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Memorial to Ronald L. Olson (1895-1979)

While in California recently, I learned of the death of Ronald L. Olson, which occurred on August 1, 1979, in Escondido, California, near where he had lived most of the time since his retirement from the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley, in 1956. My purpose in writing this memorial essay in honor of Olson is in part motivated by a desire to place on public record certain praiseworthy aspects of Alfred L. Kroeber's character, which were evident in his relationship with Olson and, to a minor extent, also with me.

Soon after I arrived in Berkeley as an impecunious graduate student in anthropology in the fall of 1933, I was made to understand that controversy surrounded Olson, the most recent appointment to the anthropology faculty. Later, I learned that many anthropologists had criticized Kroeber for pushing through Olson's appointment in 1931, two years after he had received his Ph.D. at Berkeley.

Olson's life before he became a Ph.D. candidate at Berkeley was cited as poor preparation for one of the most prestigious and most sought after positions in anthropology. Many times I faced a shaking head and heard repeated: "I cannot understand why Kroeber chose Olson at a time when so many really well qualified scholars wanted the job. Do you know why?" It is well to consider that up to the 1930's most anthropologists were products of the private schools and universities of the eastern United States. A poor farm boy from the West who had not won scholarships to prestigious schools early in life would seem to have no chance for a very desirable appointment.

Olson was a farm boy who did not enter

college until 1921 at the age of 25. He was born in Mankato, Minnesota, and attended a church-run academy nearby for two years, and he met there Marie, who later became his wife. About the beginning of World War I, Olson had joined the U.S. Marines after having been a surveyor's helper and lumberjack in Canada. Of greatest importance for his future was his contracting tuberculosis while fighting in France and being hospitalized there and in the U.S. until 1921 when he was released as a totally disabled veteran with an arrested case of tuberculosis. Part of his rehabilitation was attending the University of Washington. Leslie Spier had received an instructorship there in 1920 following a temporary appointment for a year in Berkeley.

Spier was only a couple of years older than Olson, but he had been involved in anthropology with the New Jersey Geological Survey and American Museum of Natural History for seven years before he received his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1920. Spier was Olson's academic advisor and inspiration as well as being a close personal friend. At the University of Washington, Olson earned his B.A. in 1925 and M.A. in 1926.

At Berkeley, 1926 to 1929, when Olson was awarded his Ph.D., his fellow graduate students were Ralph Beals, Isabel Kelly, Cora DuBois, Julian Steward, Anna Gayton, and Carl Voegelin. William Duncan Strong had just graduated. Why didn't Kroeber choose one of these when he had the authorization to increase the anthropology faculty in 1930? Spier had left Washington and was a visiting professor at Chicago and would have been most pleased to settle in Berkeley. It was

generally assumed both in Berkeley and elsewhere that in 1930 Kroeber was selecting a successor, an heir apparent. No one seemed to agree with Kroeber's judgment.

Olson was controversial because he had received an appointment many others wanted, and to which it appeared to a number of colleagues, others were better suited. Having started his academic pursuits at a later age than most of his contemporaries and having had less pre-university preparation, Olson was very sensitive to criticism from colleagues. He told me, Barnett, and Drucker, his teaching assistants and drinking companions from 1935-1938, the hurt he felt when his old and dear friend Spier, as editor of the *American Anthropologist*, placed as a lead article in one issue a very harsh 10-page criticism of his Ph.D. thesis written by Lowie who had earlier accepted it and approved it for publication in the *UCPAAE* series at Berkeley. The incident is part of the anthropology department folklore at Berkeley, as was evident when it was reported to me in 1980 by a recent graduate.

In spite of being permanently disabled as a result of the tuberculosis he had contracted during World War I, Olson was a large, hearty, and bombastic hale fellow well met. That Kroeber was attracted to and wanted to give special aid and encouragement to late developing rugged country bumpkins is demonstrated by the support he gave to me. On many occasions, I was made to feel by professors and colleagues that I was considered one of the least likely to succeed. Furthermore, I have always been a very poor speller. My Ph.D. thesis was adequate and was signed by both Kroeber and Lowie. Demitri Shimkin and I received our Ph.D. degrees at the same time and we both applied for the Social Science Research Council Post-Doctoral Fellowship. I received the fellowship and had a chance later to talk with the dean at the University of Minnesota who had come to Berkeley for the SSRC to make the final interviews with appli-

cants and sponsors. At an informal moment in Minneapolis the dean who had recommended me in place of Shimkin, told me why I received his determining vote. It was because of Kroeber's strong support for me which was ended with the opinion that "Omer needs it more than Demitri—he can profit more from the extra year of study."

So far as I remember not one of the authors who have written about Kroeber since his death has mentioned Kroeber's selecting Olson in place of a number of others judged at that time to be more worthy as his heir apparent. Maybe no one dared question Kroeber about it, but I believe it was an attraction for opposites. Kroeber was pleased that very diverse and unusual people could obtain Ph.D.'s at Berkeley. He chose one of those most unlike himself to succeed him.

From 1933 to 1940, I saw Olson often and from time to time from 1946 to 1953. He was a great teacher of the two semester "Introduction to Anthropology" and regularly filled the largest lecture hall on the campus. For this Kroeber wrote a special essay in his honor at the time of his retirement in 1956 (*Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* No. 16:1-4, Spring 1957). Students flocked to Olson for advice and council, and for many majors and graduate students he was the only anthropology professor with whom they had any personal association. Students liked his wild informal manner, often aided by beer at student gatherings. Whiskey was reserved for the lost weekends he shared with his teaching assistants and a few nonuniversity drinking buddies.

In 1956, Olson retired at the age of 61, after twenty-five years teaching at Berkeley. Very soon he left Berkeley and Walnut Creek, where he had moved so that his wife Marie, could maintain a kennel. They soon settled in Valley Center, nine miles northeast of Escondido, San Diego County.

In San Diego County, Olson became active

with the Palomar Gem and Mineral Society and with the San Diego Gem and Mineral Society. He did publish two additional articles on the Tlingit in 1961 and 1967, but no further titles attributed to him have been discovered.

My recent telephone discussions with relatives, friends, and neighbors of the Olsons in Valley Center and elsewhere brought out clearly that Ronald never drank alcohol in his new home area. He had become a "tea-totaler." He gave many speeches on his gem collections, especially those from Mexico, and displayed his finds regularly at county fairs and gem and mineral shows. In 1979, Ronald and a niece of his wife, Marie, who had died two years before, took a tour around the world including Siberia. His last lecture at the Valley Center Library, illustrated with slides, dealt with the Holy Land.

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**PUBLICATIONS OF
RONALD L. OLSON**

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