

# Cal Olson Biographical Essay

By Catherine Olson McMullen

Calvin Wallace Olson, who went by “Cal,” was born in Vining, Minnesota, on Nov. 13, 1924, to J. Alvin Olson, a barber, and Ellen Dahl Olson, a teacher. He graduated from high school in Ulen, Minn. He briefly attended Moorhead State Teachers College (now Minnesota State University-Moorhead) before enlisting in the Navy Air Corps in 1942. Upon discharge from the Navy in 1945, Olson attended the University of Minnesota, where he majored in journalism. He edited a newspaper for his dormitory, Pioneer Hall, and worked in the dorm’s kitchen.

In 1948 Olson left the university six credits short of graduation to take a job editing the *Fargo News*, a publication of the *Moorhead Daily News* company. The *Fargo News*, with a circulation of 6,000, was mostly want ads with editorial copy only on the front and back pages, and was aimed at a largely rural audience in North Dakota. A few months later, with a change in ownership, Olson began working as a reporter for the Daily News. His job consisted of reporting on Moorhead and taking photos to accompany his stories. He had never taken a photography class in college.

In April 1950 Olson married Joanne Salomonson of Hitterdal, Minn. They had two children, Catherine, born in 1952, and Charles, born in 1957.

In September 1950 Olson was hired by *The Fargo Forum* as a news photographer—although he had hoped for a position as a reporter. He worked at *The Fargo Forum*, later renamed *The Forum*, for 25 years, serving in a variety of reportorial, photo and editor positions. When he was a reporter, he also made photos; when he was a photographer, he also reported stories. For many years he wrote a weekly hunting and fishing column for *The Forum*’s sports section.

He was named chief photographer in 1957, the same year that *The Forum* won a Pulitzer Prize for local reporting under pressure of deadline for its coverage of the tornado that devastated north Fargo. The Pulitzer citation reads: “For its swift, vivid and detailed news and picture coverage of a tornado which struck Fargo on June 20. Proceeding under considerable difficulty and overcoming many handicaps, a small but skilled staff put out a complete tornado edition within five hours after the disaster.” The lead photo of the Pulitzer-winning edition showed a young man, Dick Shaw, carrying the lifeless body of a child, Jeanette Monson, from the rubble created by the devastating storm.

In 1967 Olson was named *The Forum*’s special projects editor, which permitted him to range over the paper’s circulation area to find in-depth stories. He was named city editor a year later—“kicking and screaming,” he recalled—and became *The Forum*’s managing editor in 1972.

In his various roles at *The Forum*—and both before and after he was special projects editor—Olson’s skill in both reporting and photography allowed him to tackle many in-depth stories. In 1965 Olson spent a month on the four Indian reservations in North Dakota, reporting on the lives of the 13,000 Native Americans who then lived there. For his five-story series of 13,000 words and 46 photos, in 1966 Olson won Long Island University’s prestigious 1966 George Polk Memorial Award for local reporting; other winners that year included Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times*, Richard Harwood of the *Washington Post*, Murray Kempton of the *New York Post* and photographer Horst Faas of the *Associated Press*. The series also won the Paul Tobenkin Award from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, the highest award it bestows on coverage of race, bigotry and discrimination, and a citation from the American Political Science Association for the reporting of governmental affairs.

In March 1966 Olson spent a month in Vietnam, producing a series of interviews and photos 119 military men from the *Forum*’s circulation area: Marines around Da Nang; the 125<sup>th</sup> 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 Cat Lo, and on the U.S.S. Forrester in the China Sea. When he returned to Fargo Olson made more than 80 talks about his experiences to civic clubs, veterans’ organizations and schools.

In 1974-75 Olson took a year’s leave of absence from *The Forum* to teach reporting classes at Moorhead State University, where he had been teaching as an adjunct faculty member since 1970. When Olson returned to *The Forum* he was named Minnesota editor; unhappy at a position which he deemed a demotion, he resigned a year later to anchor a weekly newsmagazine show, “Spin,” for KFME, Fargo’s local public television station. The hour-long show featured stories from KFME’s viewing area, a corridor up the Red River from the southern North Dakota border to Winnipeg, plus much of the state of North Dakota and the western reaches of Minnesota.

Olson became editor of the *Sioux City (Iowa) Journal*, circulation 62,000, in February 1978. On July 19, 1989, Olson led the news room staff in covering one of the biggest stories in his career, the crash of United Airlines Flight 232. The plane, a DC-10 flying from Denver to Chicago, lost its hydraulics and was forced to crash-land in Sioux City, killing 112 people, while the skill of the pilot resulted in 184 passengers and crew being saved.

Olson retired the following October.

Almost from the beginning of Olson’s career, he was involved in National Press Photographers Association, an organization with which he had a long and important relationship. He joined NPPA in 1952; shortly thereafter, he helped form a local branch of the organization, the Dakota Press Photographers Association, and served as its first president. He was elected a regional director of NPPA in 1962, and served two terms as the organization’s president, in 1964 and 1965. From 1967 to 1971, Olson edited the organization’s magazine, *National Press Photographer* (now called *News Photographer*);

from 1983 to 1987 Olson edited NPPA's annual Pictures of the Year book. Olson received several awards from NPPA: its highest award, the Joseph Sprague Award for his contributions to photojournalism; the Joseph Costa Award "in recognition of his outstanding initiative, leadership and service in advancing the goals of NPPA" in honor of the organization's founder; its J. Winton Lemen Fellowship Award for "continuing to render outstanding service in the interests of press photography," the Samuel Mellor Award for "setting an example of devotion to NPPA's ideals," and the Kenneth P. McLaughlin Award of Merit.

Following Olson's retirement he and his wife, Joanne, spent summers at their lake cabin in the Chippewa National Forest near Marcell, Minnesota. During retirement he edited Calliope, the monthly magazine of Clowns of America, and appeared as a clown at local festivals. Olson was an avid fisherman. It was at the lake cabin that, on July 15, 2009 he suffered a massive head injury in a fall. He died the next day in a hospital in Duluth, Minn.