

# Watergate Recorders Bugged

By Marlene Cimons  
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A brief moment of fame came to Ben Firshein two weeks ago when, without hesitating, he chewed out a Watergate witness on national television.

It took only a second of air time, but the crusty, 63-year-old Firshein wasn't finished with him yet. He waited until Richard A. Moore, the white-haired, 59-year-old special counsel to the President, completed his testimony before the Senate Watergate panel. Then, as if Moore had not had enough troubles that afternoon, Firshein growled at him as he was leaving the hearing room:

"You are, without a doubt, the worst witness I ever had."

The grey-haired, bespectacled Firshein, with his colleague Fran Garro, 48, who resembles actress Bette Davis, are the court reporters for the Watergate hearings. They have, since the hearings began May 17, been charged with transcribing every public word uttered within the room. And they view the goings-on with their own professional perspective.

The incident with Moore occurred during an interrogation by assistant committee counsel Terry Lenzner. Moore asked Firshein to read back one of his previous statements. While Firshein was backing up the tape, Moore and Lenzner started talking again. Fir-

shein dropped the tape to take down what they were saying.

"Which will it be?" Firshein said testily. "I've only got two hands."

"Then he made that cute remark," Firshein said. "I thought you could do that with one hand?"

The two court reporters (they resent the term "stenographers," claiming that a stenographer is looked upon in their business as "someone who works in an office") have a combined experience of more than 60 years.

They are employed by Ward and Paul, a reporting company under contract to the Watergate committee and located, ironically, in the Capitol Hill building that served as McGovern-For-President headquarters before the Democratic National Convention. They divide the work, breaking for one another when each senator or staff member ends his questioning. Mrs. Garro's 16-year-old daughter Susan sits nearby, waiting to rush the tapes to the main committee office. There, three typists immediately transcribe the material.

Both requested the Watergate assignment and had no problem getting it since they are the two senior reporters in the company, each with a heavy background in political transcription.

Mrs. Garro has often worked closed Senate committee hearings, in addition to several national political conventions. In 1968, she traveled with the

presidential campaign of Democratic nominee Hubert H. Humphrey recording speeches and press conferences.

Firshein gave up a law practice during the depression to learn to operate a stenograph machine. "At that time lawyers were starving, and the work wasn't too interesting anyway," he said. "My sister had one of those machines and I got curious as to how it worked."

He recorded the closed-door 1951 Senate inquiry into President Harry S. Truman's recall of Gen. Douglas MacArthur as allied commander during the Korean War. He was at the White House when President Dwight D. Eisenhower held his first press conference. And he was in the Supreme Court chamber in 1954 during the landmark school desegregation arguments. "You'd have to be pretty cold-blooded not to get excited about being there while these things were happening," she said.

One of his first assignments was the sensational 1948 investigation conducted by the House Committee on un-American Activities of former State Department official Alger Hiss, during which a young Republican Congressman from California, Richard M. Nixon, first gained national stature.

"There was the same kind of tension as Watergate," Firshein said. "By the way, Mr. Nixon struck me as a very judicious inquirer. He was fair. He didn't browbeat the witnesses."

Firshein has developed his own personal rules of behav-

ior over the years, which, he says, have served him well, particularly during times of great stress. "You maintain a good sense of humor, and patience," he said. "And you keep your big, fat mouth shut."

But the Watergate hearings are not without their problems for the two.

"Unless they turn off those damn TV lights I'm gonna disintegrate into a pool of water before the whole television audience," Firshein said. "The heat from those things hits my noggin like a laser." (Mrs. Garro wears dark glasses to protect her eyes from the glare.)

"The chairs are uncomfortable," Firshein said. "When the hearings started, I took one of those big, straight-back chairs to sit on, figuring my duff might as well be comfortable. By the time I got back from lunch, one of the senators had taken it away because he couldn't see through me."

It bothered Mrs. Garro at one time that her function was too much of an anonymous one, but her attitude has changed, especially since Watergate.

"I used to want to get out of the business," she said.

"I felt too much like a funnel, that the words went into my ears and out my fingers. But not anymore. I realized I could never get an education like this one anywhere else. I am, in effect, recording history."