

Two link \$2 million loot

By Larry Finley

Two witnesses testifying before a special federal panel said they were asked to help dispose of nearly \$2 million in stolen loot they believed had been in the possession of Watergate figure Mrs. Dorothy Hunt when she died in the Dec. 8 plane crash near Midway Airport.

The panel of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is meeting in Rosemont to hear charges by legal researcher Sherman Skolnick that the United Air Lines plane was sabotaged in order to kill Mrs. Hunt and 11 others involved in the Watergate scandal.

The witnesses, Alex Bottos and Joseph Zale, were presented by Skolnick Wednesday to bolster his version of the crash.

Skolnick has contended that the plane's electrical system was tampered with as part of a government conspiracy to cover up details of Watergate and other political corruption in the Nixon administration.

Mrs. Hunt was one of 45 persons killed in the United Air Lines crash. She was the wife of convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt. Investigators recovered \$10,000 in \$100 bills from her belongings, which has been traced to the Watergate cover-up.

BOTTOS, of Gary, testified that he was an unpaid inform-



Legal researcher Sherman Skolnick (right) and witness Alex Bottos prepare to testify before the National Transportation Safety Board in Rosemont Wednesday. (Daily News Photo/Bill DeLuga)

er for several federal law enforcement agencies, including the Justice Department strike force investigating corruption in the Chicago area.

He said he had infiltrated a gang of airline pirates led by Joseph A. Sarelli, who were robbing planes of valuable

securities. He said he was acting as a fence for the gang to dispose of \$2.2 million in securities stolen from a North Central Airlines plane last Aug. 17.

Sarelli and several others were indicted Tuesday by a special federal grand jury in connection with the robbery.

BOTTOS SAID he was the informer who broke the case to the federal strike force.

Bottos said the same "Mafia" gang offered him an estimated \$1.9 million in blank U.S. postal money orders and American Express checks to fence.

With the stolen checks, he said, were stock transfer lists for a Texas natural gas firm that showed that former Atty. Gen. John Mitchell, through a nominee, owned gas company stock at the same time the Justice Department dropped a \$300 million suit against the company.

Skolnick has contended that several persons aboard the plane worked for the gas industry and were going to expose a scandal involving Mitchell.

BOTTOS SAID that once federal agents became aware of his knowledge of the loot from the Midway plane, he was "whisked off (to prison) under trumped up charges."

Under questioning by United Air Lines attorney R. Richard Street, Bottos admitted he had been arrested in Indiana on charges of impersonating a federal officer and sent to the Springfield (Mo.) federal hospital for 40 days for a mental examination.

As Bottos testified he wore a bulletproof vest, explaining that several attempts had been made on his life. He said that

to Hunt death

when he was exposed as an informer he became a "marked man for the Mafia here in the U.S."

ZALE, A GARY restaurant owner and friend of Bottos, said a member of the aircraft piracy gang, Benny Smith, showed him a photo copy of samples of the checks and money orders about a week after the Midway crash.

Zale testified that Smith indicated numbers and denominations of checks totaling about \$1.9 million.

Zale was one of those indicted Tuesday on charges of possessing stolen securities from the North Central plane. Smith was arrested in January on conspiracy and possession charges in the same theft.

THE SPECIAL NTSB hearing was requested by United Air Lines after Skolnick's charges of murder, sabotage and political corruption received nationwide publicity.

Skolnick was barred from testifying at NTSB hearings held here in February. As a result, he sued Mrs. Isabel A. Burgess, presiding officer at the hearing.

Mrs. Burgess and Skolnick frequently exchanged angry words at Wednesday's hearings as he accused her of trying to coverup details of the crash.

IN AN opening statement, Skolnick implicated as participants in the crash and the alleged cover-up the Federal Aviation Administration, United Air Lines, Mitchell, the Justice Department strike force, the Mafia, the FBI and officials of the Columbia Broadcasting System.

He charged that FBI agents knew where the plane containing Mr. Hunt would crash and were at the scene to take control of the site from local authorities.

Acting FBI Director William Ruckelshaus said Wednesday in Washington that 50 FBI agents were at the scene after the crash, listened to tapes at O'Hare control tower and interviewed witnesses.

No signs of sabotage were found, he said. He was responding to complaints from the NTSB that the FBI actions were "unprecedented."