

A Report That Nixon's Secretary Erased Tape

Washington

Rose Mary Woods, President Nixon's long-time personal secretary, is prepared to testify that she erased an 18-minute segment of a key White House tape subpoenaed in the Watergate investigation, it has been learned.

A high administration source, confirming Miss Woods' responsibility for the erasure, said he presumed it had been done accidentally.

The Los Angeles Times learned that on Thanksgiving,

a day after Mr. Nixon's Watergate lawyers disclosed that an 18-minute segment of the tape was blank, Miss Woods decided to consult an outside lawyer about the problem — Washington attorney Charles S. Rhyne. She met Rhyne again Saturday. He is a friend and former law school classmate of Mr. Nixon at Duke University.

The erased portion of the tape was potentially crucial evidence because it was part of a conversation between

the President and H. R. Haldeman, then White House chief of staff, on June 20, 1972 — three days after the Watergate break-in.

Rhyne is expected to represent Miss Woods at a federal court hearing that will be resumed today on this tapes.

Rhyne refused to comment on the matter Saturday and would not say whether he is representing

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Miss Woods. "I'm a lawyer, and I've known her for I - don't - know - how - many years," Rhyne said. "I can't tell you anything."

Although one administration official said he understood Miss Woods would take the witness stand at today's hearing before U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica, another source said it is possible she would invoke her Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination and refuse to testify.

Any testimony by Miss Woods contending that the erasure was accidental is likely to draw intense questioning by Watergate special prosecutors because of her earlier sworn statements regarding the tapes.

On November 8, at a hearing in Sirica's court on two missing tapes, Miss Woods testified that she had spent more than 30 hours at Mr. Nixon's request trying to transcribe conversations on the June 20 tape, which would have included the erased portion.

She gave no indication during that testimony that anything was missing from Mr. Nixon's conversation with Haldeman. She grew increasingly irritated as assistant Watergate prosecutor Jill Vollner questioned her about what precautions she had taken to ensure that nothing was erased from the tape.

Miss Woods assured the persistent Mrs. Vollner that she had had no difficulty understanding instructions she was given on operating the tape-playing machine and would not have pushed the erasure button by mistake.

(The New York Times reported, meanwhile, that a Washington audio technician with long experience in tape recorders said that, barring some highly unusual malfunction in the machine, it would have been very difficult to wipe out such a long passage by mistake.

(Most tape recorders, the technician said, are designed to prevent such mishaps from occurring, even when the machines are operated by novices.)

In disclosing the missing 18-minute segment last Wednesday, J. Fred Buzhardt, Mr. Nixon's Watergate counsel, described it as a "phenomenon." He later told newsmen, "We don't know what the character of the problem is."

Buzhardt said the June 20 discussion between Mr. Nixon and Haldeman broke off into "an audible tone and no conversation" for the 18-minute interval.

In her November 8 testimony, Miss Woods discussed the Haldeman-Nixon conversation as if it were part of a discussion also involving John D. Ehrlichman, the President's former chief domestic adviser.

According to logs of Mr. Nixon's June 20 activities, from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. he met with Ehrlichman. The meeting with Haldeman, including the blank 18 minutes, apparently lasted from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

In subpoenaing a total of nine presidential tapes last summer, former special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox said of the June 20 meetings of Mr. Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman: "This was their first opportunity for full discussion of how to handle the Watergate incident, and Ehrlichman has testified that Watergate was indeed the primary subject of the meeting. . . Ehrlichman and then Haldeman went to see the President. The inference that they reported on Watergate and may well have received instructions is almost irresistible."

Miss Woods, who has worked for Mr. Nixon for 23 years, took the June 20 tape with her to Camp David on September 29.

Los Angeles Times