

An Oral History Interview

with

RICHARD OLSON (part 1)

conducted by
Julie Ferdon

September 9, 1998
Fairfax, Virginia

The Morris K. Udall Oral History Project
University of Arizona Library, Special Collections

transcribed by
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Richard C. Olson

Dick Olson was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 13, 1922. He attended the University of North Dakota and the North Dakota Agricultural College before enlisting in the U.S. Naval Reserve in 1942. After being discharged in 1946, he returned to North Dakota and worked for the *Fargo Forum*.

In 1948 Dick moved to Tucson to attend the University of Arizona. After receiving his degree in 1950, he began working for the *Tucson Citizen* as a reporter and eventually editor. He left the *Citizen* in 1955 to begin a public relations business and to work part-time for then Congressman Stewart Udall. When Stewart Udall became Secretary of the Interior in 1961, Dick moved to Washington, D.C. to become legislative Assistant, and eventually Executive Assistant for Congressman Morris K. Udall, who had replaced his brother in a special election.

Dick left Udall's employment in 1971 to become editor of *Living Wilderness* and Director of Information for the Wilderness Society. He returned to Congress in 1976 to serve as Special Assistant to House Majority Leader Jim Wright. In 1982 he left Capital Hill to work for DynCorp as Director of Corporate Government Relations and, eventually, Vice President for Public Affairs.

JF: This is Tape 22 of the Morris K. Udall Oral History Project. Good morning, it's Wednesday, September 9, 1998, and we're at the home of Richard Olson in Fairfax, Virginia. My name is Julie Ferdon, and I would like to welcome Dick Olson to another in a series of oral history interviews that form the Morris K. Udall Oral History Project.

Dick, thank you for your participation. I'd like to start just with some biographical information, if I might. You were born September 13, 1922?

RO: Yes.

JF: And was that St. Paul, Minnesota?

RO: Yes.

JF: Thus the "Olson" part of it? (laughs) Swedish ancestry?

RO: Yes, that's right.

JF: I noticed that you moved around a lot as a child, going from Minnesota to Missouri, to North Dakota, South Dakota. Was this due to your father's work?

RO: Yes, it was.

JF: What did he do?

RO: My father was a traveling salesman. I look upon my father and my mother as examples of American entrepreneurship. I mean, here they were, they were first-generation Americans, all of their parents had migrated to this country from Northern Europe. Just in their early twenties, my dad was working as a shoe clerk, my mother was working as a beauty operator. They decided that they would make a big move. My dad got a job as a salesman for the U.S. Rubber Company, covering all of South Dakota. (phone rings, tape paused)

JF: Okay, we're back again. You were speaking about your parents as entrepreneurs.

RO: Yes. My mother, who was just in her early twenties, made the decision to start a beauty shop of her own in Watertown, South Dakota--the Vanity Beauty Shop. It was right downtown. So she was very successful, my dad was very successful, and I thought that I was the richest kid in Watertown. Until the Depression (laughter), and then everything changed. So it was because of the Depression, the fact that my dad lost his job, and one thing and another, that finally we had to move to Missouri, where my dad succeeded in getting another job. We lived there for a couple of years. It wasn't a very good job, and finally he got a better job which required our moving to Fargo, North Dakota. (laughs) And so that explains our moving around.

JF: Okay. From 1940 to 1942, you attended the University of North Dakota, and then

moved over to North Dakota Agricultural College, is that correct?

RO: That's right, and the reason for that was my folks couldn't really afford to send me to college, so I was paying my own way, and going to the university in Grand Forks required more money than I really had. In my freshman year, I was the photographer for the university yearbook, if you can believe it. And I also worked as a waiter in my fraternity house, and one thing and another. But it was a struggle, and so that summer I went back to work for *The Fargo Forum*, where I had worked the previous summer.

JF: What was *The Fargo Forum*?

RO: *The Fargo Forum* is the largest daily newspaper in North Dakota. So I went back to work for *The Forum* as soon as I got back from Grand Forks, and I decided to take a job as a night proofreader during the regular school year, so that required my transferring to what we then called the A.C.

JF: What was your major there?

RO: Well, at the time, I hadn't decided on a major, but my intention was to transfer to the University of Minnesota after the first two years and major in journalism. So that was my intention at the time. All of that changed with the war.

JF: And you enlisted in 1942, is that correct?

RO: Yes.

JF: Naval Reserve?

RO: Hardly anyone enlisted in the United States Navy itself, during the war. The additional personnel provided during the war generally were recruited in what is known as the U.S. Naval Reserve. But I was in the Navy. I was in the Navy for three-and-a-half years, and when the war ended, I got out. So I was not in the regular Navy, which would have required a six-year [enlistment] and so on.

JF: I see. Did you serve on a ship?

RO: Yes, I did.

JF: What was your position?

RO: I was the photographer in charge of a photo lab on a repair ship, which served the advanced fleet--Halsey and Spruance and McCain.

JF: What kind of places did you go?

RO: Well, we went to the Solomon Islands, and then the Admiralty Islands, the West

Caroline Islands, and in particular we were at a place called Ulithi for seven months. It was a staging area for the invasion of Okinawa and Saipan and so on. It was there that we did repair work for some of the famous ships of the war, like the *Enterprise* and the *Franklin*--many others.

JF: So you got to see a lot of those ships?

RO: Well, I was on board all of them, and got to know the photographers on all these ships, and have many stories about my relations with these other operations. But anyway, that was my experience during the war.

JF: Oh, that's great! You were discharged in 1946? (RO: Yes.) And then you returned to the North Dakota Agricultural College and *The Fargo Forum* (RO: Yes.), working there. In 1947 you married Patricia Pahsure [phonetic spelling]. Is that how you pronounce it? (RO: That's right.) with whom you had four children. (RO: Yes.) In 1948, you moved to Tucson, Arizona. (RO: Yes.) Why?

RO: I had intended, prior to this great romance, to transfer to Brown or Dartmouth, or some school like that. I had delusions of grandeur. I was working on that when I suddenly found myself falling in love and getting involved in the whole thing. So we decided to get married, and rather than continue this effort to find some great school, that I would apply to the University of Arizona where a new brother-in-law of mine was teaching. He was teaching in the engineering school, so I made the change and enrolled at the University in the spring of 1948.

JF: What did you major in there?

RO: Philosophy.

JF: Philosophy?!

RO: Don't ask me why. (chuckles)

JF: I won't ask you why. (laughter) From 1950 to 1955, you worked for the *Tucson Citizen*. What did you do for the *Citizen*?

RO: I started out as a general assignment reporter, moved to rewrite, then I became co city editor and acting city editor. And then I was given the assignment of entertainment editor, with responsibility for the Saturday supplement, which at that time was just a little five-column, tabloid newspaper. I then converted it into a magazine format, and it was known as *On the Town*. For the next two years, I was probably the best-known writer on either newspaper in Tucson, and had a marvelous time interviewing the famous personalities like Walt Disney and Oscar Hammerstein (JF: Oh, what fun!), and movie stars like Greer Garson and so on. I just had a great time. However, I wasn't making any money, and I had four kids. So eventually that had to come to an end, and I left the *Citizen* and started a public relations business, and simultaneously took a job with my

friend, the new congressman, Stewart Udall, as a part-time aide, managing his Tucson office.

JF: What did you do for Stewart? Let's see, he was elected in 1954. (RO: Right.) You started working for him in 1955? (RO: Right.) What did you do for him?

RO: Well, in truth, I worked on all of his campaigns. And in those days, that wasn't a problem. In those days, being on a congressional staff did not preclude your also being involved in the campaigns--and in fact, I was involved in Stewart's campaigns and Mo's campaigns for many years, while being a member of the staff. But in addition to that, I was asked to write speeches and articles, and I was assigned various projects: for example, one having to do with the Soil Bank. I gathered information on the Arizona farmers who were receiving very large payments from the Soil Bank for not planting crops. My research resulted in a big nationwide news story that ran in all the magazines and newspapers, about these (chuckles) fat cat Arizona farmers getting \$200,000 a year for (JF: Doing nothing.) not planting and so on. Anyway, that was one project I worked on.

JF: Now, were you simultaneously working in Stewart's office and doing your public relations firm?

RO: Yes.

JF: Was there ever any conflict of interest problem that arose there?

RO: No. There could have been. It's not an arrangement that I would particularly recommend--wouldn't even be legal now--but there wasn't any, I didn't experience any conflict of interest.

JF: Were you effectively Stewart's district representative?

RO: Oh, I was!

JF: Okay, that's what it was. Now, were you the only person in Tucson?

RO: Yes, at that time. Now, come to think of it, I believe we did eventually hire a secretary, who also was on the congressional staff. I think perhaps that was only during the months of the year when Stewart was in town, because in those days, Congress would adjourn generally in August or early September, and then Stewart and his family would move back to Tucson for the fall months. And so it seems to me we did employ a secretary.

JF: A secretary also. (RO: Yes.) How had you come to know Stewart?

RO: I was active in an organization called The Tucson Council for Civic Unity. I was recruited to that organization by a mutual friend of ours, Mack Wright [phonetic

spelling], who also was a law partner of Frank Barry. Mack had persuaded me to join the organization. Mack was the president at the time. The immediate past president was Stewart. So that's how I got acquainted with Stewart. And then when he decided to run for Congress, he invited me and many other friends out, and enlisted us to help in the campaign, and I did help in the campaign.

JF: So you worked in that first campaign (RO: Yes, I did.), and every campaign thereafter. (RO: Right.) I noticed that Stewart's district office was at 222 North Court. Was that the same building, or near the same building as the Udall & Udall Law Firm?

RO: Yes, it was across the street.

JF: I thought the address sounded somewhat familiar.

RO: Yes, right.

JF: In 1960, Stewart was involved in organizing delegates for the John F. Kennedy presidential campaign. Did you help Stewart in that effort?

RO: I can't recall that there was any particular role that I played in that. I remember the time pretty well, but I can't recall any particular task that he assigned me.

JF: In 1960, of course, Kennedy was elected, and in 1961, Stewart was appointed to the cabinet as Interior secretary. Morris Udall then ran in a special election to succeed Stewart, and won by, I think it was something like 3,000 votes--it was a very narrow margin--against Republican Mac Matheson. First, had you met Mo by that time?

RO: Oh, yes. In fact, I had had an office, a congressional office, for a time, in Mo's building.

JF: The building where his law firm was?

RO: The Udall and Udall Law Firm.

JF: When you say "you," do you mean....

RO: I mean just my function as the congressional representative for Stewart Udall, had an office in the Udall & Udall Building for a while. Eventually, I moved it out and made other arrangements. But anyway, I had contact with Mo during that time. And in other connections I had contact with him. And then Mo had used my services as a public relations firm on at least three occasions. First of all, he asked me to assemble part of a case for the establishment of a new bank for Tucson. It was called The Bank of Tucson. So I gathered together all kinds of information about the population of Tucson, the economy of Tucson--this and that and the other thing--and prepared a large volume of material, which he used in submitting the application. We were successful in that. Later, he asked me to do the same thing for the Catalina Savings and Loan Association. And so

those were two things in which he and I worked together. And then the last thing, before I became involved in his campaign, was the so-called "Modern Courts Initiative," of which he was the chairman. I handled the statewide advertising on that campaign. During the time that we were waiting to see whether Stewart would be appointed secretary--or maybe just after he'd been appointed, I'm not sure--Mo came to my office one day to settle up on the Modern Courts financing. He came in, I said, "Mo, I've got an idea, sit down." I said, "I've been wondering about who the Democrats could nominate to replace Stewart. You know, Harry Ackerman is interested, Don Hummel's interested," somebody else. "I'm not sure that we can elect those guys. But it just occurred to me there is one person we could elect, and that's you." "Well, thank you, Dick," he said. "My wife and I were just talking about that last night."

JF: Had you been aware that he had wanted to run for Congress when Stewart ran (RO: Yes.), and deferred to Stewart instead?

RO: Oh, I was very much aware of that, yes.

JF: Did that create any hard feelings between them?

RO: I think it did. I think it did create kind of a strain. And I don't know whether it was so much between Mo and Stewart, as it was between Pat and [Mo]. I think.... Well, let me think about it. Back in 1954, when Porque [Harry A.] Patten decided he would not run for re-election....

JF: He was the....

RO: He was the congressman from the Second District.

JF: Before Stewart ran?

RO: Right. And the Second District at that time was all of Arizona, except Maricopa County. We said it was a "doughnut district." So it was an opportunity. And furthermore, it had been held by a Democrat, so, I mean, conceivably it could go to another Democrat. And at the time, I think Mo was interested. I think his family thought that he would be the logical one to run, because he was county attorney.

JF: That's right.

RO: He'd held office, he was well-known, he was very popular. And I think that he would have, except that Pat didn't want to go to Washington, and persuaded him that he should run for judge instead.

JF: This was when he ran for Superior Court judge?

RO: And so he ran for the Superior Court, and of course that ended up being a disaster, because of this fluke on the voting machines.

JF: Right. So it was more a matter of, do you think, not deferring to Stewart as much, as the older brother and all, as deferring to Pat's wishes?

RO: Oh, yes. No, in fact, I think as far as ambition is concerned at that point, I think Stewart probably had more ambition than Mo did--more eagerness to be elected to national office. But it was kind of odd that the one who had absolutely no experience in public office would be the one to run, and the one who did have the experience, did not.

JF: Stewart was on the Amphitheater School Board at that time, wasn't he, before he ran for Congress?

RO: Yes, that's true.

JF: But it's not equivalent to county attorney.

RO: Not exactly a very prominent position. Yes, I'd forgotten about that.

JF: Did you sense over your years with Mo, any rivalry between them--brotherly rivalry?

RO: I can't say that I did. I've spent a great deal of time with each of them, and I've never heard Mo say anything negative about Stewart. I certainly have never heard Stewart say anything negative about Mo. Now, that doesn't mean that there wasn't some rivalry, and that may reflect more the nature of my relation with each of them, that they would recognize that that would present a problem to me if they were to say something negative about the other guy. There might have been some kind of a subconscious rivalry, but nothing very serious. The funny thing is, what they call each other. Mo calls Stewart, "Stew," I call him "Stewart." Stewart calls Mo, "Morris," I call him "Mo." (chuckles)

JF: I've noticed in the interviews that I've done so far, the people who knew Mo in college in early years, or in law school--Charles Ares, Tom Chandler--Jim McNulty even--call him Morris. (RO: Yes.) And it seems like after he came to Washington was when everyone started calling him "Mo." And I only really made that association while doing these interviews.

RO: Yes. Incidentally, the first campaign button that I made for Mo was in very nontraditional colors. It was brown on beige, or something like that. And it was just a little button, and it just had the letters M-O. And of course if you turn it upside down, it says "Ow!" But it was a very decorous campaign button, and I remember people would look at that button and say, "What's that?" (laughs) Later, Mo preempted the name "Mo." I mean, in Arizona, you say "Mo," and anybody would say, "Oh, you mean Mo Udall." But it may be that that was the beginning.

JF: Of it's popular use. Yes, I have one of those buttons.

RO: Oh, do you?!

JF: I have one of those, and to use the same type, when he ran for either Speaker of the House, or majority leader, I think, he had a small M-O button, which when he lost, he flipped around and it read "Ow!" (laughter) On Mo's first campaign, did you work on that campaign against Mac Matheson?

RO: I certainly did, yes. On one level, the people involved were myself, Roger, and Dick Schwietzer. On another, more formal level, the radio and television side of the campaign was handled by Pete Tufts. The newspaper and print side of the campaign was handled by me and Bill Borst [phonetic spelling] and so on. I took care of those. I remember when we were deciding on the slogan for the campaign. (laughs) We came up with this funny one, "Big Job--Big Man." (laughs) I remember I had some reservations, it was kind of too cute. But anyway, we went with it. So I was very much involved in that campaign. And then on election night, I was the one that was reporting to Mo on the votes as they were coming in, and we just couldn't believe it.

JF: Why was it so close?

RO: Oh, we learned a big lesson about special elections. What we learned was later carried out in many other special elections. And that is, that in a special election, you lose much of the advantage that you would normally have being a part of the majority party. Because the only people who are going to show up at the polls are the people who are motivated by interest in your particular race. Whereas in a general election, you're going to pick up the votes of people who are brought there in their interest to re-elect the sheriff or the governor or somebody else in your party. And so that reduces the advantage of the majority party. And the Democratic Party was in the majority at the time. But in that special election, much of that disappeared. It came back in the next election.

JF: Who was Mac Matheson?

RO: He was not anybody who had ever held office. He was a quite conservative ... private businessman of some kind. I can't remember what he did. I will tell you one little story, however. During this time, I was chairman of the Human Relations Commission of the City of Tucson, and so I was in the news a lot, in that capacity. For example, when a requirement was imposed on all public employees, including nonpaid public employees, like members of commissions, that they must sign a loyalty oath, I was in the paper defending members of the Commission who refused to do so. And I signed the damned thing only in order to be able to defend the others who didn't. But anyway, I was in the news, well-known. And so one night during the campaign, Matheson, at a-- perhaps it was a debate that we were having--made a joke about Washington, saying that it was "60% chocolate and 40% nuts." So I wrote a letter to the editor of the *Star*, calling everybody's attention to this remark and what it said about his views on race. And that letter--I didn't sign it as chairman of the Human Relations Commission, but my name was known in that context--the *Star* ran that letter as the number one letter on the editorial

page, or op ed page on Easter morning of 1961. When I got home from church, I had a phone call from Matheson saying, "Oh, [I] didn't mean that!" (laughter)

JF: Funny how people say things they don't mean, isn't it? (laughter) Do you happen to recall if George Miller, who is currently mayor of Tucson, was involved in the loyalty oath thing at that time?

RO: No, I don't remember that.

JF: Okay. Now, how did Roger Lewis get involved in that early campaign?

RO: As I recall.... I meant to ask my friend Oren Beatty about this. Oren was administrative assistant to Stewart, both in Congress and at the Interior Department. As I recall, Mo asked Stewart to suggest somebody who could work on the campaign. And I think Oren recommended Roger, because Oren had worked with Roger on *The Republic*. Now, that's my recollection. And then I remember that either Stewart or Oren asked me about Roger, whether I thought he would be good for that, and I recommended him.

JF: Now, didn't you mention to me that Roger was once a student of yours?

RO: Yes, he had been.

JF: This was when you taught some at the University Journalism Department? (RO: Yes.) Was this when you worked on the *Citizen*?

RO: Yes. It was a part-time teaching job that I had while I was working for the *Citizen*, for two years, from 1971.... I mean 1951. How the years slip by! From 1951 to 1953.

JF: And Roger had worked on *The Arizona Republic* then as a writer?

RO: Yes, after he left the University, he got a job at *The Republic*.

JF: And then went from *The Republic* to Mo's office, because after Mo's election, Roger went back to Washington to work as his A.A., did he not?

RO: Yes. Initially he was hired to help with the campaign, but then once the campaign was over, Mo offered him the job of administrative assistant in Washington.

JF: Who else worked for Mo during that time? I notice in the staff list, a list of all the staff members for Mo through the years, that that first year or two has Roger only. Is that your recollection?

RO: First year or two?

JF: Yes, right after the special election, before the....

RO: Oh, for about....

JF: I guess that would have been a year, actually, wouldn't it? If that, even.

RO: Shortly after Mo had offered Roger that position, I told Mo that I might be interested in going to Washington. He said that it hadn't occurred to him that I might want to leave my business and do that. But he then decided that he would have Roger and me function jointly as administrative assistant. However, there wasn't a slot on the staff at that moment, because Fritz Kessinger was continuing during the interim when there wasn't a congressman, from the time that Stewart resigned until Mo took over. Fritz Kessinger had been holding down the office, and he was continuing for a while on Mo's staff. So Mo then, I think perhaps helped Fritz find a position with Senator Hayden. And that created a slot, so I then came to Washington in late August of 1971. I actually went on the payroll September 1.

JF: Of 1961?

RO: Of 1961, I'm sorry.

JF: So there was just a very short time in there . . .

RO: Yes, about three months between the special election and my arrival. I arrived around the twentieth or so, of August.

JF: In Washington?

RO: In Washington. During that three-month period, Mo had cast a vote against foreign aid. I was just appalled. Roger explained it to me that they'd gotten a hundred telegrams from all over the state, from the John Birch Society, and Mo decided that while he personally favored the bill, that he had to represent these people, and therefore he'd voted against this foreign aid bill. Well, I was just absolutely horrified. So I set out to create some material that we could use in answering mail on the subject of foreign aid. And I started writing, and then I wrote some more, and then I wrote some more, and then I found conservatives who supported foreign aid, like the columnist George Sokolsky, and so on. And Richard Nixon. (laughs) I created a thirteen-page document, which I intended to be just an enclosure with a reply to somebody who wrote us on the subject of foreign aid, and Mo decided to send it out as a newsletter. And so that was our first newsletter.

JF: Oh, it was?! Okay.

RO: Yes, it was mimeographed. And at the time, we had a mailing list of about 6,000 or so--Roger had been building up a mailing list from various sources--so that was about what it was. Well, I had gone to Washington with the intention of being there just a couple of months, because I had things to finish up back in Tucson and so on. So having created this monster, this thirteen-page newsletter, I then left town, and the rest of the

staff had to collate (laughs) thirteen pages, 6,000 copies or something. It was a horrendous task.

JF: Did it change Mo's mind on supporting foreign aid?

RO: It was a case for supporting foreign aid. So then when I came back in January—we all came back. In the meantime, Mo had also been out in Tucson. We addressed the question of what to do about newsletters. What kind of a newsletter did we want to put out? And Roger argued for short, snappy, topical things, like names of people who'd visited the office, and so on. And I argued for major doctoral dissertation types. We characterized our two views as "the New York *Daily News* and *The New York Times*." (laughter)

JF: I'm going to stop this right here and flip it, because I don't want to cut off in the middle of newsletters, so hold on.