

An Oral History Interview

with

SAM STEIGER

conducted by
Julie Ferdon

June 8, 2001
Prescott, Arizona

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

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JF: This is Tape 49 of the Morris K. Udall Oral History Project. Good morning, it's Friday, June 8, 2001, and we're in the office of Mayor Sam Steiger, in Prescott, Arizona. I'm Julie Ferdon, and I'd like to thank you, Mayor Steiger, for participating in this project.

SS: You bet.

JF: Let's start with a little background. You were born in New York City on March 10, 1929?

SS: That's a fact.

JF: What brought you out west, and then to Prescott?

SS: I came to a dude ranch when I was twelve, out of Snowflake. It was an outfit run by the Turleys—Stan Turley, who ended up as Speaker of the House and president of the State Senate, that was his mother and dad [who] ran it, Fred and Wilma Turley. They were running this operation. And I went out there, was a camper there for two years. Then I came back and worked in Snowflake and did stuff like that.

JF: And how did you get to Prescott from Snowflake?

SS: Well, I graduated from Ft. Collins, at what was then Colorado A & M, "practical education at a mile-high level." I went to work at the Steeple X out of Springerville, a ranch. And then I was drafted for Korea. When I came back from Korea, I came here.

JF: And you've been here ever since, basically, except in Washington.

SS: That's right.

JF: You served in the Arizona State Senate from 1960 to 1964 (SS: Yes, ma'am.) and then ran in 1964, an unsuccessful campaign for Congress. (SS: Right.) At that point in time, around 1964, had you met or knew about Mo Udall at all?

SS: Well, actually, yes, I probably knew Stew better than I did Mo at that point. But yes, I had met them both because of the political.... As you know, then Arizona was much smaller. I knew I was going to run, so I availed myself. And Mo was always very cordial. He was capable of extreme partisanship, but he never let it interfere with his personal relations. He was always very cordial. I remember that in the early days.

JF: In 1966, you ran again for Congress, this time successfully, against incumbent George Senner. When you went to Washington, D.C., representing the 3rd Congressional District, Mo was there representing the 2nd Congressional District. Mo had a way, I understand, of taking newly-elected Arizonans under his wing, and sort of showing them the ropes. Did that happen in your case?

SS: Oh yes. Well, you gotta remember, to put it in a proper context, we were in the short rows on the Central Arizona Project, and so it was probably the high-water mark of cooperation within the delegation, because everybody was focused on the same goal. In fact, we met Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, every afternoon, in Carl Hayden's office, for two years, while we

were getting it.... Of course the entire delegation, as you know, was Mo and John Rhodes and me in the House. And then it was Carl Hayden and Paul Fannin in the Senate then.

An interesting little sidebar: We met every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday in Carl's office at two o'clock in the afternoon. That was a standing deal. And in two years, Carl never learned my name. He used to always say, "Is that boy from Prescott here?" And Mo, of course, being Mo, about the third week of that he said, "Yes, Senator, the boy from Prescott's here." He would say it before he asked it. (laughter)

JF: So these were meetings with the entire delegation?

SS: Yes, what we were doing was brainstorming and keeping everybody abreast of what the legislative situation was. Procedurally, we had to get it out of the House Interior Committee, which Mo was on and I was on. And then, of course, it had to go to the floor of the House, and then the Senate was to take it up after that.

JF: I'm curious, were staff included in these meetings?

SS: Not often, although Roy Elson, who was Carl Hayden's guy, was always there, yes, because.... Everybody told me that—Carl was along in years then, as you know—way along in years—and everybody said if I could just come over some morning, because he was better in the mornings. But I never saw him without Roy in the afternoon.

JF: It's interesting how different that would be, compared to now.

SS: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely, yes, you couldn't have a meeting without staff.

JF: Without staff there, yes.

SS: No.

JF: When you arrived—you're known as a bit of a rebel yourself, in your time—and when you arrived in Washington, Mo was leading a bit of rebellion himself, a rebellion against the seniority system. The year you arrived, he introduced a resolution to strip Adam Clayton Powell from his chairmanship.

SS: That was my first vote in Congress, was to affirm that.... No, it was to affirm the rejection of the seating of Adam Clayton Powell. Mo just wanted to take away his chair, which they did do. And then a Democrat—and I don't remember who it was—it wasn't Mo—but a Democrat then challenged his seating, and he wasn't seated.

JF: And you voted in favor of not seating him?

SS: I voted in favor, that was my first vote. In fact, I remember I asked Mo what he thought. I believe that Mo also voted not to seat. You have to remember, we thought there was a higher standard then that we ought to be held to, and that Adam Clayton Powell hadn't been held to that standard.

JF: But that was still fairly unprecedented, wasn't it?

SS: Oh, absolutely. I don't know, historically it may have been a first.

JF: Yes. So that's interesting, your first vote in Congress was with Mo on a measure that he had [introduced]. A year later, Mo challenged Speaker John McCormack for the chairmanship, and a year after that, he challenged Hale Boggs for the majority leader—failing in both attempts. I know you were on the other side of the aisle, but you were a brand new freshman congressman subject to the seniority system. I wonder what you thought about this little rebellion Mo was leading.

SS: Obviously, we were very interested. As you know, subsequently I had to lead, because I was the only other Republican in the Arizona delegation when we got John Rhodes elected as minority leader. We had the same kind of situation that Mo was up against. We had two large states, with big delegations, who were vying for the speakership. And Mo was a lone vote from Arizona. And so we were very interested, tactically. And as you know, Mo's strength was clearly not in the size of the delegation, it was everybody liked Mo. It was just one of those.... Mo was, across the aisle, universally respected and liked.

JF: On the Republican side of the aisle as well.

SS: Oh, yes. Well, because he was partisan—he was a very loyal Democrat—but he was never ugly about it, and he never.... In fact, he wouldn't campaign against sitting Republicans for other Democrats, which was kind of interesting.

JF: I've heard that a number of times from people who served in Washington, and I wonder to what extent he was appreciated for that in his state.

SS: None. Well, they don't understand. In fact, I used to kid him, "I always thought I was the best legislator that ever went to Washington, but nobody here knew or cared." It was just not something that....

JF: You're never a prophet in your own home.

SS: Well, yes. And I understand it. Whatever abilities it takes to be a good legislator are not the kind that make good copy.

JF: Well, same thing that happened to Jim McNulty.

SS: Sure. Exactly! He was very good, excellent.

JF: But then wasn't reelected.

SS: Yes. I mean, the idea that a guy like Kolbe could beat a guy like McNulty is absurd, in my opinion.

JF: Yes, that's part of the same syndrome.

SS: Yes, exactly.

JF: You were assigned to the Interior Committee, along with Mo.

SS: Right. And Mo and John both insisted on that. It was because we needed the votes on the—because California had five votes on the Interior Committee, and Mo needed some help.

JF: And was that for all issues, or primarily CAP?

SS: Oh no, there were no other issues. You've got to understand, that was the only issue as far as Arizona was concerned.

JF: Was the CAP—getting it.

SS: Yes, absolutely.

JF: Have you had any 20-20 hindsight regarding the CAP?

SS: Oh, yes. I'm sorry we did it. I believe that. . . . There was a plan to have the state do it, itself, which it would have worked beautifully, and the feds would have never—it would have cost a third what it cost, and there would be a continuing cash flow. The one problem with it, it would have meant another dam, and that would have almost certainly. . . . That would have been a problem in subsequent years. But no, the feds messed that up something terrible. I mean, they really did.

JF: Yes, I believe Stew Udall has voiced regret. I believe Mo had regrets. I think everybody. . . .

SS: Well, even Barry [Goldwater], I remember he complained about it. But mine was not so much on the esthetics or the burying of Glen Canyon or any of that—mine was that it was just handled so badly, it was managed so badly—overspending and regulation—made no sense—that kind of thing.

JF: On the Interior Committee in other issues, Mo was at that time ranked very high among environmentalists (SS: Right.) and you were at the. . . .

SS: I was a "Dirty Dozen" member.

JF: That's right, you were the opposite side of the spectrum as the Dirty Dozen legislature with what was considered the worst voting record on environmental issues.

SS: That's right.

JF: Does that mean that you and Mo found yourselves on opposing sides quite often?

SS: You know, I'm sure we did, but I don't remember it as any contention between us. We both understood where the other was coming from, and it was not something that bothered either one of us. In fact, subsequently, the chairman of the committee was a guy named [Wayne] Aspinall, from Colorado, and there was another really rabid deep-breather on the committee named Phil

Burton, who was even more—he was a radical environmentalist from San Francisco. And he and I became good friends, and we took over the committee—we took it away from the chairman, because I had all the rednecks, and Phil had all the droolers, so between us.... And we found most issues were nonideologic and non.... And we could do what we wanted on those. So we, for about three years, four years, we ran the committee. (chuckles)

JF: [following a short break] Okay, I want to go back a little bit to when you were saying that you and Phil Burton controlled the Interior Committee. Was that a matter of just defusing Aspinall by numbers?

SS: No we would out-vote him on procedural matters. I mean, that was unheard of. In fact, I don't think he figured it out for almost a year—Aspinall. You know, it just wasn't done. In fact, I didn't share it with Mo, and I don't know if Phil did or not, but Mo finally came to me one day and he said, "I'm not sure Aspinall knows what you guys have done." I remember him telling me that. (laughter)

JF: That's fascinating. You cosponsored a couple of things with Mo, didn't you?

SS: Oh, yes. In fact, you've got to understand—and I don't even remember what they were—but you've got to understand that the legislation that impacted Arizona was not a partisan ideologic thing. In fact, I remember the first bill I got passed was the establishment of the Hubbell Trading Post as a historic site. Well, Mo helped me with that. I didn't know how to do it. Mo helped me, and that was the kind of thing—but we did that all the time.

JF: What about non-Arizona issues such as the Surface Mining Control Act, or the Alaska Lands Act?

SS: We were on—I mean, I was a big build-the-pipeline guy, and he was a stop-the-pipeline guy in Alaska. And I thought that the strip mining ought to be regulated, but that the regulations weren't realistic. And so we were generally on opposite ends of that one. For example, I supported his PAC [initiative]—he's the guy who established political action committees. It sounded like a good idea the time.

JF: How do you mean he was the one who established that?

SS: That was his bill. That was Mo. It seems as if Arizonans are destined to do campaign finance reform. That was Mo's deal.

JF: You mean the Federal Election Campaign Finance Reform Act?

SS: Yes.

JF: With John Anderson.

SS: Yes. It's interesting, what created that. Most people have forgotten, but some guy had given Nixon a million dollars, or \$500,000, which in those days was—that was all the money in the world. And there was no limitation. And that's what prompted.... Actually, Anderson got on Mo's coattails on that one, because Mo was the one that really did that one.

JF: Yes, I think that's right.

SS: I remember, that. That's when John had decided he was presidential material.

JF: What was your position on the election bill?

SS: I supported it. I was wrong, but I supported it. No, actually, in fairness, it was a thing that was evolving. What we didn't consider, there we had listed a maximum of sixty-three PACS—I remember it very well. And today there are something like 15,000 or something.

JF: I couldn't even begin to....

SS: Nobody envisioned that—nobody.

JF: Yes. Well, you saw Mo both as friend and foe in legislation. Was he any different?

SS: No. The one thing about Mo, aside from his good humor and everything, he wouldn't lie to you, and if he said he'd do something, he'd do it. I guess under—and I don't remember—I really have no memory of him back—but if he did have to back up, he'd come tell you before the vote. He'd say, "Hey, I gotta quit ya' on this one," or something. And he never, ever left you hanging out.

JF: He was always gentlemanly about it.

SS: He was a class act. He clearly was a class act.

JF: He was, I believe, in 1973 named chairman of the Subcommittee on Energy and Environment, which I believe you were also on. (SS: Right.) How was he as a committee chair?

SS: He was very fair. In fact, I remember we always used to think that—nobody in those days envisioned the time when there'd ever be a Republican, so we always used to think that Mo—you know, we wished Aspinall would just stop running, because Mo was the second-ranking on the committee. And we figured that he'd be a chairman, and he'd be a very good chairman. The staff liked him, because he.... In addition to his sense of humor, which is really very valuable in most of these situations, he also made it very clear that it was important to him to be fair, and that was a good thing.

JF: You were also on the Subcommittee on Mines and Mining. (SS: Oh, yes.) I'm curious what your stand was on the 1872 Mining Act and the repeal of that.

SS: I've always supported retaining it, and Mo has always supported modifying it. And I've got to tell you, I don't ever remember any rancor. I mean, the arguments, everybody understands the arguments, but the fact is, I thought it was well designed, because it did encourage exploration, and eventually the government would get the benefits of the activity, because it would generate, it would stimulate.... When they found something, it would stimulate economic activity, and the government always benefits. And I understood that if you had a valuable piece of property, the

government ought to get more than they were getting. Well, I thought that the incentive to go look for it was more important than the return to the government afterwards. And Mo, I will tell you, he respected that. He just didn't agree with it, but he didn't disrespect the position.

JF: Yes. I believe Stewart Udall is now very active, again, in trying to get it repealed.

SS: Yes.

JF: You mentioned humor and how important humor was. Mo, of course, is known for his sense of humor, and you've been known for a keen sense of humor as well. What do you see is the role of humor in politics?

SS: Well, you know, there's an awful lot of tension, and the humor, reasonably well applied, is a great breaker, alleviator, of that tension. And that's a good thing. In terms of your own getting your message across, you almost always are more memorable in what you have to say if there's some humor associated with it, than if it's just pedantic. And Mo understood that beautifully. He would weave humor into narratives that would otherwise be crushingly dull, but it would allow you to absorb the important part.

JF: Help you keep focused?

SS: Yes.

JF: Did you see a difference in the way you used humor versus the way he used humor?

SS: Yes, I was a little tougher than he was.

JF: A little less gentle, you mean?

SS: Yes. Mine was usually at the expense of somebody else. Mo was much kinder. (chuckles)

JF: Going back a wee bit, in 1969, Mo received a letter from Ron Ridenhour describing the Mi Lai incident in Vietnam. And I've heard that Ridenhour sent the same letter to a number of members of Congress. Did you get one?

SS: No. I was asked that by somebody else. If I did, I don't.... I remember seeing the letter—I don't know if it was addressed to me. I was a very junior member then, and I would assume not.

JF: That you probably hadn't. (SS: Yes.) Okay. By the time you left Congress in 1976, you had worked basically with Mo for about ten years. Had your opinion of him changed at all?

SS: No. We became much closer. In fact, when I was in Tucson for something, I'd call and see if he was there. If he was, we'd go have lunch, that kind of thing. If he was up here, he'd hunt me up if he could, if he had time—or at least call and say hello. We were never close, but just because of where we lived.

JF: So you did have some contact with him after you left Washington?

SS: Yes. Oh, absolutely. I'll tell you one was I got convicted of extortion when I was with [Governor Evan] Mecham I was set up by a Republican attorney general. Mo, unasked, wrote a letter to the judge, asking him not to incarcerate me. I always thought that was way above and beyond the call.

JF: It was unsolicited?

SS: Absolutely. Of course Dennis DeConcini did the same thing, which really stunned me, because I did not have the same affection for him that I did for Mo.

JF: You ran against him for Senate, didn't you?

SS: Right.

JF: And lost. (SS: Yes.) In 1976, Mo ran for president, from the House.

SS: Indeed he did. (borrowing a line from Mo) We were laughing about that this morning.

JF: (laughs) That's something rarely attempted by members of the House. What was your reaction to his running?

SS: I thought it was great! I must confess that I didn't think he'd... He just was not enough part of the Democrat good ol' boy network that he would be successful. But I thought it was great that he was willing to go through that. Because, you know, even then it was just all killer, in terms of demands on you. You just had to give up your life. I mean, really. And of course he certainly knew that.

JF: What kind of president do you think he would have made?

SS: Oh, he'd have been great! No, really! Well, I think he would have espoused some things that I would have had a difficult time with, but in terms of caring about the country, and really sincere -- not interested in a historic memorial for himself or any of that stuff. He'd have been head and shoulders above most of them.

JF: I have one final question I ask everybody. Generally we end up talking a lot about very positive things about Mo—what do you think was Mo's greatest weakness?

SS: Oh, when he made a political mistake, in terms of legislation, it was a beauty! He was the father of the PACs, which really ended up institutionalizing money and politics in a way that none of us, including him, intended. He was the author of the reform of the Postal Service, which in my opinion has been a terrible disaster.

JF: Were you there in Congress during that time?

SS: Oh, yes!

JF: Did you support that?

SS: No! No. That one was written by the postal union, and we knew it and Mo knew it, but he thought it was good. I will tell you, he didn't do it because it was written by the postal [union], he did it because he thought it was good. But it has turned out to be.... So those are his two big national legislative legacies, and they're both disasters. But I will tell you, I've got to ameliorate that by telling you that those were done with absolutely good intentions on his part. I mean, there was not the usual influence by somebody untoward. He thought that was the right thing to do.

JF: Okay. Well, unless you have any other comments, we're done.

SS: No.

JF: I thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

SS: You bet, I enjoyed it. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]