Newspaperman

Cal Olson at the Sioux City Journal, 1989

This essay was written by Cal Olson’s daughter, Catherine Olson McMullen, associate professor of English and journalism at Concordia College. “My father was a great storyteller, whether his stories were told with a camera, a typewriter, or at the dinner table at top volume and with much waving of arms,” McMullen said. Olson told these stories about the career he loved to his family, both in conversation and a 2007 memoir he wrote for his children.
When he was an old man, Cal Olson told the story this way:

1948: He had been a reporter for *The Moorhead Daily News* for less than a year when he picked up a teen-aged hitchhiker, who caught sight of the “PRESS” sticker on Olson’s windshield.

“You a newspaperman?” the hitchhiker asked.

“Yes,” Olson said.

“Gee,” the kid said. “You get to see the ball games for free!”

“And that will do as a valedictory,” Olson wrote when he was 82 years old: *I was a newspaperman. I got to see The Ball Game for free.*

Cal Olson, whose 41-year journalism career spanned what he called “the last great, dying years of the independent newspaper,” never called himself a journalist. Or a photojournalist. Or a reporter, although he was all of those things. He called himself a Newspaperman. The way he said it, you just knew the “n” was capitalized.

As the images in Digital Horizons reflect, most of the photos Olson took were what he called “run of the mill, the kind of stuff every medium-sized newspaper uses.” He shot accidents, fires, court, politics, sports, features, and a handful of famous people. “But occasionally there were times of high adventure, of low humor, of slapstick comedy, of great grief and of grinding intensity.”

**The 1957 Tornado**

“Great grief and grinding intensity” well describes Olson’s coverage of the June 20, 1957 F5 tornado that killed 12 Fargoans, injured 150 more and destroyed hundreds of homes. Olson’s coverage included what has become the tornado’s iconic photo: That of a disheveled young man, Dick Shaw, emerging from the rubble carrying the limp and battered body of 4-year-old Jeanette Munson.

On the evening of June 20, Olson was at his south Fargo home taking care of his children while his wife, Joanne, was at a church meeting. Through the picture window he saw the tornado work its way through north Fargo. Night editor Jim Acton called Olson and told him to head north. Olson left the kids with a neighbor and got to work.

North Fargo “looked like it had been bombed out of existence,” Olson wrote. “A faint yellow haze overhung the area, and the smell of lp gas hung over the broken houses.
“I began making pictures with a Rolleiflex, including a shot of a young man carrying out the body of one of six brothers and sisters who had been killed in their home. Somewhere along the line I ran into one of our young photographers, Ed Dams, and sent him up one street while I paralleled him on another. I met him again, gave him two rolls of film and told him to head back to the office and tell Acton that there were at least half a dozen people killed in this tornado.”

By the time he got back to The Forum, many reporters and photographers had come in and the place was a beehive of activity. “Everyone was hyper, working hard, all adrenalin and nervous energy. But not City Editor Wally Lindell; he sat there reading copy and making assignments as though it was a quiet Monday morning. He held the whole place together.”

It wasn’t until Olson processed the film that he even knew if his now-iconic photo was correctly exposed or even in focus. As he swished the photo paper in the developing chemicals, the image slowly appeared. “What I recall is a huge sense of relief,” he said.

Olson’s photo led the paper’s tornado coverage. He also wrote a story and laid out several pages of photos.

Until the day he died Olson vividly remembered the first Tuesday in May, 1958. “I went into the Associated Press room to check the national wire,” he recalled. “As I stood there, the story came over the ticker, announcing that The Forum had won [the Pulitzer Prize for local news produced under deadline pressure]. They could hear me yelling throughout the city room.” Twenty-one Forum staffers were involved in the coverage.

Olson often said that the photography part of his career came as an unexpected bonus; he had other plans in mind when he studied journalism at the University of Minnesota.

**Early Career: The Reluctant Photographer**

Olson, an award-winning news photographer who served two terms as president of the National Press Photographers Association, never took a photo class in journalism school and never planned to become a photographer: He intended to be a reporter.

Olson said he became “unwillingly involved in photography” while working at The Moorhead Daily News shortly after he left the University of Minnesota a few credits short of graduating. In the fall of 1948 his editor sent him to the Clay County Fair in Barnesville, Minn., and told him he’d have to take a picture to accompany his story.

“I borrowed my grandfather’s Kodak Autographic 3A camera (116 roll film) and made some exposures of a kid kneeling besides his prize-winning ewe. First news picture I ever made. It was, technically, one whee of a picture, and I don’t know how it happened. But every detail was cracker crisp, and the composition worked and so did the cutlines. Hell of a note.”
The Speed Graphic: A Rube Goldberg-like Workhorse

The camera Olson used most regularly early in his career was the Speed Graphic, the dominant portable professional camera from the 1930s to the late 1950s. “Portable” it was, but big and boxy and afflicted with what Leigh Klotz Jr., editor of the Graflex website, called “a Rube Goldberg” variety of features. Writes Klotz: “The Speed Graphic camera has two shutters—focal plane and in-lens—three viewfinders—optical, wire frame and ground glass; interchangeable lenses; a rise and fall front; lateral shifts; a coupled rangefinder; and a double extension bellows adaptable to lenses from 90mm to over 300 mm.” The Speed Graphic was made for commercial photography and photojournalism and produced images of the highest quality.

Olson’s first use of what Klotz calls “America’s first and last great camera” came in 1949, when the Daily News photographer, described by Olson as “a smelly little fart” named Carrol Smith, who slept in an Army surplus cot under the darkroom wet sink—quit to return to Ada, Minn., to make more money as a telephone lineman. Olson’s editor, Red Wolfe, told him that he would be not only the city reporter, but the photographer. The Daily News had an old pre-Anniversary Speed Graphic, 4x5, and three film holders, each of which held two pieces of cut film, for a total of six exposures, Olson said. “Never mind that you were covering the second coming of Christ—six shots and head for the barn. Actually, you never made more than four shots, saving the last film holder for something that might happen on the way back to the office, or before you could unload those two exposed holders.”

Before he left for Ada, Smitty gave Olson a five-minute course on the Speed Graphic: “Set the shutter speed at 1/200th of a second, cock the shutter, set the lens aperture at f/11, put a bulb in the flash gun, insert a film holder in the rear of the camera, pull the dark slide out of the film holder, make the exposure, reinsert the dark slide, and that’s all she wrote. I spent the next year shooting everything…EVERYTHING…at 1/200th at f/11.”

A Buck a Print

But when Smitty left, he took his darkroom equipment with him—enlarger, developing tanks and all the rest. So Olson would develop the film in the nearly-empty darkroom and the next morning take it to Scherling’s Photo, where manager Tom Fillmore would push out an 8-by-10 print. This arrangement bothered Olson and the Daily News’ sports writer and photographer, Jim Peterson. Photo production was at Fillmore’s will and pace, and Olson and Peterson were losing money because they could not make reprints of their photos for people who wanted to buy
them. At that time, Olson said, people who were subjects of news photography more often than not wanted prints.

“Jim came in one day and told Red he had a chance to buy a used 4x5 enlarger and all the other necessary darkroom stuff. It would cost $100. How about it, Red? Nothing doing, he said. Can’t afford it. I had a bright idea.

“‘What if Jim and I buy it, and you pay us a buck for each eight-by-ten print, the same as you pay Scherling’s now?’ I proposed. Red thought about it. ‘I still want Scherling’s for prints but if—AND THAT’S A BIG IF—we need to get a print in a hurry, I’ll give you the buck,’ he said.”

They bought the gear. The enlarger was a beat-up old 4x5 Simplex. Olson got an outdated 25-sheet pack of enlarging paper and taught himself how to print photographs “by guess and by god.”

About that buck a print:

“After Jim and I got going in the darkroom, Red never ordered another print from Scherling’s. It was just too handy for Jim or me to grind them out. Great, thought I, and kept a running account of prints on the darkroom wall. After the first month I came to Red and said he owed me, as I remember, $15 or $20 for prints.

“‘Screw that noise!’ he roared. ‘That’s too much money. I’m not going to do it.’ And he never did. However, he reluctantly agreed that the newspaper would henceforth pay, not only for film, but for the darkroom chemicals and enlarging paper. All heart, old Red.”

But Olson and Peterson made out anyway through sale of reprints “to folks whose picture I had taken, or whose kid I had photographed, or someone’s prize Holstein, and stuff like that.” When he left the Daily News he and Jim sold the by-then exhausted darkroom equipment to the new owners for $200, thereby making 100 percent on their investment.

**Learning the Ropes**

Olson called his time at *The Moorhead Daily News* “invaluable, a no-crap, intense learning experience” that taught him much about being a Newspaperman. “It gave me the street smarts across the board, in just about every kind of reporting there was. I covered city hall, the courthouse, district court, the cops, sheriff, hospital, school board and the colleges, Moorhead State and Concordia. The whole schmear. If anything happened in our circulation area (largely Clay County), I covered that, too: Fires, auto accidents, robberies, community celebrations, 4H affairs. I’d work a 60-75 hour week. I got a $5 raise, to $45 a week. Just don’t screw up, buddy.”
At The Moorhead Daily News, Olson learned the importance of developing good relationships with sources, such as Clay Country Sheriff Bill Curran. In the winter of 1950 Curran asked Olson a favor: He wanted him to accompany him to take photos of suicides. “Seems relatives of a suicide victim can’t admit that their particular loved one would kill themselves, and he wanted pictures to prove it,” Olson wrote. “So I went with Bill on every suicide call all that long winter, recording probably half a dozen deaths on film for him. Grim stuff.”

Olson left the Daily News in 1950, after the Daily News was purchased by a quartet from Nebraska who fired Wolfe. For Olson, the spark had gone out of the Daily News. One day The Forum’s Moorhead reporter, Johnny Maher, told him The Forum was looking for a news photographer.


On Oct. 1, 1950, Olson hired on at The Forum, then called The Fargo Forum, as a photographer, though what he’d hoped for was a job that would allow him both to shoot and write. Managing editor Sid Hooper offered Olson $40 a week; he told Hooper he made $45 at the Daily News. “How many hours do you work for that 45?” Hooper asked. Well, 60, maybe more. Sid nodded understandably. “The Forum pays by the hour,” he said gently, as though to a particularly dense child. “The $40 is for a 40-hour week, but you will be working a 44-hour week. You will be paid time and a half for those extra four hours. That’s forty-SIX dollars a week. If you work more overtime, you will be paid time and a half for it, too.”

In 1950, the Forum darkroom was in the basement of its then-four-story building at 101 5th St. N., right off the press room, where a space about eight feet wide and 24 feet long was divided into three rooms—film developing room at the far end, print processing room in the middle and a small office at the near end. It was “strictly utilitarian,” Olson wrote. “One thing in its favor: It was far removed from the newsroom (on the second floor). There was a seven-foot desk/counter in the office. I could stretch out on it for a nap; if anyone in the newsroom wanted me, they’d phone.”

Soon, though, The Forum built an extension to the north side of the building, which included a state-of-the-art darkroom and a studio. “All of this was set between the newsroom and the toilets, so there was steady traffic through the photo area,” Olson said. “So much for naps.”

“Low Humor and Slapstick Comedy”
Although many of Olson’s photos reflect the grim side of life, he also remembered assignments that were just plain fun.

Once, Olson had been assigned by the women’s editor, Doris Eastman, to shoot photos to accompany her Sunday story about an older woman who collected antiques. “I knew (but Doris didn’t) that the subject had been the madam of one of Fargo’s best-known bordellos in the 1930s. And so I ‘innocently’ made a picture of her in this antique-y bedroom, pulling back the bed covers. Doris ran it as the lead photo. When Doris found out about the subject’s past history, it was a long time before she forgave me.”

Sometime in the mid-1960s Olson was assigned to shoot a profile of jazz great Louis Armstrong to accompany a story about his appearance in Fargo. This was in the days before celebrities surrounded themselves with handlers and flacks, Olson said, so he’d been told just to show up backstage between sets. Armstrong, dripping wet with sweat from his first set, was naked but for a towel around his waist. Near Armstrong stood a beautiful young woman. “She’s my…my…my sec-a-tary, or sumpin’,” Armstrong explained to Olson. Then he whipped the towel from his waist and struck a pose in all his sweaty, al fresco glory and said to Olson: “Snap it, dad.”

Making Photos on the Road

Although most of his assignments were in Fargo-Moorhead and surrounding communities, Olson was also frequently sent out of town, such as to Bismarck, N.D., to help cover the biennial legislative sessions. In the early 1950s, logistics for taking and transmitting photos were complicated. Stories were sent by telegraph; photos were sent using a portable wirephoto transmitter (by phone) or by train, plane or automobile.

Olson was using the Speed Graphic when he first worked the Bismarck sessions.

“I’d position myself near a wall in the Capital corridor and Giff (Herron, political reporter) would round up the legislators. I’d shoot head and shoulder shots of them, four at a time, the whole legislative body.” Then The Forum would make two-column zinc halftones of each shot to be used throughout the session. But first the photos had to get from Bismarck to Fargo. About 3 p.m., Olson would go to The Prince Hotel and use a light-tight changing bag to pull the negatives out of the film holders and pack them into a light-tight box. He would take the box to the Great Northern Depot to await the North Coast Limited’s 4:30 arrival and hand the box to the postal clerk in the mail car. Back in Fargo, about 8:30, the clerk would hand the box to a waiting Forum photographer. “The photos would appear next morning in The Forum, and everyone would wonder how we got ‘em into the paper so quickly,” Olson wrote.

The Power of the Press
In the 1950s, Olson wrote, *The Forum* was a power in the lives of people in the Upper Midwest and it dominated the state of North Dakota both in coverage and in readership. When considering the power of the press, Olson wrote, “the tendency is to consider the grand and seismic manifestations of this power.

“But it has been my experience that the real and continuing power of the press is exercised on a more modest level,” he wrote. In this day of fragmented news audiences and declining newspaper circulation, he said, it might be difficult to imagine a day when the local newspaper—in this case, *The Forum*—commanded such great respect that news sources sometimes rearranged their schedules to suit that of the paper. Olson learned this shooting high school basketball:

“Basketball was very big in the small towns of the Red River Valley,” Olson wrote. So in order to give the most coverage to the most games, The Forum photographers came up with a feature they called “Friday Night Madness.” Three photographers would each take action shots at two games on the same Friday night, then come back and produce a picture page that featured photos from the six games. This required each photographer to schedule his time to the minute, “shooting a quarter or so of the game at the town furthest out, then driving like crazy to the second town on the way back to Fargo, and shooting the tail end of that game.”

One Friday, Olson had to shoot two towns, Hope and Page. Hope was furthest from Fargo, so Olson called the coach for the game time: 7:30. Olson told the coach he’d see him Friday night. He then called the coach at Page. He said game started at 7 p.m.—too late for Olson to make the necessary shots if he started at Hope. Reluctantly, Olson told the coach it wouldn’t work. “OK,” the coach said. “What time do you want me to start the game?”

The most dramatic personal experience Olson had concerning the inherent power of the press came on another routine assignment. He went to Forman, N.D., to write and shoot a feature on a 9-year-old boy, Dean Hefflefinger, who was born without arms. He used his legs and feet to feed himself, to write, throw a ball, and brush his teeth. His parents were teachers in a country school and lived in a nearby trailer.

As Olson finished the assignment, he had afternoon coffee with the family. They told him that the youngster’s birthday was coming up, and Olson asked the boy what he wanted for his birthday. “A pair of arms,” Dean said.

This was not just a vague desire; the boy could be fitted with prosthetic limbs, but the family couldn’t afford them. Driving back to Fargo, it occurred to Olson that perhaps *Forum* readers might contribute to the boy’s birthday wish. “But I further figured—no, don’t suggest that people contribute money to Dean. Just write the story and see what happens.

“What happened? Within a week after the story ran, our readers had contributed more than $8,000 to Dean. To me, that is press power.”
Not that Olson and his colleagues always commanded respect. Once, Olson was assigned to make photos at a North Dakota Agricultural College football game. He arrived at the stadium with a Rolleiflex camera around his neck—at the time, a sure sign that he was a photojournalist. Back then officials rarely asked journalists for their press passes, and Olson didn’t have his with him anyway. But he had his Rolleiflex. The ticket taker would not let him in without his press pass. So Olson backed off a couple of steps, focused the Rolleiflex on the ticket taker and touched off an exposure. “What was that for?” the ticket taker asked.

“Well,” Olson told him, “when the sports editor asks me what stupid sunuvabitch wouldn’t let me in, I can show him.” He got in.

Breaking up the Monotony

Olson frequently said that working as a press photographer was, like combat, long stretches of tedium punctuated by moments of sheer terror. So sometimes *Forum* photographers found ways to make routine assignments more interesting.

“What with three colleges and as many high schools, [photographer] Tom Abercrombie and I spent a lot of autumn Saturdays shooting football action,” Olson wrote. “One day we both came back with shots of receivers just about to catch passes, and we began measuring to see which of us had caught the football closest to the receiver’s hands. We tried, the rest of the season, to see who’d have the closest pass reception picture. The idea was that the ball couldn’t be in the player’s hands, but close, the closer the better, as long as there was some air between the hands and the ball. So for all the rest of that fall, that particular bit of action was what we turned in. [The sports department] never caught on.”

Learning from Colleagues

Olson learned a lot about photography in the 1950s when another photographer joined *The Forum* staff, Tom Abercrombie, whom Olson called “the best news photographer that I ever knew: enthusiastic, innovative, inquisitive, and possessing superlative news sense.” Abercrombie also knew a great deal about the technical aspects of photography—the chemistry, the physics, the lighting and the composition. While most news photographers in the 1950s were still using Speed Graphics, Abercrombie used a 35mm and, later in his career, was largely responsible for the acceptance of the small format camera by the country’s news photographers. (Abercrombie left The Forum in the late 1950s for the *Milwaukee Journal*; from there he went to National Geographic, where he did legendary work as a writer and photographer for 38 years).

Abercrombie marched to his own drummer. One day Abercrombie walked through the news room with a baby sparrow on his shoulder; he’d adopted it after it fell from its nest, and went on assignment with the little bird clinging to one shoulder. He came steaming through the
newsroom one afternoon on his way to cover a fire, and passed (editor) H.D. Paulson, who stared after him.

“Was that a bird on Abercrombie’s shoulder?” he asked. Olson nodded. Paulson shook his head and went back to reading copy.

Olson also valued the talents of another Forum photographer, Harry Jennings, an outstanding camera repairman. Olson would leave his cameras in the photo department while he spent the afternoon working on a story in the newsroom. “When I’d come back to photo, Harry would announce he’d checked out my cameras, cleaned the workings and retuned the timing.”

One Saturday morning Olson went to an outdoors show at a local auditorium. Olson was making photos of kids fishing in an artificial trout pond when the strap of his IIIl Leica broke and the camera dropped into the water. “It was Harry’s day off, but he came over to the house and tore that camera down, nut from bolt, all scattered all over the kitchen table,” Olson wrote. “I figured what the hell, it would have been ruined anyhow. But he put the thing back together and it ran better than before it went into the water. Took him eight hours total.”

Olson recalled other Forum photographers who left The Forum for larger newspapers:

- Mike Lien, who shot basketball photos for the paper at $3 a pop when he was in high school and whom Olson hired full-time several years later. Lien left The Forum to take a job as a New York Times photographer in its Washington bureau.
- Ray Lustig, who moved on to the Washington Post, covering Congress.
- Maggie Thomas, who also hired on at the Washington Post as a general assignment photographer.

Waiting for Roger Maris

Although most of Olson’s photo subjects were ordinary people, he had the opportunity to photograph several who were famous. His favorite was Roger Maris, the Fargoan-turned-New York Yankee who broke Babe Ruth’s home-run record in 1961.

“Maris was our boy. The Forum’s boy. Fargo’s boy,” Olson wrote. “We’d watched Maris play legion ball before going up the ladder to the Bigs. New York Yankee, for God’s sake. Pin stripes. Right next to Mantle. You said their names together: Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris. And then, 1961.”

Maris hit one home run in April, then picked up the pace: 11 in May, 15 in June, 13 in July. By the end of August, he had 51, and it was apparent that Maris had a chance at Ruth’s record of 60 single-season home runs.
“September, and the world watched. Maris couldn’t take a batting cage swing without a reporter at this shoulder. He was besieged by the press as he narrowed the gap—51 homers, 52, 53… The pressure was intense. Maris didn’t like it. The whole wild business was beginning to reach him. He started pulling chunks of hair out of his head. And the count continued: 54. 55…”

The Forum’s sports editor, Eugene “Fitz” Fitzgerald, was beside himself. “How was the Forum going to handle things if Our Boy beat Babe Ruth’s home run record?” Fitz decided only a color photograph of Maris would do at the time shooting and using a color photo was an iffy and costly proposition. Somehow Fitz connected with Maris and told him he wanted to send Olson to Bloomington, Minn., when the Yankees played the Twins at Metropolitan Stadium a week hence. Maris made no promises, but said if Olson showed up at the Yankee dugout at 10 a.m., he’d see what he could do.

By 9:30 the press had arrived at the dugout in full, ferocious force. “There were reporters and press photographers of every size and description waiting for that dugout door to open,” Olson wrote. “Waiting for Maris. Pushy. Shoving for position. Laughing, arguing, speculating if Maris would show, what he’d say, what they intended to ask him.

“Talk about feeling out of it. No one so much as acknowledged my presence. To those Twin Cities newsmen, I didn’t exist. I stood over in one corner of the dugout, wondering what Fitz was going to say when I came back to Fargo, aced out by the Big Town Press.”

At 10 o’clock the dugout door opened and Maris came out. “Big fella, suited up, cap square on his head, nose like the prow of the ship, strong jaw, unsmiling.” The Big Town press went wild—“yelling, pushing, microphones waving, cameras aiming, hands reaching, voices beseeching. Pandemonium.”

Maris put up his right hand.

“Take it easy,” he said. “Take it cool. I’ll answer your questions. But first, I am going to spend some time with him.”

He pointed at Olson.

“Maris was kept out of the Baseball Hall of Fame by a handful of small-minded and provincial New York sportswriters who didn’t like the way he treated them during that terrible and wonderful summer of 1961,” Olson wrote. “But in my mind, he’s always been there, and always will be.”

**Presidents Come to Town**

Olson photographed four American presidents when they came to North Dakota: Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.
Truman whistle-stopped through Fargo-Moorhead in the fall of 1948 in his successful campaign for re-election, speaking from the rear end of a train car at the old Great Northern Depot in Fargo. Olson covered the event for the *Moorhead Daily News*.

“Truman didn’t like to have photographers touch off flash bulbs after he began speaking—it blinded him,” Olson wrote. “So the Secret Service guys circulated among the photographers saying, ‘One more shot, fellows, then no more.’ I wanted to get a picture of Truman as he was speaking, so waited until he opened his mouth, and punched off a press 40 flash bulb. In a moment, there was this intense, grim man gripping my elbow and saying, ‘Didn’t you hear, Mac, NO MORE PHOTOS!’ Okay, okay.”

Olson also photographed Truman in Fargo in 1952, when Truman campaigned for Adlai Stevenson in his unsuccessful race against Dwight Eisenhower. The event was also covered by a large contingent of national reporters and photographers.

“I noticed one of the Life magazine photographers, George Silk. He had three Leicas around his neck but I never saw him make a picture. He just leaned against a lamppost and watched the scene. I finally went up to him, introduced myself, and asked him how come he wasn’t making any photos.

“He shrugged. ‘I’m just here in case someone tries to kill him,’ he said.”

But Olson didn’t have that luxury, so he tried to figure out just what kind of shot he could make that would beat his colleague and in-house rival, Tom Abercrombie. “As Truman spoke, I noticed that he wore a large button in his lapel: ‘I like Fargo,’ it said, which was a takeoff on the Republican motto, ‘I like Ike.’ So when Truman ceased talking, I pushed up close and yelled, ‘Mr. President, Mr. President.’ He looked at me and I yelled, ‘Show me your lapel pin.’

“Truman grinned, stuck his hand under his lapel, shoved out the pin and beamed at me. Bingo! Front page.”

**Dwight Eisenhower**

Olson “shot” Eisenhower twice. Ike didn’t much like the press, at least not local press, Olson wrote. In 1952 Ike was making a speech at North Dakota Agricultural College, and his aides allowed Olson and another photographer two minutes, tops, to take his photo as he sat in a side room polishing his speech—“but don’t you say a word to him,” the aides instructed.

“We went in and both made about four exposures with flash guns on Speed Graphics. Eisenhower didn’t even look up.”

So Olson was determined to get a better shot later in the day. After his talk, Eisenhower was scheduled to take part in a parade down Broadway to the Northern Pacific Depot, where he was to board a train for a trip further west. “The parade people had scheduled a semi-truck with a
flatbed trailer to travel immediately in front of the convertible Eisenhower was to ride in,” Olson wrote. “This was standard procedure, so that the photographers could make pictures of the procession. But by the time Eisenhower was through speaking, it was pitch dark. I figured, what the hell, I was going to ride that truck anyhow, since it would assure getting me to the depot.”

He hopped on the flatbed with a reporter from the *Hazen Star*. “All the way down Broadway, people were trying to see Eisenhower. It was so dark that many of them thought he was on the flatbed, and the Hazen Star guy and I spent a lot of time waving to the crowd. No photos, but it did get us downtown in good order.”

Olson had to wait four years to get a good photo of Ike—but it was the Secret Service, not Ike, who stood out in Olson’s memory. In 1956 Eisenhower campaigned in Minot, N.D., and Olson managed to get a shot of him flashing his trademark V sign. The photo also showed six Secret Service agents running alongside the car, each with one hand touching the vehicle and watching for signs of trouble. That shot ran six columns front page the next morning. Later in the day, Eisenhower dedicated the Garrison Dam. A crowd of several thousand people was sitting on the face of the dam, and Eisenhower was at a dais facing them. Olson tiptoed up behind him, with the idea of getting a rear view of Eisenhower with this great crowd of people in the background. “As I focused, there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to find a Secret Service agent peering at me. Oh, God.”

“Are you Cal Olson?” the agent asked. Fearfully, Olson nodded.

“Well, hey,” the agent said. “Do you think we could get half a dozen eight-by-tens of that picture you had on the front page this morning?”

**John Kennedy**

Olson was assigned to photograph President John Kennedy when he spoke at the University of North Dakota in October 1963. Using a 35mm Nikon, he made photos of Kennedy working the crowd and delivering his speech. “He was most relaxed, both with the press and with the crowds, “Olson wrote. “I have never seen anyone who could move people they way he could. They kept wanting to touch him.”

When Kennedy was assassinated about a month later, *The Forum* used one of Olson’s portraits taken at UND on the front page. “If I say so myself it was a powerful, intense close-up, made handheld in low light with a 90mm lens-- which ain’t easy, friend.”

**Lyndon Johnson**

“I made some exposures of him at the airport in Fargo, but nothing about the assignment has stayed with me.”
Working as a One-man Team: Indians and Vietnam

Olson might have begun his career as an accidental photographer, but had he not become an able shooter he would not have been able to take on two of his career’s most ambitious projects. He acted as both reporter and photographer in two lengthy series of *Forum* stories, one on the Indian people of North Dakota and another on Red River valley military members serving in Vietnam.

![Cal Olson's Vietnam Press Pass](image)

In November 1965, Forum managing editor Lloyd Sveen suggested Olson do a story on a federal educational grant from the Office of Equal Opportunity to the Turtle Mountain tribe of Chippewa. Olson argued that he should do more: Why not do a series on the Indian people of North Dakota? “There hasn’t been a takeout on the state’s Indian people since Mark Kellogg rode west with Custer,” Olson told Sveen. Sveen responded: “All right, you’re so smart, go ahead.”

Olson spent the month of December 1965 on the four reservations in North Dakota. He spent a week writing the stories, which ran a total of 30,000 words. Forty-six photos ran with the five stories. The series won the 1966 George Polk Memorial Award for local reporting, Columbia University’s Paul Tobenkin Award for reporting of minority affairs, and a citation from the American Political Science Association for the reporting of governmental affairs.

The series also led to *The Forum* assigning Olson to Vietnam, where he spent March 1966 interviewing and photographing GIs from The Forum’s circulation area. He interviewed 119 military men: Marines in their enclave around DaNang near the demilitarized zone up north, the 125th Infantry at Cu Chi, the First Cavalry at An Khe, Seabees at Cam Ranh Bay, the Air Force at Tan Son Nhut Air base at Saigon, chopper crews out of Chu Lai, naval forces in the Mekong delta near Cat Lo, and on the U.S.S. Forrestal in the China Sea.
Olson headquartered out of a hotel in Saigon, where he waited three days to get press credentials and fatigue uniforms from the South Vietnamese government. The credentials allowed free access through the country and assigned Olson a simulated rank (major) to get transportation via military planes. They ran a military airline between most major towns, so if Olson wanted to leave Saigon, for example, for Da Nang, he would merely have to give the airline a 24-hour notice and a seat was reserved for him. They were also running helicopters out of Tan Son Nhut, so Olson could stand by in the ready room and try to find a chopper pilot headed where he wanted to go.

“There was no military censorship as to what you wrote or photographed, no need to tell anyone you were going, or where,” Olson wrote. “This was a mixed blessing: You had no restrictions as to movement (aside from military realities), but if you were lost or went down, who was to know?”

Olson was shot at only once, when he was flying in a light observation plane with a pilot whose job was to track any Viet Cong movement in his assigned province. “Someone in one of the province’s bombed-out villages shot twice at us with a rifle. The pilot made a run at the rifleman and fired a couple of smoke rockets at him. I would have preferred to just get the hell out of there.”

But the time Olson felt in most danger came in an encounter with a U.S. Marine. Olson was waiting for a plane out of Da Nang to go south to Saigon. He waited by a little shed sitting beside the runway. Just outside the shed was a young Marine, maybe 19, guarding a Viet Cong prisoner who had been trussed up like a chicken.

Well, Olson thought, this will make an interesting picture. He raised his camera and focused. The marine raised his M-16 and aimed—at Olson.

“Eff off, mac,” the marine said. Wrote Olson: “I effed off.”

In this day of instantaneous telecommunication, it is interesting to note how difficult it was for Olson to transmit his stories and photographs from Vietnam to Fargo. He worked primarily through the Associated Press office in Saigon; the AP would process his negatives, and then Olson sent both negatives and stories to the states in the AP’s mail pouch to New York. From New York, his material was airmailed to Fargo. It took about four days for Olson’s material to get from Saigon to Fargo.

One Last Big Story

Most of Olson’s stories about news photography concern his early and middle career, as he spent the last years of his working life as a newspaper editor—as managing editor of The Forum, and, after a brief stint producing a weekly news magazine for Fargo public television station, as editor-in-chief of the Sioux City (Iowa) Journal.
It was at the Journal that, two months before retiring, in June 1989, Olson covered his second Big Story, this time as an editor directing news coverage—the crash of United Airlines Flight 232. The plane, out of Denver, lost its hydraulics and all flight control except engine thrust, and crash-landed in Sioux City after cartwheeling across the cornfields. The crash killed 111 people, but 180 survived, due largely to the manner in which pilot Alfred Haynes and the flight crew handled the emergency.

As Olson led the newsroom coverage of the crash, he selected a picture shot by Journal photographer Gary Porter. It showed a rescue worker, emerging from the rubble, carrying the lifeless body of a child. The powerful photo gave Olson chills. He had taken virtually the same photo 32 years earlier.

“Hell of a Ride”

Olson summed up his career in three sentences:

“Hell of a ride.”

“It beat working for a living.”

“I would do it again in a minute.”

He was a Newspaperman.
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