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The Honorable Arnold Olsen

Frank B. Morrison Jr.
Former Montana Supreme Court Justice

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IN MEMORIAM

The Honorable Arnold Olsen

December 17, 1916—October 12, 1990

It officially started in 1948. For those of us who are old enough to remember, this was an historic election year. Harry Truman defied the pollsters. He defied the advice of his own party regulars. He pulled the upset of the century by defeating Thomas Dewey for the Presidency. And it was that year that saw a thirty-three year old lawyer from Butte elected Montana attorney general. That was our beloved Arnold Olsen.

During the early years of his political career, Arnold took on all comers. He was controversial but never personal. He crusaded for the things that he believed in and, in doing so, he made enemies in high places. He pursued his convictions without regard for the adverse consequences to his political career.

In 1956 Arnold ran for governor. He won the Democratic primary but lost the general election. In part, he lost because he took strong unequivocal positions and he was controversial. Arnold was not easily deterred. In 1960 he was elected to the Congress of the United States, another significant election year in which this country elected its first Roman Catholic president and its first president born in this century.

In Congress, Arnold Olsen served with distinction for five terms. In 1970 the Democratic Party was in a state of disarray. President Nixon was popular and Arnold Olsen faced an uphill political fight. The *New York Times* wrote an editorial in 1970 endorsing a select few congressmen for reelection. The *Times* said: "Of the four hundred plus congressmen in the United States there are but 40 who deserve to be re-elected for outstanding service to their nation and to their district." One of those forty was our own Arnold Olsen. Nevertheless, Arnold suffered defeat in seeking reelection to a sixth term.

After his defeat, Arnold could have moved to Washington, D.C., and become a highly paid lobbyist. He had connections, he

knew the ropes, and the rest would have easily followed. However, Arnold never knew the easy way. He came back to Montana, ran for Congress again, and was defeated in 1972. In 1974 he tried again and once again he lost. One of the great things that Tom Judge did as governor was to appoint Arnold Olsen to the bench so that his public life and contribution would not end. He honored us as a distinguished jurist in Butte until his death.

Arnold Olsen faced the electorate twenty-nine times counting primaries and general elections. Twenty-four of those times he won, because he was great and because the people of Montana loved him. I think that, of all of the people in public life, he may have known more Montanans than anyone else.

I encountered an old friend shortly before Arnold's funeral. This friend lives on a mountain forty miles west of Kalispell. I told him that my friend Arnold Olsen had died and I was heading to Butte to speak at the funeral. My friend said, "Arnold Olsen was a good man."

"I never heard you say any politician was a good man," I replied.

He said, "Yes, I knew him and he was a good man."

"How did you know him?" I asked.

"I used to have some problems with the Forest Service getting up to my cabin."

This reclusive friend of mine lives on a mining claim in a cabin he built. He was not producing sufficient gold to be economically viable under the law, and the Forest Service was going to cancel his claim. They had the road blocked and they would not let him up to his house. My friend called Arnold Olsen in Washington about the problem.

I then asked, "You talked to Arnold personally or to a staff person?"

"I talked to Arnold personally. Arnold said he was going to be in Kalispell in two weeks and he was going to have a meeting at Hennessy's (now the Outlaw Inn). Arnold said to come to the meeting and tell him about the problem. So I did. When I put in my two bits worth during the meeting, Arnold said, 'Excuse me.' He took me aside and got the whole story. He must have made some phone calls because that night I went home and the Forest Service was gone. I never had another problem."

And so it was with our beloved Arnold Olsen. He touched so many Montanans. He touched them individually with a hands-on kind of policy that we perhaps have not seen before and will never see again.

Arnold left to us a very rich legacy. It is really a legacy of the lessons of his life. He taught us to fight the good fight hard, but without rancor. He taught us to risk rather than to take the easy way. He taught us how to win, but, more importantly, he taught us never to quit when confronted with defeat.

We love you, Arnold, and we will miss you. But we take comfort in the fact that you are with your beloved Margaret and your life's work will be with us always.

—Frank B. Morrison, Jr.¹

1. Former Montana Supreme Court Justice. Mr. Morrison delivered the eulogy at Judge Olsen's memorial service. It was also published in the February 1990 *Montana Magazine* at pages 20-21.

