if he was on Senator Kennedy's payroll, but he was around so much I almost felt he must have been on Senator Jack Kennedy's payroll. He was a smart politician, smart campaigner. He was in and out of the office a lot, especially when we knew that Senator Kennedy was going to run for the presidency. They were running for president in our office after 5:00 in the evening. Kenny, and Larry, and Pierre and all those people were working on the campaign back in '59.

RITCHIE: They would all gather in Robert Kennedy's office?

WATT: Yes. You knew they were going to a campaign strategy meeting when you saw them come and go. But it would be after hours.

RITCHIE: It must have been quite an atmosphere.

WATT: It was. And you see we only had 101 and 103 and 160 then. I guess we got room 100 after they moved to the new building.

RITCHIE: Was that when they blocked off the corridor and made an extra room?

WATT: We had to have that when the Rackets Committee started. We put the stenographers out there. In the back we had the staff editor, because they didn't have, room in 160, because we had a lot of people down there, and we had a big file system. We had three file clerks.

RITCHIE: Were most of these 104 people working for the committee around the country, or did they actually work out of your offices?

WATT: The GAO people, when we had a specific hearing in some part of the country, they would all come back. Sometimes I would come back from a hearing and find four people sitting on my waste basket and all around my desk. There were three times as many people as there were desks for them. But then they would be out in the field, because we had offices in Detroit, Chicago, New York, Florida, and I don't remember where else. Then we had temporary offices. Back then you could get a room in a government agency without any problem; in about 1970 or around there GSA [General Services Administration] made a ruling that everybody had to pay rent. We had had an office in New York for years and we closed it because we weren't

about to pay rent! But we had had a free office up there in the federal building at Foley Square for years. It was on the FTS line and we had our own phone, too. There was a man from GAO who retired and went on our payroll and he ran the office up there. But then when they went to New York they had a place to work. During the Rackets Committee we had two or three stenographers working up there on our payroll. That was great, all we had to pay was rental on the typewriters, and three salaries.

RITCHIE: During the Rackets Committee hearings you had a lot of pretty tough characters testifying. You had Dave Beek, and Jimmy Hoffa, but you also had Vito Genovese—

WATT: Oh, he was the scariest one. He was the only one that really frightened me.

RITCHIE: In what way?

WATT: I would stand in back of where the senators were when he was testifying, and he had the coldest eyes. He would look right through you and just make chills. He was about the coldest individual I think I've ever seen. We had the Gallo brothers, I think one of them was murdered.

RITCHIE: Joey Gallo.

WATT: Yes. He was testifying one day and sitting at the hearing table and he flicked his glass and it went right into an ashtray on the floor where the photographers sat facing him. It broke into a million pieces. So I had to sit down and clean it up. He said, “Oh, I wouldn’t have done that if I’d known you had to clean it up!” So apparently he had done it on purpose, just to cause a diversion. Of course, that didn’t stop Senator McClellan or Bobby Kennedy. The attendance was pretty good for those hearings. Jack—Senator Kennedy—came quite frequently. He would come when Bob would call and tell him it was going to be very interesting. I remember one day that he came into a hearing, it must have been when they knew he was going to run for the presidency because the press was flocking around him. He hadn’t had any lunch and Evelyn Lincoln came in with a tray of lunch for him, and he took it and went into the telephone booth to try to eat it. The press was like this around him, so he never ate his lunch. I remember it very well, because he was in that little telephone booth with his lunch. No matter what he

did, it was news. When the Kennedys were around, you felt it in the air. I don't know if I feel that way about Teddy Kennedy because I don't have much dealing with him, but for Senator John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy you just felt the excitement in the air when they were around. I don't know how to explain it. And when their father came to town, everybody hopped! I remember one time he came during the hearings and he was going back to Boston. They had Eastern Airlines, Jack Kennedy's office, me, the SEC, and somebody else working on one reservation for him to get back to Boston!

RITCHIE: Did he come to the office at all while you were there?

WATT: Oh, yes. He would come in every now and then. And Mrs. Kennedy was so quiet that you never much noticed her. He just overshadowed her so. They never were there at the same time. But after he died she came into her own. Before that, you never heard a thing about her. You didn't feel as though she was a very strong personality, but she kept it under wraps, I suppose, because he was so much stronger.

RITCHIE: Did he come to the hearings very much?

WATT: Oh, he came every once in a while. You knew when he was there.

RITCHIE: In what way?

WATT: Well, Bob was a little keyed up, a little tense and so-on. There was a strong paternal influence over all the Kennedys. He really was a strong, strong person.

RITCHIE: Talking about some of those witnesses like Vito Genovese and Johnny Dio [Dioguardia] and all the others, did you ever fear for any physical violence?

WATT: No, never. I think it's true that they take care of their own when things don't go right, but not anybody else. I don't think that anybody had anything to fear.

RITCHIE: I noticed a picture of Johnny Dio punching a photographer outside the hearing room.

WATT: *New York Times*, yes. Somewhere I have a picture of that. One time we had a witness, I don't know whether he was Mafia, or involved with the Mafia, or what he was, but it was something to do with a labor union. We subpoenaed this older man to come to Washington, and his doctor sent a note that he had a bad heart condition and could not come. So we always excused people like that, we had

several of those. But he showed up anyway. He came with his son. He walked into 101 and dropped dead. It was a quarter to ten in the morning and we were getting ready for a hearing. Everybody was coming and going and right in the hallway of the outer office between all the stenographers, there he was. So we had to close the room off and call the doctor and call the nurse, and went out through 103. And the son was out in the hallway, running up and down screaming, "You murdered my father! You murdered my father!" I don't remember his name, but that makes an impression on you, believe me!

We had one other man who had a heart attack in the hearing. I called all around the neighborhood and had an awful time finding a doctor. Then I had to find some way to pay for him! There's nothing in the rules that says you can pay for a witness having a heart attack. We had another in '55 or '56. He came in and his wife came with him, and he never did get to the committee; he died in the hotel room before he came to testify. Of course, we'd already paid for his ticket,

so we paid his way back home, too! But you can't avoid that when you have two or three or 5,000 witnesses over a period of years.

RITCHIE: Well, with the Rackets Committee alone you had some 1,500 witnesses.

WATT: Yes, and we paid every one of them. One time, when Dave Beck was testifying, we had some people in from Oregon. It had something to do with west coast labor unions. But we had two women that they subpoenaed, both were named Helen. One was "Big Helen" and the other was "Little Helen." They had been madams. They both were very respectable looking ladies, and one was a tall lady who lived in Oregon and was now happily married. The two of them were sitting there and Fred Othman, who was a newspaper man, said, "My God, Ruth, she looks just like my sister!" Anyway, she had come in from the West Coast and one of the investigators had used his airline card to pay her way, and neglected to tell me, and I paid her again. I called her on the phone and wrote her a letter and told her that she'd been paid twice and I would be "out of pocket." I think I had a check back from her within

a week. I was a little uneasy, you know, about having to pay a one-way fare to the West Coast.

You finally reminded them so they told you everything you needed to know. I got in the habit of saying, "Did you buy any tickets for these people coming in?" When you had that big an operation it was hard not to slip up sometimes. But the Disbursing Office had a great system. Bob Brenkworth had worked out a system whereby they cross-indexed everything, so that if we inadvertently paid something twice, the Disbursing Office would catch it for you. It was a great help when you had the volume of business, and hearings all day, and working at home at night on your accounts, you can't help but slip up. There were car rentals and airline transportation, and we had two different accounts, one with Eastern and one with American Airlines. They were always turning in tickets that should be on Eastern Airlines on American Airlines. American Airlines was on the computer and Eastern wasn't, so if one penny was off the American Airlines man would

be in the next week and say, “You paid too much” or, “You owe a penny” and soon. And rather than go through all that, I would just give him the cash to even up their accounts. But Eastern never did have the same kind of account.

RITCHIE: The Teamsters hearings seemed like a replay of the Army-McCarthy hearings in some ways: you had television cameras; you were in the Caucus Room—

WATT: I had the Caucus Room reserved the year around. Anybody who wanted it had to come to me. There wasn’t the tension. The only time there was live television was during the Beck hearings, and that was channel 5, I believe. Clark Molenhoff was the one who was in charge of it, and was the voice. Other than that, it was just the cameras for news.

RITCHIE: But you were in the papers quite frequently at that time. I’ve seen pictures of you handing subpoenas to Dave Beck and to Jimmy Hoffa. There seemed to be a little humor there as well, some of the characters went to great lengths not to answer the questions.

WATT: Oh, yes. Jimmy Hoffa was famous for that. He never claimed the Fifth Amendment, but would say, “I can’t recall,” and so-on.

RITCHIE: What was your opinion of Hoffa? You must have seen a lot of him.

WATT: Oh, yes. It felt as though he lived with the staff in the day time, during the hearings. He was back and forth. Even after the Rackets Committee was over, he was back before the subcommittee in 1961. Of course, I was prejudiced, naturally, so I really didn't have the right focus on him as a person. I was prejudiced that he was a wheeler-dealer and was, we thought, part of the mob. And of course, we played right into his hands.

RITCHIE: What do you mean?

WATT: By having the hearings on Dave Beck who was president of the Teamsters Union. Following a prolonged investigation, Jimmy could step right in as president of Teamsters. So we always felt that we were responsible for him being president of the Teamsters Union. He was smart, but all these mobsters, you couldn't help but feel that he was tied in with them.

RITCHIE: Did Hoffa come to the offices before and after those hearings?

WATT: I can't remember that he was ever in that office. He might have been, but I can't remember.

RITCHIE: I wondered, because you see all the performances in the news and on television, I wondered

if the relations between people changed at all when the cameras were turned off.

WATT: Oh, it was the same. It's not the same as on the floor of the Senate, but this was not politics. This was good over evil! It was a sincere thing. Everybody was trying to do a job. With the Teamsters Union, I've heard it said that they don't care because they get their increases and they are interested only in a good living for their families. They don't know what's going on at the top. They're paying in their dues and getting their benefits and that's it—the welfare benefits, sickness, and their salary.

RITCHIE: I've heard that it was very hard to collect evidence on them because they destroyed so much of their paperwork.

WATT: Maybe they did, but we had an awful lot of files sitting in there. One time I think there was half a roomful of things that came in. I had to testify to that. Officially, I was responsible for them to be turned in, of course I never saw them, the investigators were the ones who did, but as chief clerk I

was responsible officially. I can't remember which case it was that I testified, but I remember all those things in Room 160, files, great big bales of them. It might have been on the Sally Hucks case. That was a Hoffa case. She was a telephone operator at the Woodner, and she testified that she never got anything, but she had received a fur coat from him. The committee found out and it was turned over to Justice and I had to testify in that case. She went to jail. You see it was poor little people like that got it in the neck because the big ones were smart enough to get out of it. She had a good lawyer, but they had all the telephone tolls from the Woodner Hotel. And of course, Carmine Bellino was working on that, too.

RITCHIE: I've read that they collected the tolls, who called whom and where. Did they ever get involved in wiretapping?

WATT: No, never. At the very beginning in 1948, when these telephone things were first coming into use, (you know, the telephone system has really developed in the last thirty years, with all these bugs and everything) but it was just coming in where you could put that thing on

your telephone and have your conversation recorded. We did that just for a little while because it was a novelty more than anything else. Then it came out that it was illegal, and we stopped. You had to notify people when you were recording, you had to tell them, "You're being recorded." Then later they had these very sophisticated things that came along, but we never had any of them. In fact, in the last few years people came to me and asked me to have these things put on the phone, and I said, "Uh-uh, you can take it up with your chairman, or you can take it up with Senator Percy, but it's illegal and I'm sure they're going to say nothing doing."

RITCHIE: So you never paid any bills for anything that came close to wiretapping or that kind of surveillance?

WATT: Oh, no. We never had anything on the committee like that. The only thing I ever heard of was after Bob went to the Justice Department and he had a wiretap on Martin Luther King. My understanding then was that Bob had a tap on him because he was sure he was a Communist, that he was a subversive. Then later on he changed completely and embraced King.

But we also had some very well-known underworld characters at that point.

RITCHIE: It seemed like the whole mob was down there.

WATT: Yes, as time went on. I got used to all these strange names. And we had so many labor unions, the Teamsters was the biggest one, but we had the Bakers, and the Steamfitters, and all kinds of them.

RITCHIE: I noticed a clipping in the paper that the reporters depended on you to spell all the names for them.

WATT: Yes, I've always done that. If I didn't have the spelling in front of me—the investigators used to sometimes make a list of the spelling, if they had time, and sometimes we would hand them out—but most of the time there would be some question and I'd take a note to the senators if I could. I was more or less of a liaison, or a housekeeper, let's put it that way. I kept away from the political and the controversial, there was no point to it. My job was not to ask the reason why.

RITCHIE: The Rackets Committee had some interesting members. In fact, it made a lot of reputations for John Kennedy and Barry Goldwater and others

because of all the exposure they got from it. What were they like back then? Was there anybody in particular on the Rackets Committee that impressed you?

WATT: I thought they all were pretty outstanding. Senator McClellan, Senator Mundt—well, he had made his name as chairman of the Army-McCarthy hearings—Senator John Kennedy even before that.

RITCHIE: John Kennedy was on the Government Operations Committee but not on the Permanent Investigating Subcommittee.

WATT: That's right, but he was on the Rackets Committee because he was on Labor. I didn't have that much contact with Senator Jack Kennedy. I saw him in Hyannis Port once, and I saw him at the Rackets Committee, but he was not there every day. Bob made sure that when there was going to be publicity he came, and some days we didn't have that much. Bob was, after all, going to become chairman of the campaign for the presidency, and that helped him a lot. I told Senator McClellan one time, "Senator, Jack Kennedy would not be president if it hadn't been for you and this committee." He said, "Yes, people forget things so fast." And that's true, it's true of everybody; they want to know what have you done for me lately?

One time in '55—of course, the Kennedys have always frowned on people discussing the trips that they took to Hyannis Port—but Bob asked me and Watt, who were on our way to visit my family in Maine, to stop in Hyannis Port. Watt had had his heart attack the year before. We were supposed to fly into Hyannis and spend two or three days with him. But it was fogged in, so we called and they said, “Well, take the train.” We took the train and it turned out they had sent the chauffeur to pick us up at the station in Boston. But it was 40 miles by train, it was an endless trip down the strip to the Cape. The first day we got there we stayed at the big house, the old family house. On the left coming in was where Bob had his house, right next door. Later there was a house in back of that which Jack Kennedy owned, but they hadn't bought it then.

That first night we slept in Jack Kennedy's room, which was on the first floor. It had twin beds and bookshelves lined with “who-dunnits.” The next morning, Watt said, “Was your bed hard last night?” I said, “No, I slept like a log.” Well, there was a board in the bed and he had slept on that board all night. So they took

it out, but then the next day Senator Jack Kennedy came. So we had to move to the room upstairs which was Joe Kennedy's room. It was a huge bed, but it had a board in it, too! I remember coming to breakfast, Bob and Jack were there and they were talking politics, they didn't even know we were there, almost.

RITCHIE: Nobody noticed you?

WATT: They made the necessary amenities and so on, but we sat down. Watt was facing me, and Senator Kennedy was at the end of the table, and we almost didn't get breakfast because he was so intent and wasn't passing things. I was getting hungrier by the minute! But they were so intent, and they were such a close-knit family. I remember how I sat there wanting a piece of toast. But it was fascinating listening to the two of them talk. Then we left that day for Maine, we had just stayed the two nights. I remember how impressed I was, being from a small town and always buying ice cream by the scoop, they served scoops of ice cream in a big bowl and you just served yourself. Isn't it funny how you remember things like that! They were really very gracious people.

RITCHIE: The person who seemed to be Robert Kennedy's chief antagonist on the committee was Barry Goldwater.

WATT: Well, he and Jack Kennedy were both presidential aspirants. He was conservative and Bob wasn't; their whole viewpoint was different; and one was a Republican and the other a Democrat.

RITCHIE: What did you think about Goldwater in those days?

WATT: I liked him. He was very nice. One time he called me up to his office to meet Bob Cummings and his wife, who had come to the hearings. That's in my photograph album. Edna Carver, his secretary, was my good friend. Then one time he came back from somewhere and brought a little bottle of perfume, I remember it had my name on the outside. I was quite impressed. Of course, he had that department store out in Arizona. I liked him very much.

RITCHIE: Homer Capehart was briefly on that committee, he succeeded someone.

WATT: When Senator Ives didn't run again in 1958.

RITCHIE: Capehart seems like an amusing character.

WATT: Wilma Miller, who was his secretary—we became very good friends afterwards—but she

was very difficult when she was working for him at that point. When she was in his office, I wasn't too happy going to that office. When I saw him in the hearing, why he didn't know me from Adam, he wasn't there that long and I didn't have that much contact with him. But I remember Wilma was very difficult. Later on, Senator McClellan gave her a job on the Patents Subcommittee after Senator Capehart was defeated, and I got to know her pretty well. But she was a difficult person when she was in authority.

RITCHIE: He was sort of a blustery little character.

WATT: More or less. He wasn't that little, he was kind of wide. But then he had a big tragedy in his life, some of his children were killed in an accident, about '58 or '59. Of course, we had all that tragedy in Senator McClellan's life, too, around that point, when Jimmy was killed in that private plane accident in '57 or '58. When the Rackets Committee started on the first day, Senator Goldwater and Senator [Carl] Hayden presented the Senator [McClellan] with a gavel that was made out of Arizona ironwood. It had his initials on it, and I was custodian of it all those years

up until he was no longer chairman of the subcommittee. But there was a little chip in it. When Senator McClellan's father died in 1958, Senator Ives took over for one day of hearings when he went out to the funeral, and we had a little board so the gavel wouldn't ruin that beautiful table in the Caucus Room. Well, Senator Ives on his first whack hit the corner of the board and took a chip out of that gavel. Senator McClellan couldn't figure out what happened, but of course we told him later. Arizona ironwood, you wouldn't think anything would damage it!

RITCHIE: Frank Church also was on that committee briefly.

WATT: He replaced Senator Pat McNamara. You see, the first year Senator McNamara had defeated Senator Ferguson. McNamara was a big labor union man. After the first year, he said, "We don't need this committee anymore, I'm getting off. We've served our purpose and I'm getting off." Well, probably the labor unions told him to do that. When he went, Senator Church came on to replace him. On the first day that Senator Church came to the committee he came over; they were voting and he was the first one there in the Caucus Room. I, of course, introduced myself to him

and he said, “You know, I feel like what Harry Truman said when he first came to the Senate. He said, ‘when I came to the Senate I wondered what I was doing here; and after I had been here six months, I wondered what everybody else was doing here!’” That was the first time I had ever heard that, when Senator Church told me. He’s come a long way.

RITCHIE: He was very young at that point.

WATT: He had graduated from college and won an oratory contest or something. And when he made that keynote speech at the Democratic Convention he used college oratory. I was quite disappointed when I heard that in 1960. He’s of course, grown up since then, but it was definitely college oratory, the whole thing.

RITCHIE: Eventually when Robert Kennedy came back to the Senate, he was on the Government Operations Committee, but he never got on the Permanent Investigating Subcommittee, did he?

WATT: Yes, he was on the full committee, but he asked not to be put on the subcommittee.

RITCHIE: Why was that?

WATT: Well, after all he had been chief counsel and had all those people. He had other fish to fry anyway.

RITCHIE: I would have thought that after all his connections with the subcommittee, he would have wanted to serve on it.

WATT: Well, it probably would have brought back some pretty hard memories because he had been through so much with the assassination of his brother. He'd been there in the happier days, his growing up days really because he really matured during those years on the committee. He became an adult.

RITCHIE: You saw a real change in him?

WATT: Yes, I watched him grow up. I feel as though I brought him up! Because he was only 25 when he came and I was already in my 40s. I was old enough to be his mother.

RITCHIE: Did you see very much of him when he came back as a senator?

WATT: No. Then as far as I was concerned he was "Senator Kennedy." Our relationship changed and I felt no personal affinity to him at all, because I've never done that. Pierre Salinger was a senator for a few months, you remember, when Clare Engle died, and he was on the full committee.

RITCHIE: He was on the Government Operations Committee, too? Did you ever have any dealings with him?

WATT: I had to go up and get his signature two or three times when I polled the committee, and that was in the privacy of his office and so it was “Pierre.”

RITCHIE: Had he changed very much?

WATT: He was just the same.

RITCHIE: But even though Robert Kennedy was on the Government Operations Committee you didn't see very much of him?

WATT: Just when I went to his office to get things signed. He was always very cordial and very sweet and treated like he always had, but I still said, “Senator Kennedy,” I never called him Bob again. I just didn't think it was proper. I've always been very careful about niceties and the proper attitudes towards the senators. Just because I'm a lot older doesn't mean I don't have the same respect. I remember some personal incidents. One time when Bob was chief counsel we were getting low on stenographers. Angie Novello had become his secretary by that point. Bob said, “We've got to get some more people on this staff, some young glamorous people.” You know, joking. So Angie went down to room 160 and got everybody's jewelry and got all this fancy stuff on and went up and

rapped on the door and said, “I came applying for a job.” Because all of the people were older and had a lot of experience. You couldn’t start some young person coming in on a big thing like this. We had many people who were older and had plenty of experience, and for them it was a one-shot deal for a year.

Senator McClellan told me once to have a picture made of the staff, but I never did because they weren’t very glamorous; I thought, “No, I don’t think I will.” I’m not sure that would make too good an impression with all those people 55 to 60. I figured if you had a group picture they ought to be at least a little glamorous. So there were no pictures of the staff that year. One girl came down from Senator Kefauver’s office. Senator McClellan had a specific policy of not hiring people from another office. He didn’t believe in taking people away from other offices. But she specifically asked Senator Kefauver if he would object if she came down. So Kefauver called Senator McClellan. But I never knew him to hire anybody from another staff.

RITCHIE: When you mentioned Kefauver, it reminded me: Did the committee have access to the Kefauver Crime Committee papers?

WATT: I don't know. My biggest regret was that there were so many of the printed hearings around all the time that I never bothered to get a set for the committee. We never did have a set, we had to go to the library. All the papers went to the Commerce Committee, and I don't think that we had any of their files. Of course, we had access to the FBI files, and if we wanted a file we just wrote them. We wrote the attorney general or J. Edgar Hoover.

RITCHIE: I've been through some of the Kefauver records at the Archives and I was struck by the mug shots and criminal records of some pretty frightening looking people.

WATT: That's right. We had many pictures and charts of the families. We had big charts on the walls, and then they were made smaller to fit into the printed hearings. They were put together by the staff. There were many of those families, and a lot of them have been killed in the meantime since then. The ones that were the most frightening were the narcotics hearings. Genovese was the head of that. Later on, we had Joe Valachi, that was the first time we knew it was called "Cosa Nostra," he's the one that introduced that.

RITCHIE: I noticed that in a short biography you once did, you said that while the Army McCarthy hearings were the most spectacular hearings that took place while you were with the committee, that you thought the Rackets Committee hearings were the most interesting. What did you mean by that?

WATT: I think it was probably the people that I worked with. They just made it more interesting to me. The staff that was around when Senator McCarthy was chairman, they were all gung-ho as far as Communism was concerned, and were interested in hearings one after the other, but there wasn't the preparation that went into them that went on later during the Rackets Committee. And I worked more closely with the chief counsel during the Rackets Committee. One reason was that while Roy Cohn was counsel, he had his office down in the HOLC Building, and I was never down there. All I did then was to go to a hearing knowing there were certain witnesses I would have to write up subpoenas for, or on another day I was going to have to pay them. But I knew nothing about the content of the hearings because it was remote, it was way off somewhere else. So I was not involved

with the preparation. I was in Room 101 during the Rackets Committee, which was the center of activity, so I knew everything that was going on—and that makes a lot of difference. The witnesses were in and out; and I would hear discussions and briefings and so on; whereas I was not involved in it during the Army McCarthy days because the HOLC Building was about three blocks away.

RITCHIE: So would you say that Robert Kennedy made better use of the staff than Roy Cohn did?

WATT: Well, his investigators yes, but I was clerical, you see. Of course, there were two girls working down in HOLC that did all the work for Dave Shine and Roy. I may be unfair, but I don't think he put the preparation into a hearing that Senator McClellan and Bob Kennedy did. Because Bob never went into a hearing when he wasn't well prepared. His people worked all night sometimes. I've come in in the mornings and found investigators who slept on the floor all night, who worked until four or five and just went to sleep on the floor. And there they were in the morning when we got to work. There was a dedication there, complete dedication. I'm not sure that was there during the earlier hearings,

except for our dedication to Senator McCarthy. Most of them on the staff weren't there that long, I had been there since he came to the Senate, but I was in a different position, because mine was purely to make sure the place ran smoothly, not the preparation of the hearings. I paid the bills, took care of the vouchers, and made sure everything was legal, and attended and set up all hearings in Washington.

Bob went into everything very carefully, and he had a larger staff. There were 46 on that Rackets Committee and there were only two minority people out of the 46. It wasn't until 1973 that we started getting bigger staffs for the minority. But Bob just did a magnificent job. He kept the senators briefed. Of course, it got political with the senators themselves as time went on, but at the staff level, politics wasn't discussed.

[End of Interview #4]