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Strange Case of Senator's Letter

Washington

The Central Intelligence Agency says it cannot, for the life of it, find the letter Frank Church wrote his mother-in-law.

The Church committee can't find it either, which is somewhat unsettling since the Idaho Democrat described it last month as a prime example of the excesses of the CIA's illegal mail opening program.

Now that no one can find the letter, from "sources" close to the CIA come hints that maybe it was never intercepted, that maybe it never existed as far as the CIA's files are concerned. From spokesmen for Church and his Senate intelligence committee come counter-suggestions that maybe the CIA destroyed its copy.

The letter in question was one that Church said he sent from the Soviet Union during a 1971 trip.

At a Senate committee nearing September 24, Church said the CIA had surreptitiously opened and copied the letter along with others written to and from American politicians as part of the CIA's 20-year mail intercept program.

Committee aides indicated that the copy had been found in a special CIA file set aside for correspondence to and from "selected American politicians."

But neither the CIA's copy nor the original can be found. Mrs. Chase Clark has told reporters in Boise she doesn't remember receiving it. And Church, according to a spokesman in his senatorial office doesn't recall what he said, except that he's sure it was just chatty, inconsequential travelogue.

Committee officials announced yesterday that at least a dozen witnesses, including former CIA Director Richard Helms, are being called to hearings on mail opening operations of both the CIA and FBI scheduled for next Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday.

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