

Joe Bartlett

The House Assembles in the Ways and Means Committee Room

Recollections of the 81st Congress (1949-1951) which met in the House Ways and Means Committee Room.

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The Ways and Means Committee Room was never intended for a plenary session of the House of Representatives. And when we were forced to do that—you see, it wasn't for a frivolous reason that the House had to make that change. But what had actually happened, the old House Chamber had a skylight that on bright days made the chamber bright and on dark days or at night it was a very dark chamber. And, the lighting was grossly inadequate. But worse than that, the superstructure, there was a.... The center of this roof in the old House Chamber had, they told me, was 18 inches off of alignment. And they had put up a superstructure of I-beams. It looked like a construction underway. And it had to suffice throughout World War II, because they certainly could not undertake a major restructuring of the chamber during the war. So along comes, the war's over and they've got designs for a new House Chamber. What are you going to do with the 435 Members of the House? Well, the only, the only large chamber, and it isn't large by comparison at all, was the Ways and Means Committee Room in the Longworth House Office Building. And, the plan was made to move over there and hold the session both in 1949 and in 1950, because in 1950 then they did the second level of the House Chamber, the old House Chamber. All of the things that we have discussed previously were absolutely true. Informality became really very unsophisticated and casual. It lost its dignity. I don't know that the laws that were passed during that period of time were any of the worse for it. I have no specifics in mind. But I do know it wasn't a very becoming situation. We didn't have the public looking down on us. We didn't have a very good way of reporting, of accommodating the press media. I'm sure in your life you've gone from the classroom to the class picnic, and you know how different things are. You say things to the teacher at the picnic that you wouldn't begin to say to them in the classroom. Well, that was pretty much the way it was there and there was some informality. That's the nicest word I can use to describe it, but there were things that were not very—were certainly no credit to the process. And it was a necessity I gather, and it certainly we survived it. The Members returned to an absolutely gorgeous chamber. It had deficiencies of light and sound, but it was a beautiful chamber when we first went back. Color coordinated and bright, and many of the things that we had not had before. There were those of us who were pretty excited about coming back to work in a situation like that.