

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 396-036**  
**Interviewee: Orvin Fjare**  
**Interviewer: Bob Brown**  
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Bob Brown: We're visiting with former Congressman Orvin Fjare at his home in Helena. Congressman Fjare represented the second district of Montana from 1952 to '54. Is that right?

Orvin Fjare: I was elected in '54.

BB: So from '54 to '56.

OF: Correct.

BB: Congressman Fjare, what got you interested in politics? You were first elected as a relatively young man. What motivated you to become interested in politics and run for Congress?

OF: After the war, I returned to Big Timber, my home, and was in the clothing business with my father-in-law intending to stay there for perhaps the rest of my life. Then about '49 or '50, Big Timber chartered a chapter of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. I became its charter president at about 1949 or '50. I became, as I say, its charter president and eventually state president. Then in 1953, I was elected a national vice president of the Junior Chamber of Commerce. I became interested particularly in Americanism and in government and made quite a few speeches in that direction. I remember even early in '53 I was on a speaking tour in the Midwest in DeMoines, Iowa. Up until that time, several people had suggested that I should perhaps practice a little bit more of what I preached and run for public office. The only public office I ever attempted was to be elected to the school board in Big Timber that would be in the mid-'40s.

Early in 1953, it became...Little hints here and there would be heard. Finally, I got a call from Al Wilkinson, who was at that time the Republican whip, you might say, or representative for the Anaconda Company. He asked if I would attend the meeting to be held in Bozeman on such and such a date at the Rainbow Hotel there. I agreed to be present. During the course of the meeting, they decided—they convinced me—that I thought I could and should be a candidate for Congress. The reason that I was asked for, or even hinted for, was that then Congressman Wes D'Ewart had decided on behalf of the party and other influential groups that he should run against Senator Murray, which he agreed to do. That left it vacant.

So I was 36 years old. (Unintelligible) and very idealistic and of course very flattered that people of this importance would even suggest or consider that I would be. I thought there might be an interesting turn in my life. The Junior Chamber of Commerce meant a great deal to me. I would

like to have been, and I think I could have been the national president. I was one year too old. I was 36 and when you're that way, you're out of the running. I agreed that I would give it a try. There were four others that also thought they would like to be. There was Charla Biholiday (?) from Jordan, I can't remember the attorney's name up in Malta, and an attorney from Bozeman and one other—there were five of us in the primary. [Republican primary candidates were Fjare, James T. Harrison, Charles H. Mahoney and Allen N. Goodwin.]

BB: Were any of these other fellows involved in this same meeting that Al Wilkinson invited you to?

OF: Not one of them.

BB: So you felt that perhaps you had some support from that group?

OF: Exactly. I was the "chosen one" you might say.

BB: Do you remember any other people that might have been at that meeting?

OF: There were, but I don't remember from the Montana Power Company. I don't remember who, but I'll never forget Al Wilkinson. He was a very imposing, important looking man. I remember I was at the national convention in Colorado Springs at the junior chamber outgoing as a national vice president. The Montana Power Company sent an airplane down to pick me up and bring me back. This would be in early June to get active in the primaries. So that's basically how I got involved into Republican politics and running for Congress in specific.

BB: Did the Montana Power Company and the Anaconda Company have kind of a network that helped you?

OF: Yes they did. I learned later. All of this I learned much later. We ran and...

BB: Who was your opponent? Who was the Democratic nominee?

OF: His name was LeRoy Anderson from Conrad, Montana.

BB: So you ran against him twice?

OF: Right. I beat him the first time and he beat me the second time. Right. So that's what got me involved.

BB: So when you served in Congress, you served with Gerald Ford.

OF: Oh yes, Gerry Ford, yes.

BB: What do you remember about him?

OF: He was a very good close friend. Gerry Ford and I were very close along with some others and perhaps most important one was [Richard] Dick Nixon, who was then...He at that time was vice president with [President Dwight] Eisenhower.

BB: But you were personally well acquainted with both Ford and Nixon.

OF: Oh yes, on the first-name basis, yes.

BB: Did you serve on a committee with Ford?

OF: No, I served on the House Committee on Education and Labor. That's the only committee I was on as a freshman congressman.

BB: Is there an issue or an incident or anything that you were involved with as a congressman that you particularly remember?

OF: Oh well, that's a little difficult. There were many and of course those were the placid years of Eisenhower. I think probably the most important piece of legislation that was even considered during those two years was the passing of the National Interstate Highway bill. That of course affected the entire United States and a lot of Montana. Of course I was the only Republican in the delegation. There was Mansfield, Murray, and Metcalf. Murray and Mansfield sent it and Metcalf was the other congressman at that time. Of course, amongst other things, all of the postmasters at that time served at the pleasure of the President. So whenever there was a change of party for the President, all of the postmasters got to change parties. So being the only Republican from Montana, all of the postmasters said that this whole state of Montana was handled by my office. So that kept it busy. Not only that but Indian Affairs. There were seven of them [reservations]. There still is. Indian Affairs went through our office.

BB: Did you ever meet Sam Rayburn?

OF: Sam Rayburn? He's probably one of the most effective people that I have ever known in my life. (Unintelligible) one of the people I remember most. Sam Rayburn was House Speaker and was far and away the most impressive member of Congress that I can recall.

BB: What was memorable and impressive about him?

OF: And also like he, as Senator Mansfield, was a very important person. There were people that you had to respect even though they were from the other party; you had to respect them for their knowledge and their diplomacy and their honesty almost to a fault that I admired.

BB: Both Rayburn and Mansfield were very honest men?

OF: Correct.

BB: Then you also had a working relationship with Murray and Metcalf?

OF: Well, we had as good of a relationship as we could have under the circumstances.

BB: How would you characterize Murray?

OF: He was a hard man to know. He was a very partisan man. For instance, speaking of the Interstate system in almost every state, not all, but almost every state and that was a practice or a hopeful thing that interstates would cross one another north and south, east and west at the capital of their states. That's almost true in every case, even in Wyoming where Cheyenne is on the southern border; the two east and west interstates cross at Cheyenne. Not in Montana, they don't cross in Helena. They cross in Butte. Senator Murray was chairman of that committee. That's why it went to Butte.

BB: How about Metcalf? Did you have any workings with him?

OF: Not too close. He and I didn't agree on very many things and we didn't work very closely. I worked with Mansfield closely but not Metcalf.

BB: Now Congressman Fjare, one thing that's been mentioned to me to ask you about is the Yellowtail Dam issue.

OF: A lot of people think that my demise as a congressman occurred, and it's very likely true, amongst other things. The Yellowtail Dam was authorized earlier in the early '50s but never funded. While I was in Congress, Congress got around to the point where they were going to not only authorize it, but to fund it. Amongst other things, the proposal was that the Crow tribe in which Yellowtail Dam would be built would be compensated at the amount of 2.5 million dollars for the dam site, just where the building would be built. Well, Metcalf, Murray, and Mansfield and others in the Democratic Party including the Chamber of Commerce (unintelligible) Hardin and Yellowstone, all decided that the Crow should be paid five million dollars. I even supported that, even by a letter early on, which was used against me later. Later on, that occurred to me through recommendations of the Interior department and the President Eisenhower himself that five million dollars was an excess of what it would be normally paid. It set a bad precedent and so forth. Now in the convincing of the Interior Department and the President, I reversed myself and became known that I recommended it be 2.5 million dollars rather than five million dollars.

BB: Did Ike contact you personally about this?

OF: Oh yes, yes.

BB: He talked to you about it or wrote you a letter or...?

OF: The President? No, but the committee chairman did, of the Interior Department.

BB: The Secretary of Interior on behalf of the President?

OF: Correct. Well, the Chamber of Commerce didn't like that at all. That's understandable.

BB: They wanted the tribe to have more money that they thought would be spent in Billings?

OF: (Unintelligible) five million dollars that used car dealers and the liquor dealers would have had it in ten days. It was 2.5 million dollars, so they'd get it in five days. So that was the big problem of Yellowtail Dam. Eventually, of course, they wanted...They did fund it at 2.5 million dollars rather than the five because they got the job done.

BB: So your opponents were able to use that as an issue against you?

OF: Oh yes.

BB: It seems like most people in Montana would think that the value of the property wasn't worth five million dollars.

OF: You would think that, but it was a close race and I say that if it hadn't been for that, we would have won it all right. The Chamber of Commerce in Yellowstone County, which is a strong Republican county, went for it. The other thing equally important, but perhaps is not well known is that—

Let me go right to the beginning. When I was first elected as a congressman, the Anaconda Company and the Montana Power Company were very helpful and tried to get me off on the right start. Amongst other things, I've told very few people and it's about time it was told. The Anaconda Company particularly recommended that I had as a member of my staff a lady by the name of Molly Cromwell. She was with Congressman D'Ewart's office. She was a very capable person, very knowledgeable woman. She had been in Washington for three years from Cascade, Montana. I was very pleased and very impressed that they would try to help me out to be properly staffed. So she became a member of my staff. Then of course I had my other people, about six other people.

Early on in '56, I began to get very uncomfortable with her. Her loyalty to me as a staff member became in doubt. I became convinced that she was a plant. She was there at the will and the pleasure of the Anaconda Company. She was reporting to them. She was the inside person. I couldn't handle that. I just could not tolerate...I had a complete loyalty to me, and it wasn't there. So I dismissed her.

BB: Did she know why?

OF: You bet your life she knew why. I told her why. Up until that time, frequently perhaps as often as once a month, (unintelligible) and my administrative assistant would be invited to the Shoreham Hotel for a beautiful dinner or entertainment or best table in the house at the expense of the Anaconda Company and Montana Power Company. Well, when I dismissed this lady that was the end of that association. I never heard from them anymore. So I was right.

BB: Do you think there might have been an issue? What caused you to have your doubts about her?

OF: Not really an issue, but I just knew that she was not loyal to me. She was loyal to somebody else. I was right. That was the end of our close association.

BB: But did you have a difference of opinion on some matter or something or other with the Anaconda Company that she was going behind your back to them for?

OF: No, I just knew she was working for somebody else. I've never told this to anybody else. You're the first.

BB: So when the dinner invitations stopped, you got the impression that perhaps the Anaconda Company wasn't as supportive of you?

OF: Exactly.

BB: So when you ran for reelection in 1956, you had also reason to believe that was the case?

OF: Exactly.

BB: Did you notice that the business community was less supportive of you in '56?

OF: Yes, that's right. Oh yes. No question.

BB: They were helping LeRoy Anderson? Or just not helping you?

OF: They just weren't helping me. Of course, the same thing came to light in 1960 when I ran for the Senate. I still had the honor of being the...Of all the Republican candidates for the United States Senate in the state of Montana, I hold the honor of coming closest to becoming elected. Two of them were elected. I still was the closest to being elected with less than 5,000 votes in '60.

That was primarily because of the non-support of the Anaconda Company primarily, partially the Yellowstone...I mean the Montana Power Company. Montana Power Company was interested in having Yellowtail Dam built because they purchased power. They were practical in politics. I was too young, too inexperienced to try to be a statesman before I learned how to be a politician. That's exactly right. If I had learned how to be a politician a little bit first, the 5 million dollar thing...If I had just kept my mouth shut, just forget it, I would have been swept in.

BB: But the dam was built anyway?

OF: Oh sure.

BB: It was just a question of building it economically or uneconomically.

OF: Exactly. And exactly the way we proposed in the first place.

BB: I'm glad you did what you did.

OF: Well I am too. I can sleep pretty well.

BB: How important was the Montana Farmers Union in politics in the 1950s?

OF: Extremely important. Not only the Farmers Union, but all the other unions. In 1955, Montana was probably one of the most densely populated union towns per capita in the United States. With the lumber industry, the mining industry, the railroads, and all of those were highly unionized. So when you were bucking up against unions as a Republican, you were pretty (unintelligible). The Farmers Union was then as it is now, but then it was very strong and of course very Democrat and very opposed to my candidacy.

BB: Now Orvin, did you have a farm background? When you were a kid, were you brought up on a farm?

OF: Oh yes, I was on a sheep ranch.

BB: When you first thought about running for Congress, why did you run as a Republican?

OF: Well, I was raised in a Republican county. I was raised in a Republican family. In 1932, or '33 when Roosevelt was elected president, every county in Montana, every county in Montana went for Roosevelt. Sweet Grass County, my county went for [Herbert] Hoover. I was born into it.

BB: I see. So your family wasn't a Farmers Union family?

OF: Oh no.



BB: So you were bucking the Farmers Union and they had a lot of members then and influence then?

OF: They didn't. The Farmers Union didn't have much membership in my county, but in the state of Montana they sure did. Particularly east or north.

BB: Do you remember any prominent leaders in the Farmers Union at that time?

OF: Not really, no. I can remember them, but I can't remember their names.

BB: Any prominent labor leaders in Montana during that time?

OF: I can't remember their names, but I remember them, yes.

BB: Who would you say were the four or five most influential people in Montana during your period of political involvement?

OF: Well, of course, Mike Mansfield, there's no question about that. I admired Mansfield. I'll never forget in 1960 when I was running against Metcalf for the Senate, we were looking in pretty good shape there towards the end of the campaign. Mansfield had not been involved much until it became kind of apparent that we might win it. Then Mansfield came out and he said, "I need Lee." He meant Lee Metcalf. That made a difference. There's no question about it. Then of course, Hugo Aronson, the governor. He was an impressive person. In the Congress, Charley Halleck from Indiana; I mentioned Sam Rayburn. Joe Martin, a former Speaker [from Massachusetts]. They were all people that were very impressive, yes. The reason I got to know Gerry Ford and Dick Nixon, when I first went into Congress, I was invited...Every member of Congress when he's elected is invited to join a lot of associations or organizations, most of which are social. I got one that was called the Chowder and Marching Society.

That sounded to me like a bunch of playboys and a lot of money and threw it in the wastepaper basket. Later, Gerry Ford was one of them. Jackson from California came around and wanted to know why I hadn't answered their suggestion that I join the Chowder and Marching Club. They explained what it was. It was about 12 members of Congress who formed this association back in the days when Nixon and Gerry Ford and (unintelligible) too. Jackson had got together 12 of these to stop a piece of legislation and they thought if they could do it once, perhaps we'll need to do it again. They said they had this little organization and it became very influential. I can't remember all the names, but a lot of them were secretaries. What was his name became secretary of State. It was very influential. And I got to know Nixon and Ford very well on a first name basis.

BB: Because they were both members of that society?

OF: Correct. We would meet once a week.

BB: That's quite an honor.

OF: It really was. Jim Battin, who later became congressman, he became a member of the society. There were only two (unintelligible).

BB: Strictly a Republican group?

OF: Strictly Republican yes. We had dinner in the White House four times.

BB: So you met President Eisenhower personally?

OF: Oh yes, not as well as Nixon.

BB: If I asked you in a few words to describe Eisenhower what would you say?

OF: Oh, he was a very diplomatic man, strong, very honest. There's no question about his honesty. He was a very likable person.

BB: How would you describe Nixon?

OF: Extremely ambitious. A very talented man, particularly in foreign affairs. He was a victim. Sometimes in the political circus he'd say, "From my enemies, I can myself defend. Heaven protect me from the well-meaning friend." Nixon was the victim of some awfully well-meaning friends. I owe Nixon a lot, as I do also Tim Babcock, the governor. Nixon appointed me to the Federal Housing Administration. So I'm indebted to him on a personal basis. He was a fiercely ambitious man.

BB: Did that come across in your personal...when you knew him personally? Did the ambition come through?

OF: Yes. Talented.

BB: Was he friendly?

OF: Yes.

BB: Interesting conversationalist?

OF: Man to man. Terrific.

BB: Look you in the eye?

OF: Yes.

BB: Did you ever have a visit like that with Eisenhower?

OF: No. I'll never forget one time we had, I think there was 12 members of the Congress were invited to have breakfast with the President on a totally friendly basis. No politics to be talked. I got to sit right across the table from him at the White House at the breakfast. He felt like a soldier. The language would get a little salty.

BB: You know Orvin, I talked with Tim Babcock about General Eisenhower. He made the same comment. He said that Eisenhower could sometimes talk a little bit like a soldier.

OF: Exactly.

BB: So you ran for the U.S Senate in 1960.

OF: Right. Murray decided not to run. So I got involved with the primaries again with several others. Ray [Wayne] Montgomery—

BB: Wes D'Ewart, did he run?

OF: No.

BB: D'Ewart didn't run in the primary in '60? I was thinking that he did.

OF: No, he ran against Murray and lost in a delayed count. [D'Ewart ran against Donald Nutter in the Republican primary for governor.] Then D'Ewart went back and was in the Agricultural Department under Eisenhower.

BB: So you nearly lost in 1960 and then you were involved in Babcock's campaigns weren't you?

OF: Yes in 1962 Babcock...Don Nutter was killed, as you know. Babcock became governor. Then Governor Babcock gave me a job with the Highway Department as a tourist promotion director. State advertising director, was called. It was the best job I've ever had in my life. Selling Montana vacation and recreation resources was a good job.

That would be 1962. In 1964, Babcock had to run to be re-elected. So I was his campaign manager for about five months, the summer of '64. I was working for the Highway Department, and I quit the Highway Department and went to work for Babcock as his campaign manager. I got him elected in 1964. Just one second.

BB: Oh my, yes. That's wonderful. This is a wooden carving of an elephant and it says, "To Orvin from your winning 'Win With Tim' Team, 1964." So you headed up the "Win With Tim" Team in 1964?

OF: Correct.

BB: Were you the chairman of the Tim Babcock committee?

OF: I was campaign director.

BB: I see.

OF: Campaign manager?

BB: That was the race against Roland Renne. What do you remember about that campaign?

OF: It was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun and he was a good candidate.

BB: Babcock was?

OF: Yes.

BB: Were there any issues that you can remember in Babcock's campaign for governor in 1964?

OF: Oh, not per se, no. I can't remember the issues. No I can't.

BB: Are there any events, or are there any things that you were involved in, in your life that are especially memorable that you need to talk about? A memory or an incident or something that stands out in your mind that you'd like to talk about?

OF: Well, not really. I think the fact that I was able to serve in Congress was a big honor and working for the state of Montana as tourist promotion director. It was about eight years with the Federal Housing Administration. That was a very...

BB: Were you back in Washington, D.C., then or in Montana?

OF: No, in Montana. For the state of Montana, Federal Housing Administration. I was led here in Helena.

BB: Did the thought ever occur to you to run for public office again?

OF: No, never again. I took the cure. Then when I retired, I went back to Big Timber and got involved with building miniatures and had a very complete and interesting life.

BB: The miniatures that you mentioned are these wonderful furniture within them that you've become famous for actually. Remarkable workmanship.

OF: Well, we were very successful and...A very enjoyable experience.

BB: Now one thing I wanted to bring up again, because I'm intrigued about it. Was this woman on your staff from Cascade, Montana, who was more loyal to the Anaconda Company than she was to you, was there a particular incident that brought that to your attention?

OF: Not really. No. It was just a feeling that she was not loyal to me. She was answering to somebody else.

BB: That wasn't just based on a hunch though, you must have had some reason for thinking that?

OF: I can't do that. That loyalty was not there.

BB: She didn't deny it when you confronted her?

OF: No.

BB: Now you mentioned Governor Aronson, any thoughts or observations about him?

OF: Oh yes, he was a delightful person. He again was a very honest person. I don't know. I just enjoyed being with him, working with him.

BB: Anything else you'd like to say?

OF: I think that would be 1,000 things I'll think of after you're gone. I think not.

BB: Thank you very much and thank you for your public service.

[End of Interview]