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Interviewee: John Robert Pickering Fletcher  
Interviewer: Jack Rowan  
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Jack Rowan: The first thing I’d like to do is if I could have you state your full name and your date of birth. The reason for this is when a record collection is created it’ll have all that information right there.

John Fletcher: Okay. So my full name is John Robert Pickering Fletcher. Born [full birth date restricted], 1948.

JR: Great, thank you John. As I mentioned, my first question for you is to ask you a little bit about the background of what brought the New Party together? What were the main impetuses?

JF: This is Margaret Kingsland, who is also an oral history buff. Jack Rowan. Margaret.

Margaret Kingsland: How do you do Jack?

JR: Very nice to meet you.

MK: Glad to meet you. Glad that you’re doing this, thanks.

JR: It’s my pleasure.

JF: I actually was not present at the birth. In the spring of 1993, some people were getting together and we had a person come and visit from the outside world—Tole Rogers. But again I wasn’t there. So that was followed by perhaps an organizing meeting and anyway, in perhaps May or June of ’93, my friend Paul Lynn came to me and said, “John, I’m not into this but this is something you might be into.” I think he was saying that because he knew that I had, several years earlier, run for the city council here in Missoula and that since then I had joined a couple of local government boards and so he knew I was a political junkie.

Anyway, so that’s when I started attending meetings—was in the late spring of ’93—and in June of ’93 the person who had volunteered to be the treasurer or the clerk told folks that—anyway, so I volunteered to take over as that.

So because it was, amongst other things, a political group which had to submit reports to Helena, I took on kind of the treasurer-type jobs, which in the early days didn’t involve a lot of spending of money but did involve recording our income and expenses and keeping an eye on that. Reporting that to not only our steering committee, which met monthly or sometimes even
weekly, depending on what was going on. And then I’d also report to Helena once a year. A
couple of times I was able to pass that job off on others, but it kept coming back to me, so I was
still doing that when we folded our tent. But there were several other people who did do some
of what we called the clerk job.

JR: So in ’93, were there any particular events or was it a response to a national movement, do
you think, that this party came into being?

JF: I think the Missoula New Party was always a Missoula operation. The name “The New Party”
we took on because there were other New Party chapters performing in other communities
and so there was a national organization of sorts, never as well organized as we were here. I
think I’m the only person who paid several visits to the national offices in Manhattan and then
in Brooklyn. But yeah, I’d say while there was an organization that was attempting to be
nationwide, our focus was local. In particular, every two years, in the odd years, we elect
people to our city council. In ’93 there were people who at least were coming. And in the early
days—we’ll say in ’93—we were still working out what it meant to be a member of New Party.
But then that pretty much solidified and by the end of ’93 we were a membership organization.
But for the ’93 city council races, some of our members ran for the city council. For the ’93,
some of the people who were incumbents joined the New Party. That’s sort of what was driving
the formation at that time, was we wanted to get some people on city council.

And then the flipside of that was we wanted to get some people on city council who were
different from many of those who were on city council. Especially we wanted to—well those
were a time and it’s still an issue. At that time, city council offices—the mayor and council
members—ran on a partisan basis. There had been or has been a gradual shift of the center of
politics—has moved to the right. I suppose I first began waking up politically in maybe the
1950s, but I personally think that Dwight Eisenhower was far to the left of Bill Clinton, and so
this phenomenon had happened in Missoula. Many people thought that the folks who were
calling themselves Democrats were what we considered right-wing Republicans. So we felt that
the notion of—those of us who were getting organized, we didn’t want to organize. Some
people were members of the local Missoula Democratic party and even involved in their
Missoula County Democratic Central Committee. I wasn’t one of them, but there were some
people in the beginning. And for the life of the New Party who thought the Missoula New Party
was the liberal or progressive or left wing of the Missoula Democratic Party. Other people, like
myself, just didn’t see the point in that and didn’t have that kind of loyalty to the Democratic
Party.

I think we had a clear sense that we didn’t want to mess things up for either of the existing
parties. We never tried to mess up their primaries. We never made endorsements in primaries,
except for our own members. But a lot of that is the whole notion of being a—and this was very
much an early-on sense of the Missoula New Party that I think we managed to maintain
throughout 10 years’ existence—is that we’re a membership organization, and that we
members were going to do more than just vote. We were going to try to learn about the issues.

John Fletcher Interview, OH 400-001, Archives & Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of
Montana-Missoula.
We were going to try and learn about the process. We were going to ourselves serve on government boards. We were going to do recruiting and hope that we can get from within our membership people willing to run for office. And then every New Party member was going to be a canvasser, someone who wasn’t afraid to go out on the doors and to work for our candidates. So those I think were ideas that we agreed on all of those in ’93, our first year. We moved away from some of that, but that’s for later question.

JR: So, as you mentioned, the Missoula New Party really was most active around the elections from 1993 to 2003, is that correct?

JF: Well, no, in that—again, this is my opinion—elections were just part of what we did. Unlike the other parties, we said we’re going to hold a monthly meeting, every month, of our general membership. Then we’d have meetings for our steering committee a couple times a month. We were really big on educating our own members. The point I’m trying to make is that’s another difference between us and, we thought, other parties. Other parties exist to get their people elected at elections that happen every couple of years. We hoped to be an organization whose members were engaged in something that was steady all the time.

Early on, we established a list-serve so all of us could be talking to each other. So it went beyond just being a bulletin board. It was also a way in which we gathered into each other into a community conversation. So I think it was an ongoing social organization and I think that’s also what most of us miss about it is that it was a way—in some ways it was more like a book club, in that we got together regularly and we talked about a common interest and often it was a common text. So I’d say we spent—I mean, sure, we were looking forward to coming elections and preparing for elections and all that, but in the two years between elections we spent our time looking at how our people were doing, talking to our people, getting our folks that had been elected to tell us about the issues that were coming up and informing ourselves about how local government works.

So I think it was about a lot more than elections, especially because a lot of it was getting our own people interested in serving at other levels of local government. Elections are just one way of getting people in office, not a particularly tasteful way of getting people into office, not a very satisfying way of getting people into office. So a lot of our folks were also being appointed to office and a lot of our folks were—you can be involved in local government just by going to meetings and speaking up. That’s what was happening too. That’s another thing that distinguished us from the other parties in that we didn’t care all that much about being elected to office because we had these other longer-term interests, and I think we approached the whole notion of seeking office differently.

JR: Thanks for that clarification. Following from that, reflecting on that particular aspect—and this is kind of bridging that line where I’m asking your opinion—but do you believe that there were certain issues that helped motivate it, or was it more a group of people that just wanted to find a different way to be involved in local government?
JF: Issues, yeah. Feelings, I think probably at the beginning, more of that in people were genuinely disappointed in the actual political content of the actual city council. And Missoula’s always had a—or at least I’ve been attending city council meetings on Monday nights since...well, I guess I first started listening to them on KUFM and then when KUFM took them off the air in about maybe 1980, I was going and showing up. But anyway, the point I was trying to make: Missoula’s always had some good folks of all political persuasions willing to serve. We’ve had some duds too. Some of it is that electoral process that I mentioned. You don’t necessarily get, in fact you often don’t get, the very best people to serve in an electoral process, but it’s what we have.

There was a time of disappointment I think that was happening in the early ‘90s. Some of it was just disappointment with how some of the members of city council were marketing themselves. In particular—it wasn’t that big a deal for me—but I know some people were really hurt that there were folks that were calling themselves Democrats that in their opinion weren’t Democrats. There was no way of really controlling that, so I think that was one reason why the New Party became a membership organization and you actually would show up and become known to your fellows and they could help shape your own political views. It was just more open. So I’d say some of the usual values of transparency and accountability, authenticity—those were values that were important.

Issues that you asked about: I think I can’t really remember a huge driving issue until the Living Wage Campaign, which came along much later. That was in the late ‘90s. That was part of a movement that was sweeping the country. That was also unfortunate in that what we were talking about in this community as a Living Wage Campaign was not what people in the rest of the country were talking about as a Living Wage Campaign. We were very much deliberately limiting—well, I’m getting ahead of myself. We limited our discussion on that to when public funds went to private or quasi-public bodies. When public funds were at use, we wanted to see a wage that brought people out of poverty. Or at least brought them off food stamps, that level of poverty. So that was a campaign. Both nationally and locally that got confused, I think, with the notion of minimum wage—perhaps deliberately confused. It’s our fault that we chose a name or a label that could be confusing.

So that’s an example of an issue that I think we took on. I think it was an issue that was of national concern at that time and arguably all chapters of the New Party might have been concerned about that and they’ve had Living Wage Campaigns going on at the same time. So you asked earlier about a national issue so sure, maybe that was one.

JR: I had another question I was forming and then...

JF: It faded away.

JR: It faded away. Sometimes that happens.

John Fletcher Interview, OH 400-001, Archives & Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
JF: That probably means that my answers drifted off.

JR: No, no, I think it’s just myself. I need to remain more focused. When would you say, in terms of it as a member-based organization, could you identify a period—like maybe a highest period—where you saw the most amount of membership? Or was it pretty steady throughout the entire existence of the organization?

JF: It was a membership organization. I think some of us meant that to be almost a limiting factor, in that we were not trying to increase our numbers because we wanted folks to understand that there are responsibilities that come with being a member of the New Party. Frankly, we don’t want your money, your payment of $36 a year in annual dues. What we wanted was something more. We wanted you to be involved. We wanted you to learn how to, at election times, walk the doors and talk to people and that sort of thing. At other times, we wanted our members to serve in other ways.

I think there were maybe 50 people in 1993 who were doing all those things that I mentioned. I think there were 50 people in 2003 who—or 2000, whenever we ran our last election, 2001—that were doing those things. Very often they were the same people. The point I’m trying to get at is we were a membership organization but it was important, especially for some of us, that we have more and more members. It wasn’t that important for others of us because we wanted members who would do what members were supposed to, or what we expected of them.

So anyway, I give you one answer. I think we never grew beyond 50 members who were doing all the responsibilities that we initially expected a member to do. There were, if you measure membership by how many dues-paying members we had, probably we got up to over 200, I think, in about 2000.

We also had—and I’m talking about money here—some of those were people who just gave the local chapter $36 a year, which were membership dues. A lot of those, a significant number, were people who instead were paying the national party through either having their checking account debited every month, or their credit card being debited every month. The national party was taking those and then was using that money to pay a staffer who was here. But the latter type of funding, that was reported by national to the folks to whom it made its reports in New York, and was not reported here. I make that distinction just because I was the person who had to take care of making that distinction. So we had our local checking account and so we of course would report what went into our local checking account.

We had people who were paying either of those two forms—dues or sustainer payments—a couple hundred. Probably had, at the height of our list-serve, which is another way of measuring how many people, how many email addresses are you sending things out to, a couple of hundred that way too. Maybe a bit more. We were pretty stiff about—you could
really only be on our list-serve if you were a member. That’s why the numbers are about the same.

JR: Is there any point in there that you go...Hmm, I’m getting into more and more subjective terms. Do you feel there was a high point in terms of the activity of the organization and what you saw happening on the local level as a result?

JF: Well, I mentioned the Living Wage Campaign. That was a coalition. There were lots of people who were concerned about that issue who weren’t members of the New Party, and we were certainly pleased to work with them. Some people, after working together with us on the Living Wage Coalition, said, “Hey, this is pretty good. We’ll join the New Party.” So I mentioned that as a time in which we were actually functioning as a coalition. So I think that would be a direct response to your question that there were high points in which we were doing things other than electoral stuff.

The Living Wage Campaign was—first, we were trying to get something through the city council. An issue through the city council, not an election. And then we actually—when that failed—we got an issue on the ballot, and then we were campaigning again. Not for election of people to the city council, but for an approval of something on the ballot. That ended up failing. But I think the effort was certainly worthwhile and the community conversation was worthwhile, because within a year it was passed by the city council. So there were some people who wanted to take it to the people directly, others who said, “No, let’s go through the council process.” I think probably the latter view was confirmed as the way to go in that eventually it was passed through the council. It passed through the council by—oh, I think it got seven votes out of 12. That sounds as though...yeah, sure, it’s one more than the majority. We also had the mayor on our side by that point.

Some of it, I think, was also an understanding, particularly for when we had it as a referendum. The Chamber of Commerce and many of Missoula’s employers were deliberately confusing it with a minimum wage thing and interfering with private enterprise: people get to run their own payroll; horrible socialism at work. When that was not the case. I don’t think we really could have—educating the citizenry is...I think we enjoyed doing it throughout the life of the Missoula New Party. But that’s a tough commitment to make and I don’t think we ever were able to overcome some of the deliberate misinformation that was put out on that, whereas the city council they knew exactly what was going on. They knew the issue and it just took them a while to—including some of the more conservative people, not New Party members on the council, they knew it was the right thing to do, and the responsible thing to do with public money. So that’s an example of an issue-oriented campaign that was more than just the New Party on that.

So we met lots of other folks. It was a good, functioning coalition. And it turned out good for the New Party in the sense that membership and credit afterwards. There were lots of social
forces, especially ones that have survived past the death of the New Party that are doing the same sort of responsible work that we were trying to do. Lots of—

[End of Tape 1, Side A]
JR: You had mentioned that there were some churches and NGOs that kind of picked up the non-profit—

JF: Yeah, I think the New Party itself wasn’t a big deal in Missoula because the community itself sustains this sort of thinking, and I think the proof of that is that some people can say maybe New Party members don’t get together to meet and fulfill themselves socially, but we’re certainly electing good people to the city council without the New Party. And we’re dealing with the issues that we—especially social change issues, dealing with resolving some of the conflicts that we have, I think we’re dealing with those pretty well now in 2005. A lot of the credit for what the New Party was able to accomplish in concert with others really goes to the others also—the other organizations and individuals.

JR: I’m not necessarily trying to cap things on that phase of our interview, but what would you say brought about the ultimate demise or the decision to no longer keep working as an active organization?

JF: In the 2001 election, there was only one candidate running who was a New Party member. I want to be sure I got this right. I think I’ve got the date right—2001. But anyway, that person lost, in the opinion of many, largely because not the candidate but the candidate’s association with the New Party was being slammed, especially slammed with money collected all over the community, even though it was a race in just one ward. And it was a ward in which we felt these were our roots, too. This was the race in Ward 2 and Ward 2, until quite recently—until the annexation of Grant Creek—had been Missoula’s longest tradition of being a blue-collar neighborhood. A neighborhood that had been a union neighborhood and politically coherent. When we lost that, it was a time to—it wasn’t the first time we’d lost a race in Ward 2 but it was a wake-up call to some members saying that: better that good people not be saddled with the label of the New Party.

We were an organization that reached its decision through consensus. I, when it came to the stage in our decision-making process, you know: Is there anyone who disagrees with this? Actually I was the lone person to stand up and say, “Yeah, I have profound disagreement with folding up the New Party.” And I say that because it should be part of the answer to your question, in that I’m perhaps not the right one to ask that question. I didn’t withhold consensus. I said, “It’s fine by me. My feelings won’t be hurt if you want to pass this over my head.” And that’s how the decision was reached. But I did not agree with the decision but we don’t have to go into that here. I wanted that to be part of the answer to the question is that you’re probably not asking the right person that question.

JR: With the local Missoula New Party, do you feel there was an intention to start on the local level and then maybe graduate some of that involvement to the state and national level? Or do you feel it was always focused in on Missoula, and making a difference in this community?
JF: My response to that would be a bit of analysis. I feel there were always two—there was a divergence of opinion on that question. There were some people who firmly thought that the whole notion of “party” meant that it was connected to having a ballot line status; expecting to see candidates on a line on a ballot and that ballot line is the New Party line. So there were people who would have liked to have seen that in Missoula and then statewide and then nationwide. There were others—and I’m part of the second branch, I think, of the New Party—for whom not only was that not important but that that was counter-productive. I was a strong champion that we do away with party affiliation locally. So in the 1995 local government review, I spoke up for that, as did many others; some New Party members, some not.

So we did away with party affiliation and partisan elections for local elections. I think my reasons for that were twofold. One, it kept us out of any conflict with established parties, which for me was always important—that we don’t get into going up against the Democrats particularly. But I think also I personally don’t think that party affiliation is all that useful in public policy and that it messes things up.

But there were members of the New Party who not only wanted to have chapters in other Montana cities, but wanted to actually have—at a statewide level, do what the Libertarians and the Constitutionals and the Reform people did, which was to have a ballot line. And then there were people to whom this was important, not just in the Missoula New Party but in other chapters of the New Party. They looked at a notion, and the modern term for this notion is fusion.

Some states in the U.S. have a provision in their laws that say that one candidate can run on several party lines. The major model for this is New York state. So Hilary Clinton ran on the Democratic Party line. She also ran on two other parties’ lines. In theory, the way this works is when Hilary Clinton looks and sees that she got 47 percent of her votes from people who voted on the Democratic Party line and she got 22 percent of her votes from people who voted on the Working Families’ party line, that she should pay attention to people in the Working Families’ Party. That’s I think the way it’s supposed to work. Anyway, there was a move afoot here in Missoula. A lot of people were thinking this might be a way, without offending the other parties, to achieve ballot line status in Montana. But before we really got seriously organized in doing that in Montana, and before we overcame the inertia from people such as myself—who weren’t really all that interested in that—the Timmons decision went through the U.S. Supreme Court because the New Party in Minnesota had tried exactly that. But the U.S. Supreme Court said—well, I won’t go into the basis of that decision, but it turned that idea down as saying all states had to do this. A state can still do it if it wishes but it need not. And so at that point I think any push for ballot line status for the New Party in Missoula faded.

But there really were some people very interested in this and that’s what their notion of what a party is: you’re not a party unless you have a ballot line. Other people thought that a party was about organization and discipline and solidarity and so on. I’m one of the latter group.
JR: So in line from that, you mention when the group first started forming here that there were visits by someone from the outside world.

JF: Should I tell the story of that?

JR: Please, yes.

JF: Joel Rogers came to Missoula in the early 90s. A new party had formed—small letters, not capital letters—in Canada: what’s now called the New Democratic Party. Some of us had been looking over the border, especially what was happening in Alberta, and it looked pretty good. Joel Rogers was and still is a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He came to Missoula and gave a talk, as did, at about the same time, Dan Canter, who comes out of more of an organizing tradition and he’s from New York. Anyway, Danny and Joel had good ideas and Joel especially is a very charismatic person. Parenthetically I’ll say a cult-building person. So there were these national stimuli; or people who came in and had suggestions about what was happening in other parts of the world. Especially other communities like Missoula—Madison, Wisconsin, for instance—also a university town.

So I think we took a hold of those ideas. We took a hold of some of—well, let me back up a bit. We had just the members, say that cadre of 45 people that I mentioned early on in 1993. Some of those people came from a background of what we call organizing. That social and political power can come through getting people to come together and educating people and that the more and more of this sort of people they could get—it builds a social impetus and things can happen. Others of us came from maybe more of a tradition of ideas and direct activism. So the people in the latter—it’s being simplistic to say there were two sides—but the people from the latter group, it just wasn’t all that important, and I’m including myself there, how many numbers we were. It was things like commitment and responsibility and engagement were what was important. But others of us in, say, the other camp—kind of the organizing camp—it was important for them that we go out and recruit more members. It was important for them that we move away from being a volunteer-based organization to having a staffer. And that staffer’s main job was to go out and get more people.

This is the second instance in which I pretend that there were sort of two opposing camps, but we actually got on quite well. It’s just that some of us had different levels of enthusiasm for what was very important for others of us. So I think that there were times when we would get into certainly “engaged” discussions, shall I say. I don’t really recall any shouting matches, but there were marital separations and divorces and so on that may have been related to those things.

Anyway, I bring this sort of a second thing in to say that there were different styles of organizing or different sets of standards for what was important. How should we grade
ourselves on our development and growth and progress towards any goals? There were just people that had very different notions of how we should review ourselves.

JR: In looking back, one of the other political issues that seem to be coming to the forefront during that period was the occupancy standards, and I’m curious as to—was that an issue that the New Party took a position on? Or was that something that was seen as—I guess, how did that play into the dynamics of the New Party and its activities?

JF: I think the New Party’s—well, occupancy standards came from another group, another well-organized group in our community. A group that arguably until the New Party, was used to being the one group that had most influence over the Missoula city council. So it was their occupancy standards, was their issue, and it still goes on today. I’d say the New Party—well, first of all, it went along with the city attorney and the Montana Human Rights Bureau, both of whom had given official opinions that the occupancy standards weren’t particularly lawful.

And then secondly, the Missoula New Party saw the way the occupancy standards at that time were being presented—when so many people who aren’t related by familial status or marriage are living together—and placed limitations on the number of people, and the subtext of it was: we want our community to be Ozzie and Harriet families just like it was in the fifties and so on. I’m a product of the fifties and I can remember Ozzie and Harriet, but I think a lot of members of the New Party just weren’t invested in that sort of a—that wasn’t their identity. And I doubt if there were many open and active homosexuals in the group that did devise the occupancy standards. We’ve got a lot of them in the Missoula New Party. I doubt if there are bunch of mixed and blended families in the group that devised the occupancy standards. We’ve got a lot of those in the Missoula New Party.

Anyway, what I think I’m trying to say is we were confident that those members of the Missoula New Party on the city council would oppose the occupancy standards when they finally came to decision by the city council. I think we also recognized that the occupancy standards were never intended to be an issue that would come up for votes at city council. Rather, they were a political wedge issue to be used in political contents and to be trotted out every now and then as saying, “Oh, this person is against our occupancy standards,” and so on. It’s an effective device and is still going on even in our current council and mayoral elections.

It’s another group’s issue and it wasn’t the New Party’s issue. We reacted against it, but I think we realized it was someone else’s issue. It wasn’t ours. It became, for other folks—it let them say, “Oh, the New Party didn’t support our occupancy standards,” and so on. But I personally never got too upset about—well, I don’t think I’m being too cynical by saying it was a political wedge issue and I know it’s still being used as that.

JR: Well, two other issues that seemed to be prominent in local politics at that time—that was a period when a lot of (inaudible) and a commitment towards providing incentives to re-develop within the existing core of the Missoula community, as well as open space—were two kind of
prominent issues in local politics. Were those issues that the New Party responded to, or do you think helped to frame that discussion?

JF: They were certainly issues that the New Party had to engage in. Again, I’d say the New Party really wasn’t about issues as much as it was about process and just getting involved—engagement. I think the New Party did, first of all, discuss—and we tried to educate ourselves about both of those, and I’d say we took a position. Our candidates certainly took a position and we supported them in it. So briefly, yeah, full support of open space—did try to at least mention in our endorsements that we knew that stewardship of open space was a consequent issue; that we’d have to pay attention. It’s not just merely acquiring lands but having to take care of the lands, and that developing public policy for that would take time and would take discipline and all the rest of it—commitment. And on the infill, I can say that I think we took the Missoula—we, again, tried to educate ourselves. We were lucky to have some members of the party that were professional planners and by this time I, too, had taken all the planning courses that the University here has to offer in its public administration program. And I, by that time, had served on the planning board and was a member of the American Planning Association myself. I think we supported notions of infill in the sense that it was the fiscally prudent thing for a community to do is to concentrate infrastructure, to build up rather than out, and not be extending the city limits through annexation and other means.

So actually, some of the policy; the expansion of Missoula—some New Party members have actually been against that. There’s not been a lot of talk about that: the way our city limits have expanded. As far as what we call the “toolbox of growth management” and so on: I think the New Party was open to having a toolbox and having some ideas such as density bonuses. These really aren’t—I think we’re making too much of them if we pretend those are political issues in that I think they are literally tools which we’ll find [that] some are useful under certain circumstances. Some tools you might want to give away at a garage sale; you’ve found that they’re not all that useful. But you probably have to try them anyway, and at least think about adding them to the toolbox and certainly having an attitude towards a toolbox in that you do want to have tools in it, whatever their shape.

So I think, again, the members of the New Party did try hard to educate themselves and that’s part of, say, that list-serve that I mentioned. We did a lot of self-education. We passed around a lot of articles. We’d talk about them in our meetings. I think that sort of internal emphasis and engagement is, at least at this distance, what remains with me from that initial growth management discussion that we had in the late 90s and roughly 2000—when our current growth management plan and growth policy were adopted.

JR: You said there were at least 50 core people that were involved, and it seems like some of them have to try to take on a role on a national level in getting—or at least an expanded [effort] of keeping the New Party going, whereas some abstained. Who were some of the key people that were involved early on and that you still say are the core New Party?
JF: Well I think you’re better informed than I am, Jack, in that I would say there’s—I haven’t seen any interest in keeping the New Party going on a local level, and I know only of say one of those members of the initial 50 who is, to my knowledge, serious about keeping some of this going on a national level. I’m not saying that people have fallen away from politics or political interest. We’ll always find in any group of political activists that probably most of the people in that room—at least at the functions that I attend, which are gatherings of political activists—I think a coherent thread is that most of the people in that room happen to be former members of the Missoula New Party. That’s because there actually is just a cadre of people who are politically active on that level and of that general persuasion in Missoula. I think that’s the reason that we came together, and I think that’s probably also the reason we’re still—I mean, we haven’t stopped. I don’t think the demise of the New Party has made any of us go and hide, or bruised us or something like that.

Names of people that were there at the beginning who are still interested in politics...of the two—and this is crude—some of our folks came from an organizing background. So we had people from the Missoula unions, some of whom are still organizing with union work. And we had people from—

[End of Tape 1, Side B]
JR: You had mentioned that another aspect of New Party activity and the commitment of that local organization was an outcome of the neighborhood council and neighborhood association.

JF: Yeah, we have to take care of our terminology here. Neighborhood associations came well before the New Party, and actually it’s a neighborhood association or a homeowner’s association that I mentioned earlier that was a political force before the Missoula New Party came along and so on. But yes, the decision to divide the city up into 17 neighborhoods, and to purposely engage people at the neighborhood level in coming together, and regularly talking over issues that are impacting their neighborhood—both for information exchange and to seriously move to form a pipeline. And move issues up the pipeline towards local government.

That whole neighborhood initiative was championed in the 1995 local government review study commission. It was members of the Missoula New Party who were—after the city voted in to have neighborhood councils along this sort of format, the people whom the city hired to do that were New Party members Len and Judy Smith. With probably the political consequences, there are still folks who either don’t like neighborhood councils and what they’re doing, or who don’t like Len and Judy Smith and what they’re doing. And they conflate the two and point fingers and associate neighborhood councils with creeping communism, or say the same thing about Len and Judy—both of which I think are unwarranted.

But another example of that is precisely the sort of thing that the New Party was interested in: at the lowest possible level of grassroots; getting people to inform themselves and discuss issues, and get used to just meeting regularly, and having bylaws, and having to amend the bylaws every now and then, and to have parliamentary procedure in their meetings—all of which are aspects of government. And that’s very much consistent for the New Party to have people recognize what they can be and to get going, to get cracking, to be engaged. So that was a good reminder, so thank you Jack. That’s very much an issue that the New Party was involved in here in Missoula.

JR: Taking a step back, at the very beginning you talked about how you took on the clerk position fairly early on, and then you tried to hand it off at times and it kept coming back to you. As the clerk of the Missoula New Party, what were some of the activities involved there, and what were some of the other aspects of your involvement—your personal involvement in the New Party?

JF: Well, the aspect of being clerk that I took most seriously and that we should take most seriously is that aspect of accountability: the annual reports that are filed with the Missoula County elections office and with the office of the commissioner for political practices in Helena. We do have confusing statutes and administrative rules in Montana. Some people thought of the New Party as a PAC. And it was a PAC if we also include that the Democratic Party also has
to fill in those same forms and so on, and so all political organizations are PACs. We were, I think, a bit different from PACs in that we...well, that’s getting off the subject.

What I did was—that’s the main thing that the clerk does and you have to do it right—is to submit those reports. And then the clerk also—because we were an organization which did use our members’ money—had to report in on our financial situation and that sort of thing to our own members and to our steering committee especially. And so there would be quarterly reports that we’d print up and have distributed to our membership, especially when we needed to make budgetary decisions. So the clerk would do all that. Also, the clerk—after a while, I think around 1995, we had paid staff. And so while I didn’t do the actual payroll work because that was done out of New York, I was the person who would work most closely with the staff person in that the main chore that a staffer did was go out and find new members. So I would then be the person that the staff person would say, “Oh, here’s this card that I got filled in and here’s the check that so-and-so wrote.” Then I would also run the list-serve, which was our main communications device. So those were all things that were in the job description of the clerk. I also—ex-officio the clerk is a member of the steering committee, so I ended up going to all the steering committee meetings.

And I did mention handing the job off onto others? I think that’s because we all recognized that it’s not good for any particular individual to have a role too long. So I’m glad that others agreed with me on that. So three times, other people were the clerk and actually it wasn’t until after we dissolved that I resumed—because I was the person that had the most experience in dealing with the national—that I did most of the real wrapping up of business; including submitting the last reports and amended reports to the state.

I think I was also the member who, just as a citizen, most consistently attended the Missoula city council’s Monday night meetings. So I think I was also able to be useful both as a clerk and because the New Party really was committed to accountability. We didn’t want to just elect someone and not have any contact with that person until another four years, when the person may want to be re-elected. I think I was useful in maintaining that accountability, in that we would talk over what issues are before city government and we’d ask our members who happened to be serving as city council members, what was going on, but we also tried to have that process move in the other direction too and say what we thought was important in the community. That was particularly the case in the neighborhood council movement, the Living Wage movement, and some of those more issue-oriented matters.

And I think maybe also because I was a New Party member who had served two terms, six years, as a trustee of the Missoula Public Library—I had served seven years, two-plus terms on the Missoula Consolidated Planning Board. And I served maybe three years on the Missoula Planning Policy Committee and our Transportation Policy Planning Committee. Anyway, I had served in local government committees and I’d run for office. I guess I’ve been on the ballot four times now. I think both of those things made it—because we as members of the Missoula New Party; we all tried to run for office, we all tried to serve on local government boards. That...
was what we all felt was part of our job description, and that’s especially true of that initial cadre that stayed with us. So all those are levels of commitment that I was able to do and discuss with others, and others would do the same thing.

JR: The planning commission; you actually took on that role prior to the New Party.

JF: Yes, but also during the New Party.

JR: So during your time as an active member in the party, were there those type of roles that you had previously maybe not considered, or just never even fathomed, that you think your membership in that organization helped spur you to say, “Okay, this is something I need to do”? Because you mentioned being on the Board of Trustees of the public library at some point. Were most of those prior to your participation in the New Party, or were there new roles that came out of your experience?

JF: Well in ’93, when I became a member of the New Party and took on some of the clerking roles, I was still a trustee of the public library and I was still on the planning board, and I continued on to some other roles: County Board of Adjustment. If the intent of your question is the effect of having both, or how it was seen in the community—

JR: No, let me clarify my question. You took on a very active role—the clerk—as well as trying to earn a living and so forth. I’m curious if being a part of that organization [inaudible]. It’s always a hard time to decide, “Okay, what can I really do?” I’m curious if being a part of the group helped spur you to say, “Okay, I know I’ve got a lot going on, but this is something that’s important to me. I’m going to go ahead and do this.” Or was it more continuing those things you had already been involved in, and just bringing the awareness into your participation in the larger organization?

JF: I guess more the latter, Jack. My interest in just how we humans govern ourselves almost from my humanities perspective, that’s been ongoing. The 10 years of the Missoula New Party, or less—that was just a segment of that ongoing interest. The New Party wasn’t all that time-consuming, frankly. It could be, at times. During the run up to an election or when we were—sometimes I’d be the person who was sort of the direct—our staffer would report, as much as that person reported to anyone, would report to me. So maybe at times, like when we were hiring a staffer, maybe that might take some time. As an organization, if we had a shortcoming, it’s that we probably didn’t devote enough time to some pretty serious things. We should have taken hiring and firing more seriously than we did. Or just in kind of what we’d now call human resource issues. And we didn’t. There were certainly things that the New Party mouthed, things that we were going to do that we didn’t do, but largely for the reasons that [inaudible].

We did have interests in jobs and other things in the real world and it did consume—I mean they consume their time, and we all have lives. I think we were ambitious in the New Party and you can’t let politics overwhelm you. It’s not a healthy thing to do. I do think that what
members did in their jobs, you know, especially—members were, as you might expect, just ordinary people. And so I think what members did in their job or in their other interests, or their other community service, brought credit to the New Party in that it made people realize, “Oh, this is just an ordinary person.”

Also I think too many people in the community thought that party politics is all just on one particular linear spectrum and there are people on the right and people on the left and people further on the left. Whereas, in truth, the New Party contained people of all sorts of political persuasions, especially along that spectrum. We were more interested in some of those other notions: transparency, accountability, engagement, education, and those membership aspects I talked about—a serious commitment to being willing to engage. And the other political parties; those just aren’t values that they have. I think the fact that New Party members were engaged in their New Party stuff, plus all their things in their other lives, was good for the New Party in that the people in the larger community got a sense of: “Well, OK, this person’s a real human and we don’t need to—if we get to know a person we don’t need to make fun of that person’s membership in the New Party.” Just like if you get to know a person of some particular religious persuasion. If you really know the person then maybe you change your mind about the stereotype you’ve held about that particular religious persuasion. I guess that would be the main benefit that I saw from all of us working in several fields or having to do our regular job as well as other levels of political engagement.

JR: I believe you mentioned that you actually ran for council. Was that prior to—

JF: Prior to the party, a bit. I’ve been on the ballot four times. I’m 0 for 4—but yes, I ran for city council in ’89 against the incumbent Mike Craig. In ’94 or ’95, when we had a local government review commission, I was one of many people that ran for that and was not one of the top seven vote-getters. I ran for county commissioner in ’98, I think it was, and was defeated by Jerry Balias who was also running for county commissioner. I was defeated in the primary and he was defeated in the general. And then I ran this most recent time for a local government review commission for the county in 2004, and wasn’t one of the top seven vote-getters in that.

But frankly Jack, both of those were an expression of my interest and also, well, you heard my comments about electing people to office: doesn’t have a lot to do with how they serve in office. But I guess I’ll also stand here and say there’s nothing wrong with running for election and not winning. And it shouldn’t deter anyone from running for office. I think that was probably another New Party value that we tried to say, “Hey, get engaged, run for office. It’s certainly a test, but you survive afterwards. Your ego will be intact, on the other side, even from a loss. And think of running for another office.”

JR: When you look back on—we talked about this a little bit, but maybe more stepping out of the role of talking about the history of the organization. When you look back on it, what do you think was some of the best—not necessarily the biggest successes, but the best experiences and the best legacies that came out of the New Party?
JF: I think it’s probably too early to work on legacy. I’m glad of some of the issues that came to public discussion and were asked through the political means, like the neighborhood councils and the Living Wage. They were a struggle and were eventually accepted by the community, and the New Party had a role in each of those. I wouldn’t want to overstate that because it was a small role.

Again, I’d say just as an individual, the impact upon me was largely social; meeting hundreds of really fine people at meetings, or often still today I’m introduced to someone whom I only really knew from seeing their name on a check. And then when the two of us begin talking about that, there have certainly been times when I’ve been glad that that person had written that check and that obviously that person was glad that she or he had written that check because that person now is proud of saying, “Hey, I was with the New Party too.” And I think these days that’s only really dusted off when we see one of those crank letters to the editor in election time as someone is actually using the New Party as some sort of an epithet.

I don’t wear my New Party around a lot but I haven’t thrown it away. So maybe at benefit auctions they’ll be handed out and people will bid 50 dollars for a t-shirt in 20 years. I’m being light-hearted but I think that’s probably the most realistic and sane way to judge something that we have committed to the past.

I know I’m certainly too close to it to think about a legacy that’s anything beyond just what I feel individually and my individual thoughts—at least at this moment—are still that I got great social benefit from it. Some of the people that I worked with I’d known for 20 years before 1993 when the New Party began. So it was just another aspect of our relationship. But a lot of people I met through the New Party, and we’ve retained that relationship. If nothing else, just partying together. I think that’s the most frequent comment that people say, “Hey, we ought to rent Orchard Homes again and have another gala. And it was good cooking together in preparation for that, and sneaking out back for some refreshment and coming in and going on with our cooking or whatever.” That kind of a social nostalgia is, at this stage, the only legacy I can measure. Leave some of that for others.

I do get a bit defensive when I see some of what I regard as uninformed comments about the New Party. But there’s really no way that you can persuade someone who never went to a meeting of the New Party to go to a meeting of the New Party because the New Party doesn’t meet anymore. So there’s really no way they could really inform themselves about what the New Party was about. I think other perceptions count as much as mine. It makes good material for letters to the editor.

JR: A few more minutes on this side and I just wanted to ask you—you talked about this a little bit, particularly in terms of uninformed reactions, or not fully formed reactions to the New Party—what do you think were some of the biggest obstacles that the New Party faced in terms

John Fletcher Interview, OH 400-001, Archives & Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
of trying to get its message out to people? Not just to take it seriously, but really listen to what
the New Party was trying to—

JF: What were our obstacles? Well, to the extent that the New Party was an electoral device, to
the extent that we were trying to get people elected to office—and I hedge on this because
there were lots of things—that wasn’t at all what the New Party was all about. But I think our
presence, or the fact that we even rode over the horizon or whatever, made us an obstacle. Or
others perceived us as that, which means we had become our own obstacle.

I’m struggling for a response Jack frankly, in that I really don’t think there were obstacles to
what we were trying to do. There were difficulties, in that we’re really talking about power, and
it’s not easy to share power. I don’t think any of us want to know that perhaps there are others
that are coming in and want to share some of that power or are being insistent about it. Some,
being cynical, might say that power never gets—not real power, you don’t have real power until
you’re a banker or something like that. The New Party, none of us were bankers or makers and
shakers in Missoula; huge property owners, that sort of thing. None of us were corporations,
and so one could say that that’s where power resides. But I also think that there are other
parties and other organizations that had their share of power, I believe, so maybe our presence
was a threat to them and so that could be an obstacle. I’m still fumbling with the question.

[End of Interview]