Gordon Bennett: Is that working?

Bob Brown: Well, let’s see. And you say his name is Reasonable Doubt?

GB: Yes.

BB: What’s the other one’s name?

BB: Liza, Liza Dolittle, out of *My Fair Lady*.

BB: We’re interviewing Judge Gordon Bennett in Helena at his home. It’s June 8, 2005. Judge Bennett, you’re from up in the northeastern part of Montana, up around Scobey, and you grew up there I suppose during the Depression era and that sort of thing and I’m sure the influences of your boyhood contributed greatly to the development of your philosophy. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about that.

GB: My dad went up to Scobey probably in about 1912 or ’13, when much of Daniels County was untilled. It was mostly grazing country. He broke up a sizeable portion of Daniels County because he went to the country and broke it up because he had this marvelous crop of grass. The grass came up to his knees when he went up there to look at it. I just came back from Scobey, and by George, on some of the prairies, it’s the same as it was then. It was as green and beautiful as Ireland. He was attracted to that country. I was born in 1922 and I went through the eighth grade in Scobey and was there until 1936, approximately. And so I was born in a depression year, in a drought year, 1922, up in the northeastern corner of the state, but I wasn’t much of a witness to it. But I was a witness to the “Dirty ‘30s,” all of them. My dad continued to farm up there well after the “Dirty Thirties.” But in the ’30s, we experienced the ugliness of Montana when it turns against you. We had grasshoppers and we had hailstorms and we had dust storms and we had drought. We had about everything you could have that would kill off a crop. Hope was almost gone. Hope was so slight in that corner of the world that communism had moved into the northeastern corner of the state. A full communist ticket was voted on in Plentywood, 50 miles away in probably about 1932.

BB: And they were successful, right?

GB: Some of the communist candidates were elected. Don’t ask me which ones, but I think there was some success.
BB: There was a fellow named Red Flag Taylor?

GB: Red Flag Taylor, right. I don’t know whether Red Flag got elected, but he was the leader.

BB: Did you ever meet him?

GB: No, never met him. If you want to know all about that, Larry Bowler is gone. The publisher and editor of the local paper, the Daniels County Leader, used to be an expert on that. His name was Bowler. He’s long since gone.

BB: But you remember the despair that may have leant itself to this?

GB: I remember that, yes, well, it was a combination of things. It was a combination, one, of incurable optimism. There were people there that believed in the country and believed in it but it was awfully hard to avoid despair, and there was a lot of despair. There was a lot of desperation. There were a lot of people that were sort of living off the land. There was no money around. It was a very desperate time, and of course you ask where my instincts come from. Part of them came from the fact that the advent of the Roosevelt administration really didn’t cure much of anything, but somehow there was something about it that brought hope. The famous speech of Roosevelt—“we have nothing to fear but fear itself”—had an impact. That’s the first political impression I ever had. A leader like that could make a difference simply by the sound of his voice. I remember listening to that thing on the old radio. It wasn’t very good transmission and it wasn’t very good reception, but you could hear Franklin Roosevelt’s voice. So that’s where I got my first political impression. It’s where I got my first sort of approach to understanding about desperate people, what they could put up with and what they would react to and so on. I was surrounded by them. Scobey has come a long ways since then.

BB: Judge Bennett, did you know Ed Smith at that time, the long-time legislator from up there?

GB: No, I didn’t know him up there. I knew Ed Smith when he was down here, many years later, but I didn’t know Big Ed Smith at all. Heard about him from the very beginning.

BB: I’m going to do a historical interview with him and he’s mentioned this same incident. He’s a few years older than you. I think he was born in 1917 or 1918.

GB: Yes, he was a Plentywood guy.

BB: But he remembers something about this too. He told me, he said that “We were all concerned”—I don’t want to take words out of his mouth because I haven’t interviewed him yet, but I talked to him a little bit on the telephone—he said, “Gee, we were all concerned. It was a terrible and desperate time, but we were also frightened by what we perceived to be the radicalism of this outfit—when they were avowedly communist—that had taken over the
county government.” So he said what happened was the Democrats and the Republicans basically got together and they, in the next two or three or four years, captured control of the county government back again.

GB: And if I could be editorial about it, that’s a lesson for our times. When you have people that go too far out on the right or the left, there is a tendency for the center to get together, and I think that happened up there. That crowd was recognized as radicals. My dad, for instance, would have nothing whatever to do with them. He had wanted to have everything to do with people that were working trying to do what they could, forming cooperatives and things like that. But the radical people scared him and, I think, scared most of the other people there. But they were a force and Big Ed Smith will assure you of that. They were a force.

BB: Now, the Farmers Union was becoming an important force in state politics, too, during that period of time. Do you have any recollections about that, even though—

Did you say you moved away from there when you were in the eighth grade?

GB: Yes, I moved away there from the eighth grade but I worked on the farm essentially until I went to law school in 1950. I worked on the farm for many, many years. We had a couple of sections over in the Horseshoe Basin by Peerless. Having a senior moment, I’m forgetting the man’s name. But we farmed next to the guy that had as much as anybody to do with the development, the formation of the Farmers Union. He farmed over by Peerless. When I was over there summer fallowing on several occasions his tractor would stop about noon and so I got to know him and I stopped my tractor and we used to sit down and talk together. He was very active in the development of the Farmers Union and he—we’re talking now again about the radicals—was kind of a radical, though he was no communist. I can assure you of that. He was no communist. I think borderline socialist, however. But he believed in cooperatives. He believed in people cooperating. And he was very active. People had the impression that the farmers out there farmed for about six months and then they didn’t do anything and during the long winter months they’d read the Montgomery Ward Catalog and the Sears Roebuck Catalog before they took it out to the back house and they were ignorant farmers.

This guy, Chapman...Don Chapman was his name. Don Chapman was one of the most learned people I ever talked to. He read the classics. He had a funny little house out in the Peerless area. Very unimpressive home ranch sort of thing, but in that house—I visited just one time—but my very distinct impression was that was the most literary farm house I ever saw. He had copies of newspapers spread all over the place and he had the classics. He had a set of the classics. He studied the classics, he studied economics; he studied politics, he studied society, and so on, and he was a learned, learned person. Don Chapman had, as I say, as far as I know, as much to do with the founding and development of the Farmers Union in Montana as anybody. I used to share lunch with him. It was a great privilege.

BB: And a philosopher, it sounds like.
GB: He was a true philosopher. He was a practical philosopher. He wasn’t a theoretical philosopher, but he could go back to the classic philosophers and quote them.

BB: Now Judge Bennett, I know this is an old memory, (unintelligible) memory. Is there a way you can think of that you can maybe capsulate his philosophy?

GB: Well today he would be looked on as a liberal. He believed in the people taking action not only at the government level but at the local level. He believed that people’s salvation was in the people and that they ought to take action. Now, he believed in, as I’m probably repeating here, community action. But he also believed in government action at the local level, state level, and federal level. The great farm program started coming along. It was entirely supportive of them.

BB: He would have been supportive of them?

GB: Oh, no question about it. For instance, one of the early farm programs—in my view, the farm programs today somewhat lack any rationality except their resolution of political forces. But the first farm programs had to do with strip farming. They’d pay you to strip farm. That was highly practical and it changed the nature of farming. Don Chapman was one of the early strip farmers. He believed in that. But the government subsidized it and changed the nature of farming in Montana because strip farms don’t blow like the great big section-wide farms that you had. You talk about environmental, or you talk about conservation, that was land conservation that won’t quit. You can go in southwestern United States—New Mexico and western Oklahoma, Texas—you can see where they didn’t strip farm and it’s still not recovered, the land still hasn’t recovered. He believed in those programs. He believed in practical programs. Well, they made a shibboleth of family farms. He believed in family farms. The only family farms that are left—god bless Don Chapman’s soul—are farms that belong to families but they’re big corporation farms that farm 10,000-15,000 acres. They can combine 300 acres in one day.

BB: Now the farm programs were designed to try to keep the family on the farm, I guess—I don’t know.

GB: Generation after generation, that was the shibboleth. That was the principal thing. They’re still talking about family farms.

BB: Whatever happened? It doesn’t seem to have worked—is that what you’re saying?

GB: Well it didn’t work. Two things were going on in the farming business. One is—three things were going on, you had government programs. But a couple of other things that were going on is that farming is not an easy occupation. Farmers still live pretty close to the edge while they’re living. A lot of them leave multi-million dollar farms but the cash flow isn’t all that great. They
just barely make it from year to year and the farm gets more valuable. But it’s a tough business and young people growing up on farms tend to leave them and go off and search in the city.

The one thing that’s happened to farms is that there was no one to take it over. A family would die out, essentially, and then the farm goes up for sale. The neighbor buys it. That way the farms got bigger and bigger and bigger. That wouldn’t have happened except for the other thing and that is the economics of farming. We bought a combine—we bought two combines—after World War II and they were used combines but they were in very good shape and I think we paid 600 or 700 dollars for the combine. Last week I was up in Scobey and I was talking to people who know a man who came out of my same era—he’s a pretty old guy—but he followed the technological changes and the economic changes occasioned by the technological changes. He has three units now. He goes south and combines in the south because he has to pay for the combine. He has three combines that cost a quarter of a million dollars apiece. Attached to them are 15 to 20,000-dollar semi-trucks. He’s got a million dollars capitalization. That’s the other thing that’s been happening to farming.

I didn’t understand what was going to happen. I thought—and Don Chapman thought, and a lot of other people thought—when these trends get going and are fully realized, what’s going to happen is you’ll just have great big corporation farms run by General Mills because they’re the only people that have the kind of capital that can do it. That really hasn’t happened. General Mills hasn’t taken any great interest, at least in farming in Montana. But what has happened is that you have an accumulation of the real property interests. People are buying these farms where the people are buying out and then they’re cooperative farming, sort of. They’re share cropping with the people that have the machinery. So it’s all local but it wouldn’t be fair to characterize them as family farms. They’re not a cozy little two or three man and his wife and two kids working on the farm with a half a dozen cattle and 850 acres. That’s gone.

When you put them all together, when you put all these pieces together that they bought and they rent, you’re talking about a realistic farmer—the biggest one they know of up there—he farms strips of land all the way from Poplar to Canada and he farms about 10,000 plus acres. That’s what the farming is coming to. But he’s picked up these pieces of land that families don’t own anymore. He rents things and things like that. They’re fitting the property—the real property—to the costs of operation. That’s what’s happening. That’s what’s evolved in my time.

BB: And I suppose the acreages are larger in a place like Montana, where it takes a large amount of land to generate income. That is probably somewhat the case in Illinois but probably not to as great an extent because the land is more fertile and the rainfall is more predictable.

GB: But the other thing that is happening and that is they’re consolidating. We have relatives in Minnesota who thought they had an awfully big farm. They had I think five quarters, meaning five quarter sections. That was a big farm in western Minnesota. Those are being consolidated because they’re facing the same thing. The machinery and the operation is increasing in size. But they’re not getting anywhere to the extent they are here. They’re dry land farms, but they’re richer land and they have more rainfall than they have in this part of the country. My
point is this: northeastern Montana is not the only place that has great big farms. Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas all have huge, huge acreages now under one single control. Corporations, it’s corporations and it’s maybe one family, but it’s big corporation. It’s financed like a corporation and you may have stockholders in it but you may have multiple interests that own the place and so on. So it’s run like a corporation.

BB: Why did you leave the farm?

GB: Well I left in steps. In 1936, a particularly miserable year, was three or four years into the Roosevelt administration and hope had arisen but the weather wasn’t cooperating very well. I have two brothers and my oldest brother was ready to go to college. My mother, who had the usual mother influence, she didn’t...I wouldn’t say she didn’t care what happened, except for one thing and that was her boys were going to get educated, period. We found out that you could go to the University of Oregon in Eugene if you were a resident without paying any tuition at all. We had three boys to educate so we went into a program of my mother and my two brothers and my sister, we would go out and we had a house, we rented a house in Oregon, in Eugene, and my dad hung onto the farm here and my dad had to work full time, almost, for the public service commission and other things and the federal government. He bought off much of the wildlife refuge up around Plentywood. There’s a big wildlife refuge out there. He spent many winters buying the land up there for the federal government. But he had to do all this extra work in order to save the farm and we went out to Oregon to educate the kids. So we were there and he was there and he’d come out and visit us all the time but that’s the only way we could survive and get the kids educated.

BB: So you and your brothers and sisters went to the University of Oregon, Oregon State?
University of Oregon, I guess, in Eugene.

GB: My oldest brother graduated. He took five years. He graduated as a CPA at the University of Oregon, but in 19—during the war, we migrated back to Helena here and my brother—my next oldest brother—went to the University of Montana for a year and then he went to Cornell University and became a hotel manager. We came back to Helena and then moved to Saybrook, Connecticut for a while and came back to Montana, came back to Helena. The point is, as far as I’m concerned, my residence ended about 1936 in Scobey and went out doing other things. But we kept track of it and my brother, the CPA, went up. He worked for Arthur Anderson—(laughs)—in New York City on Pine Street in New York City.

BB: People listening to this tape may not know that Arthur Anderson was a national accounting firm that was involved in a major scandal here recently.

GB: Arthur Anderson used to employ thousands of people. They employ about 250 people now. They were destroyed by the Enron thing.
BB: Enron was a big energy company that Arthur Anderson did the accounting for and it was found that they—I don’t know whether it was proven or not, but it was widely suspected that they cooked the books, so-called, and they ended up going down with Enron.

GB: That’s right. My brother worked for them in New York City. He was auditor of Schenley Liquor accounts and things like that. One day he walked out of—one August day—he walked out of the building he was in on Pine Street, just off Wall Street in New York. He was doing very well as an accountant. If he would have stayed with them he probably would have done very well in the long run. But he walked out and all at once he realized he was homesick. At the same time, my dad was in the process of being disabled. He came back, my older brother came back, and ran the farm until about six or eight years ago when he sold out, six or eight years ago. So the family has been there. My point is I’ve kept track of the country and so on and just came back here from Scobey day before yesterday. You can’t believe how beautiful it is up there. You just can’t believe how beautiful it is. Scobey’s a handsome little town. Sunday’s Billings Gazette had a wonderful article on Scobey. I don’t know whether you saw that. A front-page article on Scobey. But it’s a wonderful, friendly little town, wonderful people. They developed it into a beautiful little community, physically beautiful little community, and they have a wonderful hospital. It’s quite a place.

BB: Yes. It’s not really part of our historical interview, Judge Bennett, but I’ll just make a comment. When I was a small boy we had a neighbor. My grandmother had a farm-ranch operation up in the Flathead Valley and one of her neighbors was an old fellow by the name of Alfred Evanscos.

GB: That’s a Scobey name.

BB: The Evanscos family was from Scobey and he used to...I remember when I was a little boy he’d talk about Scobey kinds of things. He was very Norwegian and a very nice and kindly old gentleman.

GB: Yes, he probably represented Scobey as good as anybody could. Heavily Norwegian area. Scandinavian generally, Swedes, Norwegians, some Danes, and so on. Big Scandinavian influence. Wonderful citizens. I think that’s why it’s such a good town. I don’t know what I’m talking about, but I think it’s a little like a Scandinavian town.

BB: Probably so. So you probably could have become a farmer.

GB: Oh yes, I worked at it very hard from the time I was about ten years old until I was nearly 30. I got my hands dirty.

BB: But you were motivated to go to law school.
GB: Well, when the war came along, my dad developed a wonderful combination for a farmer—he had good crops and high prices. My dad loved to eat and he loved to go to theaters. My older brother was back in New York and my dad would go back and visit him and eat good things and see some plays in New York. He decided that they’d like to take a home. They got a home. It was on Saybrook Point, Connecticut. It was halfway between Boston and New York. It was an hour and a half commuting train out of New York City. My dad could go down and spend the evening going to the—my dad and my mother—could spend the evening going down and seeing the theater and having a good meal and come back to Saybrook, where it was a little local. I tell you that to let you know that when I got out of the Army, I finished up at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, in economics, and I really didn’t know what the heck I wanted to do. I helped them rebuild the house they bought in Connecticut and during the winter I did that I read the *New York Times* every morning and I decided the only thing to do in the world is to become a journalist. So I went to the University of Missouri and got a Master’s degree in journalism. I came back and, to make a long story short, I went to work for the *Great Falls Tribune* and worked there for a year, a year and a half or so.

BB: That was in the early 1950s?

GB: We’re still in the...yes, ’51, ’52.

BB: And that was of course when the Anaconda Company owned the daily papers in the state, most of them, except for the *Great Falls Tribune*.

GB: Except for the *Tribune*, yes.

BB: Was that important? Do you remember hearing that discussed? The *Great Falls Tribune*, was it proud of the fact that it was independent of the Anaconda Company?

GB: Oh they were very proud of it on the *Tribune*, but the state in general wasn’t very proud. You know the people in the state weren’t really bothered by the Anaconda Company. One of the Anaconda Company’s leading editors was Dwayne Bowler, the son of the publisher of the *Daniels County Leader*. I got to know quite a bit about the Anaconda Company and how they operated. But it was a terrible newspaper operation. They would suppress stories, they would leave stories out—important stories. It was a policy paper. But toward the end of their—

BB: What do you mean, policy paper?

GB: Oh shoot. For instance, they’re reporting on the legislature. You wouldn’t have any idea what the legislature is doing if you’re reading the Anaconda papers. On the one hand, they’d leave out half of it. On the other hand, they’d over-emphasize the other half of it. They developed, I think, a little of this intellectual thing that we have in Montana, which is powerful—everybody’s against taxes. That influence is disappearing, of course, with the passage of time, but this state was brainwashed on the subject of taxes by the Anaconda
papers. Doc Bowler got to be the managing editor of the _Billings Gazette_, the biggest paper, and he was always a rebel. He was like his old man. But he used to tell me about the huge change there was. He was an editor of the _Independent Record_ when it was owned by the Anaconda Company and he saw the transition to the Lee newspapers.

**BB:** Do you remember how he described that?

**GB:** Oh yes. Well, he described it in lots and lots of ways. He was a terrible rebel as far as the Anaconda Company was concerned. He just barely hung on because he was like his old man, as I say. He had powerful sort of independent streaks. The Anaconda Company papers wasn’t the place where you wanted an independent guy. He wasn’t comfortable there at all. When the Lee newspapers came along, he was almost liberated. He was still a rebel, still an independent thinker, but you could do that and get away with it on the Lee newspapers. The Anaconda Company papers, he would bring a story in from the legislature when he was working here as an editor. He used to cover the legislature. He’d bring a hot story in and he’d find, much to his surprise, that didn’t show up in the next morning’s paper.

**BB:** Now I remember—we’re talking about Doc Bowler. I remember him. He wasn’t particularly a political liberal, was he? Maybe he was just more of an independent. I don’t remember him as a—

**GB:** You couldn’t label Doc.

**BB:** But he wrote editorials that I think, some of them were conservative, as I remember.

**GB:** Some of them were conservative and I think some of them were liberal. It depends on how you (unintelligible). He didn’t feed at either one of those troughs. He didn’t feed at anybody’s trough. His name was Dwayne but (unintelligible) Doc. Doc was maybe the most independent son of a gun I’ve ever known on his thinking. I used to drink beer with him (unintelligible) for years. Loved to talk to Doc because half of the time I disagreed with him totally and the other half he disagreed with me. Whatever his position was, he’d thought it out at great length. He reminded me of the old saying that somebody made and that is, well, I don’t know where I am on that issue but I’ll tell you this, when I decide where I am, I’m going to be serious about it. (laughs)

**BB:** Did he ever discuss with you how the Anaconda Company controlled the papers in the state? Was there some kind of a review process?

**GB:** They selected the local editors—whatever they called them—whether they called them the editor or the managing editor or the publisher—whoever was in place. Like here in Helena it was the publisher. They had their instructions. They got their instructions from Butte and those instructions were followed.

Gordon Bennett Interview, OH 396-024, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
BB: Now you’re familiar, there’s a law firm here in town and one of the principal partners was a fellow by the name of Newell Gough. Well, in one of my interviews it came up that he was important in terms of what they published in their papers and what they didn’t.

GB: Newell Gough might well have been. There was an unholy alliance, of course, between the Power Company and the Anaconda Company. I think Newell represented them both. I know he represented the Power Company. But he represented that interest and I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if Newell couldn’t simply walk into the local Anaconda Company paper—the Independent Record—and tell them, “We don’t want to see anything about this story.”

BB: Or perhaps the editors of the other Anaconda Company papers, if they thought there was an important question about a story, might check with him before they published it?

GB: I don’t know whether they checked with Gough. I just don’t know what relationship existed between Gough and the local paper, but I know this, what Doc told me, and that is that the people who controlled the paper locally were educated, in the first place, on what the Anaconda Company liked, but if they had any question they’d pick up the phone and call Butte. You could find out in Butte whether you could publish something or not. It was a controlled press. I learned in Missouri, at the University of Missouri Journalism School, that probably the most controlled press in the United States was Montana’s.

BB: The Denver Post wrote a series of articles in 1952 about that.

GB: Is that right? I don’t think I saw that.

BB: I’ve got copies of it. They’re old and kind of hard to read, but I read them pretty thoroughly. Before I conducted my interview with him, I had Jerome Anderson read them and he was most interested. In fact, he was very absorbed. We postponed the interview for about an hour so he could carefully read those and he was fascinated by them.

GB: Jerry lived through all that.

BB: Yes he lived through all of that, that’s right. Any additional thoughts about the Anaconda Company? You mentioned that the people were pretty well...They knew the Anaconda Company—I guess they knew the Anaconda Company—owned the newspapers.

GB: Oh yes. That was common knowledge, but it always amazed me after studying Montana history and experiencing it and talking to Doc Bowler and things like that, it always amazed me how unconcerned, for the most part, Montanans were about the controlled press. On the Great Falls Tribune there was a great deal of vanity about being the uncontrolled press. The Wordens were independent of everybody. It was a family newspaper. They ran it just like a country newspaper. What Alec Worden said went.
Well, what Bill Zadick, the city editor, said. That was decided there on the newsroom floor, not somewhere else. It was a good paper to work for.

BB: And it worked harder at reporting the real news and not suppressing anything.

GB: They essentially—let me put it this way, and I don’t want to be too specific. For the most part they didn’t suppress anything. If the reporter brought it in and if it was an honest story, they’d run it. Alex Worden and Bob Worden, who was acting as managing editor, his brother Bob, they were very insistent on things like you don’t call it the Rainbow Hotel, you call it the Hotel Rainbow. Various sort of journalistic restrictions like that. I was there with [William] Scotty James. I don’t know whether you know Scotty James or not, but Scotty was the editorial editor, but he also did a lot of reporting, even when he was the editorial editor. Scotty was with the Wordens his whole journalistic career. He would fight with the Wordens. I’m not sure I want to record this, but he’d get in terrible fights with Bob Worden about what went in and so on. But as far as policy was concerned, they weren’t covering up anything. They weren’t editorializing. You know, I spent two years studying how newspapers are supposed to run. A.J. Leibling, a commentator on newspapers—used to write in the New Yorker—said the problem with newspapers is the publishers don’t go to journalism school. Well, they teach you at journalism school how newspapers are supposed to be run. The Great Falls Tribune when I was there was as close to a model newspaper as you could run into.

BB: Now another newspaper in Montana that prided itself as being independent of the control of the Anaconda Company was a little weekly here in Helena called the People’s Voice. It was edited by Harry and Gretchen Billings. How would you compare that paper to the Great Falls Tribune? Both prided themselves in their independence.

GB: They were entitled. I knew Harry Billings very well. Harry and Gretchen were some of my best friends. Yes, totally independent, but they didn’t come from the same place. Harry was a bomb-throwing liberal. He didn’t want to make any bones about it. Lee Metcalf and the labor movement and so on made it possible for Harry to be just as independent as he wanted to be because he was their kind of guy. But unquestioned liberal, pretty far over on the left end. Anti-corporation, didn’t like corporations. Hated the Anaconda Company. Harry knew how to hate. He also knew how to love. But he had positions on almost everything, everything political, everything public policy, and so on. He had a position and they were strong positions and they were well thought out positions. He ran a little shop. It was Gretchen and Harry that got out the paper, essentially. They didn’t have any reporters. They did the reporting, they did the editing, they even...Harry could help set it up in lead. He could run linotype. He did everything around the shop and reporting and everything else, wrote the editorials, wrote the news stories and so on. Hardest working news man I’ve ever known. He killed himself working there. Aren’t many people that kill themselves working. He retired, but he was essentially a broken guy from overwork. But for about 15 or 20 years, he was an entirely different voice than any of the newspapers.

Gordon Bennett Interview, OH 396-024, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
BB: Including the Great Falls Tribune?

GB: Oh yes, yes.

BB: Because they were independent of the corporations but he was more of a journalist advocate than he was a—

GB: Right, he was an advocate. The Great Falls Tribune was never a great advocate, never has been, isn’t now. Some people say it is, but that’s bologna. The Great Falls Tribune has never been an advocate and never wanted to be an advocate particularly, except on the editorial page. Scotty James was an advocate, but he wasn’t anything like Harry.

BB: Harry Billings.


BB: Now Judge Bennett, you have the reputation of being somewhat of a philosopher yourself. We’ve talked about Don Chapman. In the process of your life in Montana, you’ve paid attention to a lot of issues and also you’ve known a lot of people. I’m going to ask you some of the political figures, some of the major political figures you may have come in contact with. You just mentioned Senator Lee Metcalf. I presume you probably knew him personally. Do you have any impressions, any stories to tell, about him?

GB: You want to have another interview, or— (laughs)

I know quite a bit about Lee Metcalf. I was the nominal campaign manager for him twice. Lee was a statesman. Lee was a guy that was very hard to get along with. He was a very opinionated guy, but a very well-informed guy. Certainly no one would question he was a liberal. But he wasn’t an off-the-board liberal at all. His positions, as far as I could tell, were about as well thought out as anybody’s positions could be. He was a tireless worker. Personally, almost unambitious—personally—but politically, as ambitious as you can be. He wanted to make changes. He didn’t go to Washington and he didn’t go to the Supreme Court of Montana, he didn’t go to the legislature to be a member. (laughs) He was not a member. He was an advocate from the ground up. He decided what ought to be done and what shouldn’t be done and once he figured that out he was a tough advocate.

The contrast between him and Mike Mansfield would make a marvelous book about the contrast between two great statesmen. Now Mike Mansfield, everybody will agree absolutely that he was a great statesman. Everybody in the Senate agreed with that when he was there, on both sides of the aisle. He was a statesman the like of which you haven’t got in the Senate anymore. He would have been pretty handy around there in the last six months. He was recognized as a great statesman. But Lee Metcalf was a different kind of a statesman, but he was a great statesman in my view. I’m prejudiced.
BB: Once I think I remember reading something about Metcalf and I think he himself said if you look at our records there’s very little difference in our voting records between Mansfield and myself, and yet every time the election cycle comes up, Mansfield has an easy time of it and I have the fight of my life.

GB: That’s right.

BB: Why? It sounds like if their voting records were similar and their philosophies were similar—

GB: It points out a very basic thing and that is the electorate doesn’t know how they’re voting, for one thing. You begin with that. And then Mike Mansfield had this genius about not stirring up people. Mike Mansfield, for instance, it’s wonderful to read Caro’s book on how Lyndon Johnson ran the Senate. While he was doing all that, Mike Mansfield was...Lyndon Johnson was kind of the Lee Metcalf kind of guy.

BB: You’re speaking of Master of the Senate?

GB: Master of the Senate.

BB: Like Robert Caro, Lyndon B. Johnson was the Majority Leader in the U.S. Senate and at that time Mike Mansfield was the Assistant Majority Leader, or the Whip.

GB: That’s right. You can contrast those two, much as you can contrast Lee Metcalf and Mike Mansfield. Mike Mansfield didn’t have terribly fervent followers. He just had a whole lot more followers than Lee did. But Mike Mansfield didn’t make people mad. He wasn’t interested in making people mad. He was interested in getting a consensus.

BB: And yet his philosophy, by the record, seems to be pretty similar to Metcalf’s.

GB: Very similar. The record is very, very similar. But Lee fought for things. Mansfield did what was possible. Mansfield would take a shrewd look at something and see what’s possible and work it out from there. Lee Metcalf figured out what should be done and he didn’t give much of a damn what was possible. He figured out if you needed an environmental measure like water or air, clean air, and so on, he was ready to fight the enemies of it. Mike was willing to promote it and get it done if it was possible. They made quite a team. The book ought to be a little about that. The book, a marvelous book, and I hope somebody writes it. Mike was a master of the possible and Lee was the almost total advocate. The two of them made a wonderful combination. The combination is demonstrated by this: when Lee went back to Congress, the first thing Lee hooked into was the rules of the House. Then when he went to the Senate, he hooked into the rules of the Senate. You have Senator Byrd of West Virginia, who knows more about the customs and the rules of the Senate than anybody alive today and probably maybe
more than anybody that ever lived. But Lee Metcalf was a good second. Lee Metcalf knew how the rules of the Senate worked. He studied them, he put in a lot of time in on studying the rules of the Senate.

Presiding over the Senate is a kind of a no-brainer. You sit there and a clerk tells you what to say. They’re just barely able to stay awake. But when Mike wanted somebody who could manage the thing from the chair, when he wanted somebody in the chair who knew the rules and could help him with the rules, Lee Metcalf was there, more often—when Lee was alive and working—than anybody else in the Senate because Mike depended on him. And Lee depended on Mike. There were all kinds of people, I think, in the Senate—don’t quote me on this—that wouldn’t talk to Lee. Lee wouldn’t hesitate, if some Senator from Nebraska—he had one particular one that he loved to hate—

BB: From Nebraska?

GB: Yes, Hruska.

BB: Roman L. Hruska?

GB: Roman L. Hruska. Lee used to say, “You know, being a senator isn’t very complicated at all. If you know where Roman Hruska is and if you vote the other way, you’re not going to be wrong very often.” (laughs) He would stand out in the hall and say to Roman Hruska, as loud as he could, in the presence of all the others, “That’s the stupidest goddamn thing I ever heard.” He wasn’t out to make friends. He was out to make law. He knew an awful lot of law. He was one of the best lawyers that walked in Montana. He was a brilliant lawyer. He knew how to make law. He knew how law was going to be interpreted. Mike depended on him entirely. If there was a constitutional question about something that was going through the Senate, Mike would sit down and talk to Lee about it. He was a great lawyer but he was a lousy politician. He was a little like my good friend Forrest Anderson. When he’s campaigning, I used to think, “Somebody ought to be along with Lee just to keep him away from people.” [Laughter] I thought the same thing about—don’t quote me on this—Forrest Anderson. In fact, Forrest Anderson had a guy with him that his principle purpose was to keep Forrest away from some kinds of people. Lousy retail politician, both of them. Person to person politician.

BB: And yet they were both quite successful.

GB: Very successful.

BB: I don’t think either one of them ever lost an election, in fact.

GB: Let me see. I think you’re right. I don’t think either one...You know, that didn’t occur to me, but they never had.
BB: Mike Mansfield was defeated a couple of times for Congress before he—

GB: Once.

BB: Was it just once?

GB: Yes. Maureen wouldn’t let him quit. I heard that from Maureen.

BB: This is fascinating to me. I had two different conversations with Senator Metcalf. Both of them were good, but boy, I’ll tell you, in my interviews I’ve asked other people about Senator Metcalf and the volatility of his temper and the almost frightening, angry outbursts.

GB: Towering.

BB: He was a large man physically, I know that, and apparently he could be a towering volcano when he was angry. I had not seen that, but maybe you have, I don’t know.

GB: He had a couple of wonderful assistants that stuck with him. He had four or five assistants that wouldn’t work for anybody else in the world, when he’d exploded in front of all of them. The thing that kept them together is they knew that the next day Lee would be around and say, “Gee, I’m sorry I talked about that.” They loved him. People that worked with him loved him almost with a passion. They would do anything for him. They’d walk on water for him if they could. But he had this violent, violent temper. I don’t know from whence it came. Nobody knows from whence it came.

BB: Now he was an outspoken critic of the Montana Power Company.

GB: More than a critic. (laughs)

BB: I guess that’s maybe where I’m kind of heading with this question—was there more to that than meets the eye? Was it a philosophical thing purely, or was there—there seemed to be almost a personal thing there.

GB: There was, but it isn’t—one time somebody from the Power Company offered him a plane ride to someplace and he said, “Do you think I’m crazy?” (laughs) There was an animosity there that was a kind of a formal animosity. It was a two-sided thing. To answer your question, he had a terrible thing with Bob Corette, for instance.

BB: Bob Corette was a lawyer and a prominent official with the Montana Power Company.

GB: Yes, and I think he was a law school classmate or in law school at the same time Lee was. The Power Company, in Lee’s view—well, he wrote a book about it, so I don’t have to speculate.
BB: *Overcharge*.

GB: *Overcharge*. Vic Reinemer wrote it, essentially, but—

BB: And Vic Reinemer was a staff person with Senator Metcalf.

GB: One of those staff persons that Lee would blow up to from time to time but Vic Reinemer would have given his life for Lee. Anyway, the personal animosity, I think, started in law school with Bob Corette. And then Jack Corette, you know, went to the University of Virginia and he was kind of an aristocrat. One thing Lee didn’t like was aristocrats. (laughs) So he kind of didn’t like him personally, but he loved to fight with him, because they were wily. They were his kind of guy, really. They represented something entirely different than he did, but they were both fighters sort of, and they liked (unintelligible). I heard all kinds of criticism from Lee about those people, but I never found any real bitterness, not what you’d call bitterness, personal bitterness. But he was in a contest with him, a do or die contest with him, all the time. Lee came from this cooperative background, public power background, and so on. Anybody that was with public power did not sit well with the Corettes, did not sit well with the Power Company. He wasn’t just mad at the local guys, he understood that Goldman Sachs, to quite an extent, ran the Montana Power Company. Read the book. He understood where these guys were coming from. The big New York financiers.

BB: Is it any coincidence that Senator Mansfield went to work for Goldman & Sachs after—

GB: I’m not knowledgeable about that at all. I wasn’t surprised the least bit because Mike had something that the Goldman Sachs wanted and that is an enormous knowledge of how the Far East worked. Goldman Sachs, at the time they hired Mike, was counseling all kinds of people, at very, very high prices, about moving their industry to the Far East.

BB: But there is the Montana connection. Goldman & Sachs was involved in the so-called electrical deregulation business—

GB: Yes, intimately.

BB: —while Senator Mansfield was still living and working for them. You don’t know if this is coincidental or not, but it’s hard to imagine, isn’t it, Senator Metcalf going to work for Goldman & Sachs. Yet, like we discussed earlier, their records in the U.S. Senate were very similar. And yet, your response was what I—

GB: Goldman Sachs, like Mike, are pragmatists.

BB: Yes, okay.
GB: I would guess that Mike had nothing whatever to do with the development of deregulation with the Power Company. Mike never had much of anything to do with the Power Company. He stayed away from the Power Company. Lee is the one that short-circuited the Power Company all the time. If I were running Goldman Sachs, I’d hire Mike at almost any price, when they hired him, because the industry of the United States was beginning to move to the Far East, this great movement that was on. There wasn’t anybody—any American—that was more politically astute about the Far East, on his record, by demonstration, than Mike Mansfield was. He did a marvelous job, which hasn’t fully been accounted for, as ambassador to Tokyo (Japan). The Tokyo Embassy was the Far East embassy. It wasn’t just the Japanese embassy, it ran the Far East. Mike was there running it. If I were Goldman Sachs and the business of the country was going to the Far East, I’d hire Mike Mansfield, and I think that’s why they hired him. That’s all speculation. Never talked to Mike about it, never talked to any...Well, I talked to Ray Dockstader about it a little bit.

BB: What did Ray think, same thing?

GB: Oh yes.

BB: And Ray Dockstader was another top staffer for Senator Metcalf.

GB: No, Dockstader—

BB: Oh, for Mansfield, that’s right, yes, for Mansfield. I remember now, that’s right. Now Judge Bennett, you mentioned Governor Anderson, Forrest Anderson, and that his personality was similar to Metcalf’s.

I can say this. My dad was always a very devout Republican and I never heard my dad do anything more than maybe a low grumble about Mike Mansfield. But my dad could get table-thumping angry about Lee Metcalf. I Well, I don’t think Anderson—you don’t think of him as being a statesman, like people regarded Mansfield, and you don’t think of him as being a do or die man for principle like you think of Metcalf. You think of him as more of a practical, pragmatic sort of a person. How would you describe Anderson?

GB: Much closer to Mansfield than he was to Mike—to Lee.

BB: Personality-wise, he was more like Metcalf.

GB: Personality was more like—

BB: Metcalf, but philosophically—

GB: Well yes—
BB: Maybe more like Mansfield? I’m not trying to put words in your mouth.

GB: His pragmatism was very similar to that of Mike’s, and that is, you get done what you can get done. That’s where Forrest Anderson came from. Nothing was more fundamental to Forrest than you don’t take on everybody like Lee did. You don’t make any more enemies than you have to, because what you’re in public office for is to get things done and he liked to get things done. He would go to far greater lengths to get things done than Lee would ever do and I think Mike would ever do. Forrest got an awful lot done in his four years as governor, and the reason he got it done is that basic pragmatism that he had. He ran as a Democrat and some people might have called him a liberal. He wasn’t any of those things particularly at all. Forrest was Forrest. He, throughout his career, if he had to deal with Republicans...I don’t know what your experience was. You may have dealt with him.

BB: He was still governor my first session in the legislature. Actually I knew him best because his son Newell and I were college classmates. We went to college at the same time. Newell went to college at Northern and I went to college at Montana State, but as it turned out, we were both student body presidents. So Newell was kind of the most interesting student body president because his dad was governor at the time. This was before I entered the legislature. But anyway, I met him through Newell, so I knew him kind of as Newell Anderson’s dad to begin with.

GB: You have an impression from being in the legislature what the legislature thought of Forrest and I don’t know exactly—

BB: I was there in ’71 when there was a big impasse over the sales tax. The Republicans were trying to get some kind of a tax reform based on the sales tax through the legislature and they were willing to compromise almost anything to get it. The Democrats saw it, I think, as a good political issue and were willing to do almost anything to keep the Republicans from getting it passed. We regarded Governor Anderson as kind of the evil architect of killing the sales tax under any circumstances, regardless of what was good for Montana, in the background. That’s how I remember him as. I don’t remember him very favorably, actually.

GB: When it came to the sales tax, he was a good Democrat. He was against the sales tax.

BB: And it was good politics to be against the sales tax. It still is.

GB: I think it was good politics.

BB: And he correctly recognized that.

GB: Yes, I think he recognized that also in the ‘70s. We demonstrated and I was—you probably don’t remember—I was Bradley’s campaign manager and Bradley had been for the sales tax, and so on. The sales tax was carried around as a huge load by the Democratic Party for a long,
long time, and it probably still is. It was a pivotal issue and all that. I don’t see why the Democrats let that get to be such a pivotal issue. They could have gotten a lot further if they hadn’t. But anyway, one of the things that influenced Forrest is that while he was not a bomb-throwing Democrat or a bomb-throwing Republican, he came from the Democratic Party and the Democratic Party elected him and the Democratic Party was against the sales tax and to that extent, pragmatically, he was against the sales tax. I’m not so sure at heart he was all that against the sales tax.

BB: Remember, too, “Pay More—What For?” That was his slogan and it was basically, I think, aimed at the sales tax. That’s how it was understood, anyway.

GB: We invented that. I was in on that. I’ll tell you a little story about “Pay More, What For?” We were up at Malta and campaigning for governor. It was the Philips County Fair and we went into the dusty arena there and Forrest made a sort of an appearance, which he didn’t like to do, and he hung around there and talked to these farmers for a while and said, “That’s about all of this I can take.”

BB: Right to them, to their faces?

GB: No, no, to me and Bob Ruby. And said, “Let’s go over to the Great Northern and have a cup of coffee.” So we went over to the Great Northern and sat down in the coffee shop and this bowlegged irrigator came along, tight Levi pants and cowboy hat and you could tell that he was one of those Milk River irrigators that had a few cows and so on. He was very aggressive. He came walking over to the table and he invited himself into our little clutch. Forrest didn’t invite him at all. He pulled the chair around, swung the chair around, sat down on it, and looked at Forrest like that and said, “You’re Anderson, ain’t ya?”

Forrest says, “Yes.”

“You’re the guy that’s running for governor?”

“Yes.”

“There’s one thing I want to know. If there’s a sales tax, will it apply to binder twine?”

Forrest looked at him like that for a couple of minutes and he said, “Yes. It will.”

The guy pulled his chair away and walked back to the bar and said, “That’s all I want to know.”

Forrest says, “There isn’t anything in this campaign besides the sales tax.”

He says, “I don’t want to hear anything more about anything but the sales tax. This is a sales tax campaign. I’ll bet you the farmers from border to border here are wondering whether it’s going
to apply to binder twine, new machinery, and everything like that. We’re not going to say anything about that. We’re just going to say...We’re going to work out a slogan about the sales tax.” Karl Rove, who is the political genius of our time, has these great principles and that is you have one or two—at the most, two—issues and you stay on the issue. Well, that was Forrest all over. He didn’t want to hear about any other issue.

BB: Babcock had been an advocate of the sales tax and Forrest saw that as Babcock’s Achilles’ heel if he just kept focused on it.

GB: That’s all we did, that’s all we did for about three months was the sales tax. That’s how it came about. We were talking about all kinds of great social things and so on before that and we were sending out pamphlets with 15, 20 ideas and great principles and so on. Forrest, on the way back, said, “We’re all through with that other bullshit.” That’s how the sales tax issue developed is just this bowlegged irrigator up at Malta.

BB: You obviously knew Governor Judge.

GB: Yes.

BB: Any thoughts or impressions?

GB: Oh yes. The relationship between Judge and Anderson wasn’t very good. Judge, again, was a pragmatist, however, and I think consciously made quite a study of Mike Mansfield. He believed in what you call Democratic—large “D”—Democratic principles. He was a good Democrat. For instance, on environmental stuff he was as good a Democrat as you could find, as you know, as you experienced. But he was softer. He was ambitious. I think Tom wanted to go to the Senate. Made an enormous mistake by trying to get a third term. I don’t know why he tried to get a third term. I wasn’t that close to Tom but knew him well. I didn’t campaign with Tom and so on. But a softer guy, a pragmatist, a politician at the core. Smart, pretty smart. He worked with the legislators much better than Forrest did. Forrest had to send emissaries. He knew how to lobby. He would pick lobbyists to get what he wanted done in the legislature. He knew what lobbyists would do it or who could help him in the legislature. But Tom was better working with the legislature person-to-person, by far, than Forrest Anderson.

BB: And of course Tom had served in the legislature, both in the House and the Senate, and Forrest Anderson had, but years ago, in the house, for just one term or something.

GB: And he hadn’t made much of a—I was in the Attorney General’s office for two years during two sessions of the legislature. Well, one session of the legislature I was in the Attorney General’s office. The other session of the legislature I was chairman of what they called the Unemployment Compensation Commission. So I watched Forrest with the legislature and watched how he worked, and also watched how Tom worked. They were quite different in their
approach to the legislature. I guess the hallmark of a successful politician is pragmatism. They were pragmatic. Tom would go as far as he could but he didn’t try to push anybody much.

BB: So of the public figures we discussed in our interview today, Metcalf is really... You used the term pragmatist more or less to characterize everyone else. They all had a pragmatic side. You never used that in regard to Metcalf, who maybe had a pragmatic side but certainly it was—

GB: Lee was at war all the time. He was pragmatic as far as the war was concerned, the tactics and so on. He could intellectually comprehend how you lobbied something and if he could get people to work with him on that theory, that was fine. But as a person to person lobbyist, he wasn’t outstanding.

BB: Judge Bennett, is there any other public figure or any other issue or anything—we’ve got a relatively short amount of time left on our tape here—that we haven’t discussed? I guess we haven’t talked about Arnold Olsen, and I don’t know if you have thoughts or impressions about him, Congressman Olsen. Is there someone in the legislature, perhaps, that particularly stands out in your memory that—

GB: Well, no.

BB: Any other public figure? Maybe a Supreme Court justice or anyone?

GB: No, I don’t have any great thoughts. I wish I could tell you—and you know more about it than I do, I expect—the great thing that’s happened in our time was the Constitutional Convention and I didn’t have very much to do with that. I had a shirrtail relative who is unsung. Her name was Mrs. Speer.

BB: Lucile Speer?

GB: Lucile Speer. She was a shirrtail relative of mine. She had much more to do with it than anybody concedes. But I saw that thing pretty much through Lucile’s eyes, but I didn’t have much to do with it. That’s—I don’t say a regret—I have but I really wish I had been more involved. That was an exciting time. That was an exciting thing that happened. It’s the most exciting thing, governmentally, that happened in my time I’m sure.

BB: And of course Governor Anderson was pretty important in terms of making sure that that got ultimately approved. There was a case that came before the Supreme Court that challenged whether it received a majority of the votes and I think—

GB: Did you ever talk to Duke Crowley about that?

BB: No, but he is someone I’m going to interview.
GB: Ask him about this. There came a time when it came time for the board of—what do they call it? It used to be the Secretary of State.

BB: Board of Examiners.

GB: Board of Examiners was supposed to sign the new constitution and Murray, the Secretary of State, (unintelligible) was on the Board of Examiners, of course. He was a very guarded guy. I don’t know whether you knew Frank Murray or not. He was a very guarded guy, hesitated to do anything. The litigation had occurred and Lee Metcalf got John Conway Harrison to go along with the constitution. That’s what made the constitution possible. And it came time for the governor and the secretary of state and the attorney general to sign the darn thing and so Forrest was sort of stage managing it like he back-roomed the whole Constitutional Convention. He didn’t get into it. He worked with Graybill and those people but he didn’t want to get into it. This was a non-partisan thing that was going to develop whether he liked it or not. He wasn’t elected to rig the Constitutional Convention but he was there all the time. Now it was time to sign the constitution and he signed the constitution and carried it in personally to the Secretary of State’s office. Frank said, “Well I don’t know whether I want to sign that or not. I don’t know that you’ve signed that.”

BB: Oh, he hadn’t actually witnessed him sign it.

GB: So Forrest Anderson signed it a second time and said, “Now sign the goddamn thing.” (laughs)

BB: So his signature’s on it twice.

GB: I think you’ll find that Forrest Anderson’s signature is on it twice. (laughs) Talk to Duke about it. “Now sign the goddamn thing!” (laughs) That’s how the constitution was born. Anyway, that’s probably all. I don’t know of anything particularly. The older I get the more I go on about everything, but I don’t really know whether I’ve given you any significant information.

BB: Well it’s been really good to visit with you and I appreciate your service, your public service, in the time that you’ve been involved, Judge Bennett.

GB: Minor service.

BB: Thank you very much.

GB: You bet.

[End of Interview]