

Crash probe hears Skolnick's theory

By Donald M. Schwartz

Legal researcher Sherman Skolnick told a federal hearing here Wednesday that the Dec. 8, 1972, crash of a United Air Lines jet near Midway Airport was caused by sabotage.

He implied that the crash, which took 43 lives, was connected with the Watergate case, declaring that the number of passengers on the plane were "Watergate people" and had evidence that would have exposed aspects of the political scandal.

One passenger who was killed was Mrs. E. Howard Hunt, the wife of a major figure in the Watergate affair. Skolnick said that she was an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency and that, in addition to \$10,000 cash she was found to have been carrying, she had documents given her by her husband "that were sufficient to impeach the President."

Skolnick did not identify the documents or describe them in any way.

Appearing at a special hearing of the National Transportation Safety Board in the Sheraton-O'Hare Hotel, Skolnick said another passenger, whom he identified as Harold R. Metcalfe, was ostensibly a government narcotics agent but was really "a hit man" who worked directly for the President.

Skolnick did not say whom the purported hit man was out to kill.

The safety board held a week of public hearings here last March. The special session Wednesday was set up after United Air Lines requested that the board hear Skolnick's theories. At the time of the

request last month, a United official said Skolnick's theories "not only appear unfounded, but . . . are not substantiated, or are directly refuted, by the actual evidence developed during the continuing investigation of the accident."

John Stuhldrehr, a board attorney, indicated that Skolnick had told the board of his sabotage theory when the board held its March hearings. He was not made a public witness then because "he didn't present any facts for his allegations," the lawyer said.

Stuhldrehr, speaking to reporters before the testimony, said the board had no indication that Skolnick had any facts to present at the Wednesday hearing but decided to include him as a witness before it concluded its investigation. The board will make a report on probable cause of the crash later this summer, Stuhldrehr said.

Skolnick spent most of his testimony discussing technical operations of the plane just before the crash and actions of the air controllers attempting to guide the plane toward a landing.

He claimed several control devices on the plane malfunctioned. "Circuit breakers were popping, evidently from a stripped busbar or a wire put in there," he said.

"They were trying to run this plane without electricity," Skolnick said, referring to the minutes before the crash.

"Those who screwed up this plane had the means; they knew the weak points (of the plane)."

He did not identify those who he said "screwed up the plane."