

**ROY L. ELSON**

**Administrative Assistant to Senator Carl Hayden  
and Candidate for the United States Senate**

**1955-1969**

Oral History Interviews  
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## PREFACE

The "Great Compromise" that made the Constitution possible gave the small states equal status in the United States Senate, regardless of their population size. In 1912, when Carl Hayden first won election to Congress as Arizona's sole representative in the House, his state had a population of 204,354. Neighboring California, by comparison, had eleven members representing 2,378,000 people. Hayden served in the House from 1912 until 1927, and in the Senate from 1927 until he retired on January 2, 1969. When he left office, Arizona's population had increased to 1,663,000, earning it three representatives in the House; while California had 37 representatives and a population of 19,300,000. Despite their enormous disparity in size, however, Arizona and California each elected two senators.

During Hayden's forty-two years in the Senate, California sent eleven men to the Senate, none of whom could match Hayden's seniority. From 1955 until 1969 Hayden chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee, and from 1957 to 1969 he was elected president pro tempore of the Senate. He also chaired the Democratic Patronage Committee. Over the years, Hayden exerted considerable legislative influence to provide federal funds for his state. President Franklin D. Roosevelt once asked the senator why he always talked about roads. "Because Arizona has two things people will drive thousands of miles to see—the Grand Canyon and the Petrified Forest," Hayden replied. "They can't get there without roads." In 1934, Hayden sponsored legislation to provide \$400 million in highway construction funds to the states without requiring them to match the money. When Roosevelt asked how he had arrived at that figure, Hayden explained that he had telegraphed all the state highway departments and asked them how much they could spend.

President John F. Kennedy acknowledged that "every federal program which has contributed to Western irrigation, power, and reclamation bears Carl Hayden's mark." Although many water projects were a testament to his work, Hayden's greatest monument was the Central Arizona Project to harness the waters of the Lower Colorado River Basin. He first proposed the project in the 1920s, and fought for its approval through state legislatures, the courts, and the Congress. Much of his battle was against the competing claims of California, New Mexico, and Colorado. After one of the longest legislative battles in history, Hayden achieved his goal in

1968, his last year in the Senate, causing the editor of the *Arizona Republic* to proclaim that "Carl Hayden, more than any other man, created what America knows today as Arizona."

In 1952, when Senator Hayden was 75, he hired 22-year-old Roy L. Elson as an assistant secretary on his Washington office staff. By 27, Elson had become Hayden's Administrative Assistant. The aging senator found that the youthful staff "thought his thoughts." Elson became the senator's surrogate in countless meetings involving the Central Arizona Project and other legislative issues. In 1962 he planned the senator's last campaign for reelection. And Elson himself ran as the Democratic candidate for the Senate from Arizona, in 1964 against Paul Fannin, and in 1968 against Barry Goldwater. He was one of the first Senate staff members to become a candidate. Although he was unsuccessful, other staff members followed in his path. At the time Roy Elson gave these interviews in 1990, both the Senate majority leader and the Speaker of the House, as well as other members of both bodies, had previously served on the Congressional staff.

Born in 1930 in Elrama, Pennsylvania, Roy Elson went to Arizona in 1938 with his mother, who was suffering from tuberculosis. His childhood thereafter was divided between Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Southern California. He attended public school in Tucson, and graduated from the University of Arizona. In 1952 he joined Senator Hayden's staff, and then was called to active duty in the air force during the Korean War. He returned to the Senate in 1955 and remained until Senator Hayden retired in 1969. Elson became a Washington lobbyist and a representative of the National Association of Broadcasters. In 1986 he was the government's principal witness before a grand jury investigating organized crime on the West Coast, an experience that caused him to go into hiding for self-protection. From 1989 to 1990 he rejoined the Senate staff to prepare a new edition of *Senate Procedure*.

As Carl Hayden wrote in endorsement of Roy Elson's Senate candidacy, "Roy knows the Congress." In these interviews he shares that knowledge and experience, recalls his personal career, reflects on the senators and staff with whom he served, and offers a candid view of the legislative and appropriations processes.

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Roy L. Elson died in Senoita, Arizona, on February 25, 2010.

*About the Interviewer:* Donald A. Ritchie is associate historian of the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of C.C.N.Y., he received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. He has published articles on American political history and oral history, including "Oral History in the Federal Government," which appeared in the *Journal of American History*. His books include *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (1980), *The U.S. Constitution* (1989), *History of a Free Nation* (1991), and *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (1991). He also edits the *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series)* (Government Printing Office). A former president of both the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), he received OHMAR's Forrest C. Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.