

Maureen and Mike

# Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

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**Oral History Number: 458-004**

**Interviewee: John Melcher**

**Interviewer: Jim Caron**

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Jim Caron: Was he [Mike Mansfield] specifically an influence on your career?

John Melcher: Oh, I think everybody that ever dealt with Mike Mansfield was influenced by him because he was such a real person and so direct.

[break in audio]

No doubt he had an influence on my career. He's always very helpful. I remember when I was first successful in an election to the House of Representatives. A special election came up in a hurry because Jim Battin resigned. He was appointed as federal judge, and a vacancy occurred, so it was a mad dash of a campaign, and the Mansfields, Mike himself, and his staff wanted to help in the campaign, as did senator Lee Metcalf and his staff, and without that kind of help I don't think I would have been successful in getting elected to the House. You know, so I owe them a lot.

JC: Are there—you mentioned earlier there were other careers you felt that had perhaps felt the same influence.

JM: You know around town here now there's all sorts of people that you run into who really got their start with Mike Mansfield there on his staff or he helped them get a job here part-time while they went to law school or completed their education in some other form other than law. And it's surprising how successful they are, so no doubt in my mind that Mike Mansfield is now and has always been a terrific judge of character, and quality, ability, and he gave help. He gave help to an awful lot of people that are now serving in a pretty high capacity in government or are serving in the private sector as perhaps a CEO, vice president, president of an outfit, so yeah. Mike has helped an awful lot of people. Not just not just Montana in general, not just the country in general, but specifically took time to be interested in people.

JC: We've read a lot of stories about his maintaining an interest in Montana throughout all the national issues that he was dealing with. Did you see evidence of that or any—?

JM: Always. Whenever he could put in a lick for a Montana interest, he was his most intense and most convincing. Go back to magneto hydrodynamic, MHD for research—was started in Butte and is still going on in Butte. How he covered all the bases, made sure that nobody in the Senate could forget that this was a project that was not only necessary but it was going to go to Montana and needed to go to Montana because that was the right place at the right time. It still continues today. One instance that I recall where we needed some beefing up of the

Farmers Home Administration offices in Montana because they were trying to curtail the number of offices in the state and it just wouldn't work because it has people driving a hundred miles to see their Farmers Home Administration officer, loan officer. It just wouldn't work, and I know it wouldn't work. People, old hands in the Farmers Home Administration that had worked in Montana or worked anywhere in the West knew it wouldn't work, but we had a new appointee that was gung-ho. He was going to make his mark by eliminating a lot of offices, and consequently eliminating a lot of services. So I fought the battle in the House, wasn't getting anywhere, and I called Mansfield's office and said I gotta talk to Mike. And he took time and had me come over and said, "Now what is all this about John? Tell me." I just briefly outlined it and he said, "Now put that all on paper and give me a paper." Then I put it all on paper and he called me back over to his office and he had this new appointee from the Farmers Home Administration sitting right there and he said, "Now John, this is so-and-so," and he introduced me to him and he said, "We're going to straighten this out. We need to have this man more fully understand what Montana is all about" and before that fellow left in about 15 minutes he was saying, "Yes sir, yes sir, Mr. Majority Leader. I think you're right." That was the end of that. [laughter] It was a pure exercise in knowing what the facts were. He wanted all the facts generated and wanted to be comfortable with the facts, and after he had them, by god, that guy was going to understand Montana had some needs that were going to be met.

JC: That a gripping story. You mentioned to me earlier that you felt that people in their 40s and older would have a clear sense of who he was and what he did and that maybe the kids wouldn't.

JM: Yes, that's bothered me because anybody of my age or even 20 years younger knows Mike Mansfield. Probably met him, probably shook hands with him or at least feel that they know him and know him well. But I wondered about youngsters anywhere from 25 on down. Whether they realized the treasure, that the Treasure State has had in Mike Mansfield and how much impact he's had, not just in Montana, but how much impact he's had in the country and throughout the world. There isn't any Montanan that I can think of that has had the impact that Mike Mansfield has had, and I mean that. It's not just Montana or in the Senate of the United States. It's the whole United States and in his work throughout the world. He is, after all, the one that for 20 years has been saying that our future lies in the Pacific Rim. That's just an example. He's preached that and it's true. Now everybody begins to recognize, rather than turning our eyes as we have so frequently in the past to Europe and our roots as people, as those of us who are of European ancestry, or have European ancestry, Mike has said, you know that's changing. And he has said it for almost a generation that it was changing, and our future would lie in the Pacific, and it's coming true. Now people recognize that our trade policy has to be adapted to what's coming in the Pacific Rim countries. That affects everybody whether we know it or not in this country. Mansfield, simply put, has been truly a man of all seasons for the country and he's continuing. He hasn't stopped yet, hasn't stopped yet leaving his mark, and I doubt whether we would be able to measure the full magnitude of the marks he's left on this country, and his effect as a world leader for another generation. It will be hard to measure.

JC: That's great. I think—Jeff can you think of anything else that we ought to be asking? I think those are some wonderful quotes and stories and just the kind of thing we are looking for.

Unknown Person: The only thing I might like is just getting a nice picture of you outside.

JM: Okay.

UP: Just flash stuff.

JM: I've got one another anecdote that might be of interest to kids. Are you ready?

JC: Yes.

JM: In the '70s while I was still in the House of Representatives and it was a campaign year, that election year were Mansfield had to run too, and our paths, our campaign trails happened to cross in Glendive. And Mike said, "John where are you going next?" and I said, "Well I'm really going on back to Forsyth. I'm going to be home for a day and on Sunday I thought I might stop in Miles City before we got to Forsyth."

"Well, why don't you ride with me? You want to ride with me?" and I said, "Sure, I'd love to." So after our breakfast in Glendive we proceeded on to Miles City and had a lunch in there, a campaign lunch in there, and then he said, "All right, what's going on in Forsyth?" after we were through at Mile City, and I said, "Well, they're going to have a football game. That's about the biggest thing that's going on this afternoon. We are playing Broadus. Forsyth and Broadus are meeting and I'd like to get there."

"Is there a time" he said and I said, "Well we can get their about...Yeah." I looked at my watch, "Yeah we'll get there. We'll probably get there before the half." "Want to stop, and see some of it?" He said, "Yeah, love to." So we get there and he said, "You got any of your kids playing?" I said, "No our boys are too young, but we got a cheerleader. Joanie." "Oh, which one is she?" I pointed her out and got her, Joanie, over there during the time when the cheerleaders could break up a little bit, so she could meet Mike Mansfield. And [then] went on with the game and unfortunately Broadus knocked the hell out of us. But they lost. Broadus won the game with a big score. But anyway, Mike stayed until the game was over. Enjoyed every minute of it and then went on.

I stayed on there and a few years later, four, five, six years later, Joanie and some of our other were back here in Washington, and I said, "Do you want to go over to Mansfield's office?" "Yeah." I took them over to the Mansfield office and Mike strides up to her and says, "You're the cheerleader, aren't you." I said [laughter] "Yeah, you got her." And she said, "Yeah I'm Joanie." He said "Yeah, I met you at the football game. Do you remember that football game?" Joanie said, "Yeah we got beat." He said, "Yeah you got beat by 34 to 8, or 34 to 7 or

something.” [Laughter] He pulled out the score. Afterwards Joanie shook her head and she said, “I think he’s right on the score too.”

JC: That’s a great story. I wonder before you shut that off, one of the things we like to do is let people know that the tapes we get of people are not stock footage and were sort of made for this event. If you could just say that you think that you know something about this kind of tribute, a local tribute, or it’s sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, it’s in the Wilma Theater, anything like that you might mention that we could plug in to—

JM: Well, this is a good thing to be doing and I am kind of pleased that you are taking the initiative, gentlemen, in doing it. You’ve got the backing of the whole group in Missoula, including the Chamber of Commerce, and having the first displaying—maybe it’s the only time you’re going to enact it, in the Wilma Theater. I hope you can go on from there and through a video or something to show it to a lot of people.

JC: Great. Thank you. We’ll use that for the Humanities Council. [laughter]

[End of Interview]