

# JAMES OLSON:

## A SENSE OF HISTORY

By Steve Shinn

The features about the University of Missouri's 16th president that have appeared in the state's newspapers read much alike — sort of an “if you've read one, you've read them all” kind of thing. That's partially because Dr. James C. Olson gives the same answers to the same questions to everyone — not altogether a bad trait, especially when he's the new president of a university which had been beset by credibility problems. Olson also appears to be a very private man, and he is adept at guiding interviews away from subjects that might violate that privacy. A reporter is not going to discover the “real” Jim Olson in a visit of an hour or two.

The news that the Board of Curators had made Interim President Olson permanent President Olson at its meeting on March 18 was greeted with — if not surprise — considerable pleasure by people everywhere: the faculty, the students, the alumni and the legislators. He starts off with a tremendous reservoir of good will. Olson likes to rise early and read an hour or so of history or biography before going to the office. On one particular morning, he dictated 40 letters instead, many of them responses to messages of congratulations and best wishes. He has been encouraged by the outpouring of support from alumni, he says, adding that he considers alumni the “best source of aggressive good will for an institution.” People sincerely want Olson to succeed as president. They recognize that the University needs especially strong leadership at this point in time.

“Point in time” is an important concept to Olson. He's an historian. He and Elmer Ellis, in fact, are the only historians to serve as president of the University of Missouri. Olson believes history is a good background for administrators, helping them keep the everyday problems in context and view the long-term with a perspective of history. Now, of course, there is little time for historical research and writing, but the new president reads history whenever he can, often in the early morning hours. He recently has read a four-volume work on Thomas Jefferson and a two-volume history of the Revolution. Currently, he is writing a review of Stephen Ambrose's *Custer and Crazy Horse*. Before becoming an ad-

ministrator, Olson was an active historian and teacher. He had majored in history as an undergraduate at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, about 120 miles west of the small town of Bradgate, where he grew up. He went on to get his master's and doctor's degree from the University of Nebraska. Olson returned to Lincoln after serving in World War II to become director of the state historical society. He became a full-time professor at Nebraska in 1956, concentrating on the frontier and western history. Olson has a special interest in Indian history. It began early: A winning oration in high school was entitled, “Lo, the poor Indian.” Ten years ago his book, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem*, was published. Olson also recalls with pleasure taping an interview with the Indians' friend, the late John Neihardt, poet laureate of Nebraska and a long-time teacher at Mizzou.

Two of Olson's textbooks, both histories of Nebraska for elementary and junior high ages, were written in collaboration with his wife, Vera Farrington Olson. They had met as teenagers at a Methodist summer camp in northern Iowa. It is a measure of their family commitment that Mrs. Olson did not complete her degree at Nebraska until their two daughters were reared. Elizabeth, the wife of Dr. Steven Goldring of Boston, is a Fellow at M.I.T. Sarah Margaret is in Colorado, working with the park service there in historic preservation. When the daughters (and granddaughter Jessica, 4½) visit, Olson tries to arrange his calendar to spend as much time with them as possible. In summer, the Olson family generally gathers for a month at Cape Cod.

Jim and Vera Olson share many interests. Olson is 60 years old. He doesn't look it, and one reason for his good health, Olson believes, is his insistence on regular physical activity. He plays tennis, but almost always with his wife. He walks, and again, Mrs. Olson often joins him. Mrs. Olson has an abiding interest in the arts and art history. She's a gracious hostess and enjoys her role as the wife of a top university administrator. In his extemporaneous ac-

Dr. and Mrs. James Olson relax on the deck of the president's home overlooking the Hinkson. The Olsons enjoy hiking in this area.



ceptance to the Board's appointment, Olson made it a point to say, "... these kinds of jobs are two-person jobs — Vera and I will give this position the best of which we are capable . . . ."

Certainly, the Olsons threw themselves totally into the chancellor's job at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. They had come there in 1968 from Nebraska, where he was then serving as the vice chancellor for graduate studies and research. Olson likes to say that he never had a job he didn't like, that he has never minded going to work in the morning. That attitude must rub off, because Kansas City liked the Olsons, too. Their rapport with Kansas City society — the River Club, the Mission Hills, the Kansas City Country Club people — gave UMKC enhanced community status quite apart from any improvements made through internal administration. The Olsons still have many friends in Kansas City, although — and this is another mark of a private man — Olson says he really doesn't have friends in the "buddy-buddy sense." In any event, the Olsons enjoy returning to Kansas City. He told the *Kansas City Star*, "there's kind of an ambience in Kansas City that probably isn't duplicated in any other city."

Olson also was generally well-liked by his faculty, staff and students in UMKC. He describes his ad-

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on the campuses, adhering scrupulously to the proper channels. He won't go around his chancellors. Olson is traditional in his approach to the presidency, although he intends to forego the traditional — and sometimes lavish — inauguration. He is personally conservative, wears Brooks Brothers suits, and gave up his crew-cut only three or four years ago. Olson is open with his staff and is considerate of them. It isn't unusual for him to remember the birthday of one of his staff member's children.

Olson has no more than five years as president of the University. Then he will have reached the mandatory retirement age. But he will have ample opportunity to leave his mark. New permanent chancellors must be chosen for three campuses. Rolla and Kansas City now have interim chancellors, and Columbia's Herb Schooling will retire in less than 18 months. It already is clear that there will be fewer vice presidents at the central administration level. He has inherited a university in a steady-state. Expansion is over. The University must reorganize, he says, around its strengths. He doesn't say what changes reorganization will bring. Olson quotes a World War II general who said, "I came here to fight a war, not to talk about it." He quickly points out, however, that "war" is not an appropriate word here. Changes will come by evolution. "Revolution in a university is not healthy," he says. But he adds, "No one should sit back and be comfortable in a dynamic institution."

Olson the president will be influenced by Olson the historian. Historians know that the times often make the man, just as men can help make the times. Right now, the University's constituencies are confident that they have the right man at the right time. □

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ministrative style as "low-key" — and so do those who work close to him. He believes in taking a non-directive, persuasive approach to administration. But he is capable of making decisions and in Kansas City was regarded as effective. He enjoys contact with students and faculty, and he recognizes that this will be more difficult as president of a four-campus system. But he intends to have this contact