GP: This is an interview with John Toole, July 16, 1987. Our main topic will be the Depression of the 1930s. Rather than just jump in to the Depression of the 1930s, I think it would be good to get a little bit of background about you. Your family history is well-known but if we could start by just mentioning the fact that your family was involved in the lumber industry for one that I know of originally; I understand that your great grandfather or grandfather was involved with ranching, farming. Your great grandmother was a schoolteacher, the one who came from Virginia City?

JT: I have two who came from Virginia City, one on my father's side and one on my mother's side.

GP: I see.

JT: And if it's the one I think you're thinking of, she was a seamstress.

GP: The one who married O'Keefe, wasn't she a teacher?

JT: No, she was not.

GP: Oh, I see.

JT: She was a seamstress. She married him between '63 and '64. He brought her over her and she had two daughters, Mary and Margaret and they had this farm west of town here and sold the stuff in Virginia City.

GP: I'm just trying to get some background on employment and occupations in your family. Eventually your family had directors and managers in the Bonner Mill, correct?

JT: Yes; in 1897. My mother’s father, Kenneth Ross, went to work for Marcus Daly. Marcus Daly had just purchased the mill and its (unintelligible) from Andrew B. Hammond and E.L. Bonner Daly hired my grandfather to first cruise the timber and then take over the management of the whole operation. He was there until 1926, at which time he retired.

GP: This is Kenneth Ross you're talking about.

JT: He was retired and died in 1933.
GP: Now did he marry a Toole?

JT: No, he married an O'Keefe, Mary O'Keefe, sometimes called Molly O'Keefe. She was Baron's daughter, so Baron would be my great-grandfather.

GP: And then the Tooles, there was a Toole marriage in there too, then, wasn't there?

JT: Yes, Al Hardenburg came to Virginia City in 1864, then went back, got his family in 1865 and brought his wife and one little daughter, Anna, to Virginia City in 1865. Anna then stayed in Virginia City. (Al Hardenberg had various occupations.) Then she met in Challis, Idaho, John O'Toole who had come first to Utah and then to Idaho and then to Montana and upon his arrival in Montana went to work for Marcus Daly. He lived in Anaconda. Marcus Daly died in 1900. John found the atmosphere was hostile toward him in Anaconda because Clark and Heinz didn't like him because of his association with Daly and they started making it hard for him in Anaconda so he moved here.

He had six children when he moved here, and built a large house on the corner of Connell and Gerald, which is still there, and put his family through university. He was offered by the Standard Oil Company a job of being an engineer in this part of the country. By that time they owned Anaconda, H.S. Rogers, who was a friend and offered him a job looking out after their interests. My grandfather died in 1916.

GP: Now you grew up in that house, didn't you?

JT: No. The Toole house and the Ross house were only a block apart. That's how my mother and my father got together.

GP: I see.

JT: And the Ross house has since been torn down to make room for Hellgate High School, but just south of there one block is the Toole House which has not been torn down.

GP: This is probably off our subject but it is of some interest. He had seven children. Did they all stay in Montana?

JT: He had six. Not all; the first, Laura, who married a contractor named Clifton, moved to Spokane; Allen, the oldest son, moved to Spokane; my father stayed here and went to law school after the First World War; and his younger brother, Brice, wanted to stay here but could not because they didn't have enough legal business to keep them both going; and he had a final youngest son, John Ray, who was killed in an automobile accident in the mid-'20s.

GP: I see.

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JT: Then I overlooked Thula and her family the Weisels. She stayed here and she has a daughter and a son. That's Virginia Johnson and George Weisel.

GP: Sure. Okay. All right, well then this takes us directly into your father. Your father was an attorney here practicing in the '20s?

JT: Twenties. Thirties.

GP: Okay. You were a boy during the '20s. Do you remember this period as being a rather good period financially, economically in Missoula? Were things pretty prosperous?

JT: Yes. I wasn't conscious of that because I was only ten to twelve years old at the end of the '20s and I had nothing to compare it to. So I wasn't particularly conscious of prosperity but I knew that my grandfather Ross had a great deal of money. And Mrs. Toole, John Ross's widow had a great deal of money during that time because they spent so lavishly on their homes, their cars and their traveling and so forth. Money was no problem during those times.

GP: Now, before we started this tape you mentioned when the Crash came in the late '20s. Do you have any recollection of that and of how it affected your family?

JT: I have a specific experience of that. When the market started to go down, it went down awfully fast. In late 1929 my grandfather Ross was bedridden... he wasn't well. Every day when I would come home from school he would ask me to call a broker (someone I can't remember who it was) to get the price of Anaconda stock. He was interested in that because all his savings were in Anaconda stock. He was an uneducated man and he was not a sophisticated investor. The only thing he'd ever had experience with was Anaconda...he had all of his savings in it. One day I gave him the price...the price really meant very little to me because I didn't know anything about the stock market...and he became upset. I said, "What's the matter, Gramps?"

"Well I just got kicked by a copper boot," he said.

I still didn't know what he meant by that but I never forgot that. It had cleaned him out. The stock broke...went down to 5 from 70-80 and he was penniless.

GP: Oh, I see. Well, then you were just a child, a middle-aged boy, I guess you'd say. What do you remember after that about the Depression and how it affected Missoula? This would be around the early '30s.

JT: Start that out by saying I had a conversation with Mr. L.A. Dixon. He was still living, I think, on Gerald Avenue. I asked him, "Mr. Dixon, how did you get along during the Depression?"

He said, "Missoula did not have a Depression. I made more money during the Depression than at any time in my career." He was a Texaco bulk dealer. That opened my eyes a little bit. That

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wasn't entirely the truth because there were certain groups in Missoula who suffered a great deal. However, we were able to get along here better than most communities for several reasons. Immediately surrounding the town was a rich agricultural area—Orchard Homes, Target Range—all the little people who lived out there had cows, chickens, rabbits, which supplemented their diet; and there was liberal credit extended by the Missoula Mercantile Company which had tentacles all over western Montana. The Bonner Mill was kept running four days per week and retained on the payroll men who had large families. The single men and the men with just maybe a wife they let them go. The large families were employed all during the Depression. And all those things helped and prices were correspondingly low. I was old enough to drink beer because I was at the university. A schooner of beer—that was 15 cents. A shot of whiskey was 25 cents. Everything else was correspondingly low.

GP: Including wages?

JT: Yes, wages fell drastically. I went to work in the summer of 1936 for forty-seven and a half cents an hour. By the time I went to work at the mill at Bonner, that had gone up to 60 cents an hour. But then I worked in the summer of ’34 and ’35 for $50 a month and board and room.

GP: What were you doing?

JT: Working in the mine up at Garnet the summer of ’33. I was only 15 years old and I worked for board and room but my grandfather insisted that I go to work. It didn’t make any difference to him. The board and room, that was a tradition of his life, [it was] how he got where he was; it was through work and my father and mother, supported this . . . I was 15 years old now working for my board and room, but the next summer I got 50 dollars a month.

GP: Was it hard to get jobs for boys?

JT: I think it was, you could hire boys for nothing, just paid them their groceries, it wasn’t as hard as you might think. The boys who were hired on by the farmers and ranchers . . . just so they wouldn’t be a burden on their own families for food. And we all had a good time. I didn’t really consider it a sacrifice, just one of the things that my father had done, my grandfather had done and my great-grandfather had done. Get along the best you can. We were fortunate to be living in this country where we had all of the area around town where people could go to get milk, there were all kinds of dairy cows, every family in Orchard Homes had a dairy cow. People’s standards were really very low — three square meals a day and a place to sleep was really all you’d need.

GP: Was hunting and fishing important, I mean as a food supply for these people do you remember?

JT: I loved to hunt and fish. I knew that a lot . . . on the Blackfoot, all lived on elk and deer and the Weisel family (Thula) killed elk and deer year round. The game wardens
knew it and didn't do anything.

GP: . . . just turned their backs on it?

JT: Yes. All over the animal population went down.

GP: Is that right? Now I know you have some information and rememberings about Roosevelt's programs, but before we get into that, I was wondering: you were probably going to Missoula County High School at that time. Do you remember knowing students who were really having a tough time?

JT: They were having a tough time, but you put yourself at high school age. The Missoula Mercantile Company would hire kids for all conceivable kinds of jobs. They hired college kids particularly because they wanted to come here to university, but the Missoula Mercantile Company was plumb full of kids—running elevators—and office boys and stock boys who worked down in the basement and stockrooms. They had to work hard because times were tough. The price of meat went down. We had an influx, also, of people from Eastern Montana because it was a drought period and the price of wheat went down. They came here in the mid-'30s and they squatted in an area which was bounded by Highway 93 south, Reserve Street and South Avenue—up where those theatres are now. They built shacks, but they all seemed to get along all right.

Montana had a 30-dollar a month pension for the old ones, and there wasn't any tax, so the old ones could get by on 30 dollars a month. The county took care of some. It was a combination of governmental and private efforts to get along and alleviate suffering. It was a program to affiliate all together because they were in the same boat. So it was, in many ways, very protective.

GP: You say they squatted out there. Did they have to pay any rent at all on that land?

JT: I think whenever a landlord could collect it he would. I don't know who owned that land but I would suspect the Missoula Mercantile owned it. McLeod was a realist. He was tough but he was a realist and he had me come in and get the groceries. The Missoula Merc had grocery stores.

GP: And run up a bill?

JT: He played everything by ear, you know. (laughs)

GP: I see.

JT: And old man McLeod and Jeff Sutherland -- he had a little farm in that same general area and one day he came in to see McLeod and he said to Mr. McLeod, "Mr. McLeod, I can't make it

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-- I'm going to have to mortgage the place. I'll give you the keys to the place."

And McLeod said, "George, I won't take those keys. I want you to go back out there and go to work. And when you go to work and work hard enough, you can come in here and pay that note, including interest." Then he said, "I know you can do it if you do just that. Now take these keys and I don't want to see you again until you come in here with the money!"

GP: He must have been quite a person.

JT: I saw George after the war - and during and after the war he paid it off. He told me that story many time.

GP: What kind of a business was it?

JT: He was a contractor and had a little farm.

GP: I see.

JT: That's where he lived. Ten, twelve acres.

GP: Why don't we get to Roosevelt and his programs. He came into office in '33, is that correct?

JT: That's correct.

GP: Do you remember that?

JT: Very well. My father was an avid democrat and he said, "I want you boys to gather around the radio and hear the inaugural address," and everybody...I'll never forget the words, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself, blind unreasoning fear."

My dad was really involved and he wrote some of the code and was in Washington for a long time. I asked my father one day, "Dad, what about this Depression?" His practice wasn't getting along too bad but it wasn't big. Trouble is, we had developed a very high standard of living. We lived in a great, big house and my mother couldn't take care of that big house all by herself but she wouldn't get out of it. She was almost born here so it was quite a burden on my father trying to keep that big house going.

We were out driving in the car one day and I said, "Dad, what about this Depression? What caused it all?"

He says, "Too many people buy on the installment plan, that's what caused it." (laughs) In many ways it was true because in the '20s was when installment buying began.
GP: Yes. People got overextended.

JT: Yeah. That’s true.

GP: Was this after the Depression that you asked him that question?

JT: No, it war around ’32 or ’33.

GP: I see. Then your dad was in favor of all of Roosevelt’s programs.

JT: Until it was brought up before the Supreme Court and found out it was illegal.

GP: Oh. What do you remember about those programs as they operated in Missoula?

JT: Well, first we got the WPA. The WPA was direct employment by the government. You worked for the government and they had a variety of small projects. They logged trees along Highway Number 10 West, where the road turns north. There’s a row of evergreen trees that have recently been trimmed on the left-hand side as you go west. That was a WPA project.

GP: How far out is that?

JT: It’s right on the city limits line, right by that bowling alley.

GP: Oh, yes.

JT: Bowling alley's kind of behind it.

GP: Near Russell Street.

JT: Right where Russell joins. Planting those trees was a WPA project. They built a little bridge from the island in the river which used to be opposite the Wilma so that they could get over there and clear stumps so someday a park could be built and it’s all been done. They rip-rapped all along the place up there, all hand work. They built the east bleachers of Dornblaser Field right at the foot of Mount Sentinel. I don’t know how long you've lived here...  

GP: I remember that field; I've lived here since '65.

JT: Well, the east bleachers and the stone wall -- you probably don’t remember that stone wall.

GP: No, I don’t.

JT: Well, the stone wall on the east bleachers was built by the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. They were criticized, the WPA, because people didn’t think they worked hard
enough. Maybe they didn't. The WPA wasn't a very strict employer.

WPA was the creature of Harry Hopkins. Harry Hopkins believed the thing that had to be done was get money in the hands of the people. I think he was absolutely right. The banks had very conservative managers and they didn't like it. They didn't like unbalanced budgets. The PWA, on the other hand, was run a different way. [PWA - Public Works Administration] That was handled by Secretary (Harold) Ickes, who was Secretary of the Interior.

GP: I remember the name.

JT: Yes, well, Secretary Ickies didn't think we should do it that way. He felt that the infrastructure of the nation needed good, solid work done efficiently at the lowest possible cost. Therefore he turned his work over to the private sector. Bids were taken, towns were bonded and [they worked with] a good set of plans and specifications. As an example, the Orange Street Bridge overpass and the Orange Street underpass were projects very well-designed and are serving well today as well as two buildings on the university campus -- the Journalism Building and the Pharmacy Building.

GP: Those were bids that went into the private sector and were . . . .

JT: . . . just like they do today, that being the most efficient way to get work done and was the most efficient way to get the money out because the contractor would work as cheap as he could to improve his own cause and he would use machinery wherever he could so these bridges didn't employ nearly as many [people]

(end of side one)

(beginning of side two)

JT: At the same time we had the Federal Aid highway program going which had gotten started the previous decade with a gas tax. That was accelerated and got part of the Blackfoot highway built, a section of Evaro Hill, and then there were jobs up the Bitterroot and those were done by the state highway department.

GP: [Jobs] that did not employ WPA people, though?

JT: I don't think so, no. The CCC came in and they did their work mainly in the hinterlands. They built bridges; they pruned and planted trees; they built simple type buildings (ranger stations, log buildings and that sort of thing all by hand).

GP: They did some road building, too, I guess, in the forests. Is that correct? Some road building?
JT: Well, road building and trail building. You really can't fault any of those exercises. It was appropriate the time. But you can't fault them. Certain things they did turned out so well, but we kept them on too long and now we realize that we've got to get a new pattern. We're still using that old pattern.

GP: Yes, we are. We could go on about that subject for a long time, too, because now we have Unemployment Compensation and those things which have to be paid for.

JT: That's a different subject.

GP: That's a different subject, yes. Well, let's talk for a little bit about what you remember in Missoula itself at that time. You mentioned something about the railroad, the bums.

JT: Yes, there were an awful lot of men going through on the freights, mostly single men, a lot of them were from the big cities in the East with no jobs and were young and free and would take off. They came through in large numbers. Along here not far from the campus here was a big row of packing boxes and they lived in those packing boxes.

GP: Near the river, was it?

JT: It was on this side of the Milwaukee tracks. It was west of Van Buren Street near the bridge there. There were two rows of them on the north side and one over on Madison Street, these packing boxes, and then there was one down by the Bitterroot branch of the Burlington Northern where a kid got bitten by a muskrat.

GP: Muskrat, yeah.

JT: Down there became a WPA project . . .

GP: The park? McCormick Park?

JT: Yeah, that park.

GP: Was any help being given locally to these men? Were they being fed?

JT: Not the vagrants. They would come in here and pile off the freights, then they go through the residential areas looking for lawnmowing jobs, snowshoveling jobs, anything they could get and we didn't have anything like railroad bulls. Some towns like Cheyenne, Wyoming had railroad bulls, railroad police, and they beat these guys up.

GP: Oh.

JT: We didn't do that, I don't think, here. Very little. Because they were constantly moving, they
were going all the time. So we could get a taste of what the rest of the nation was like by watching those trains. A train would be just a flatcar with ten, twelve men on it. They'd go out -- bad weather or good weather -- it didn't make any difference. Some of them were good family men, they had families in the east, they were desperate, [they'd] come out here to get some money. Some of them would get "canned heat," you know what that is?

GP: It's alcohol which I know you're not supposed to drink, I know that.

JT: Yes, that's right. It makes a flame. It's straight alcohol and burns like gasoline. They'd get some of that stuff and then they'd load up on that stuff and some would go stark raving mad. We learned about that stuff when we were kids. That's how we found out what the outside world was like. There was very little hitch-hiking because there was very little travel on the highway. We had no huge trucks like they have today - none whatsoever.

GP: We didn't have the cars either. People couldn't afford cars.

JT: People didn't use cars. They rode the street railways early in the decade or they rode the . . .

GP: The buses?

JT: The city buses or else they'd car pool, something like that, or walk. An enormous number of people walked. I knew a friend who worked at (?). He lived up here in the university district and the cow he milked was down in Orchard Homes. He'd walk out there at 4 o'clock in the morning and milk that cow and he'd come back up here and go to school.

GP: High school?

JT: Yes. And he'd walk all the way down to milk the cow—maybe three or four miles. In Missoula a lot of people were broke. But he walked all the way down there and milked the cow and came back.

GP: Uh huh. Do you by any chance remember a person named Mrs. Shoemaker at that time?

JT: Shoemaker was a Forest Service employee?

GP: Yes. His wife. I've made a number of these interviews and have been told that she did a lot of charity. She was on the Salvation Army board and she did a lot of charity out of her own pocket and by getting other people to help the Salvation Army and I get the idea from talking to only a few people that she, at least, was reaching a pretty needy and desperate group of people in Missoula. But it's hard to find information about that.

JT: I didn't know that but I knew Shoemaker. Nan Shoemaker was exactly my age. We were
born on the same day. I don't know whatever happened to her. She had a son here -- he was here until recently.

GP: Ted?

JT: Ted.

GP: Yes, I've talked to him and interestingly enough (he taught at the University) he told me that he knew virtually nothing about his mother's activities because he went to the University and just was in a different world from hers.

JT: That well could have been. My dad did a lot of that and I don't know how much he did. He never told us. He was quite a man because we were an expensive family. He always had a little money for some guy that was down and out and he never had any money himself. Money meant nothing to him. He liked to fish. He liked to put his money in fishing tackle. Outside of that he didn't care.

GP: I don't suppose you'd have any knowledge of this but during the '30s, I was wondering if he had any trouble collecting from his clients?

JT: Ah, I remember that very well. He wouldn't do any collecting, but my mother would just beat him to death about collections. She wasn’t going to reduce her standard of living and when he came home she'd say, "How about so-and-so's account?" And he'd say, "Oh, don't worry about it, I'll get it one of these days." She'd say, "When?"

GP: Was he involved in foreclosures or things like that, bankruptcies, anything like that?

JT: He had a general practice of law. He had various clients, a lot of business people, like John R. Daly. He didn't have the Mercantile, but he had some insurance companies. He had (unintelligible), which are always nice to have. He was tied up with the Democratic Party, most lawyers do that, and I think he got some business that way. He was a great constitutional lawyer. He knew every letter of that and was quite an intellectual scholar. But he died very young.

GP: He died young?

JT: He died at 55 in 1946, a terrible tragedy.

GP: From an illness or an accident or—

JT: Circulatory disease.
GP: Oh. Well, how about you, John? You graduated from high school about '36; did the Depression affect your plans at all for going to college?

JT: No, because I lived down the street just three or four blocks and I went to the University. I wasn't really interested in the University and I didn't really appreciate what was available to me. This was a wonderful school -- intellectual giants on the faculty. And then I had cousins who graduated from Georgetown University in D.C. I went back there for a year. It cost sixteen hundred dollars: that included transportation, tuition, living expenses, everything. That was a big chunk of money for my dad. He asked me if I wanted to go back to Washington and I said, "No." I said, "I'd just as soon quit college and go to work." "Well," he said, "You've got to get a college degree." So I ended up going for two years here and got a degree in 1940. Then I couldn't get a job.

GP: What was your degree in?

JT: Economics. I couldn't get a job so I was working at Bonner for 60 cents an hour.

GP: I see.

JT: Those were terribly hard times.

GP: What kind of a job were you looking for with a degree in economics?

JT: I didn't really have a [goal]. I figured the only people who were doing anything in Montana was Anaconda Company, so I wanted to go to work for the Anaconda Company and become president. I really didn't have any connection between my education and my career.

GP: A good liberal arts background is important.

JT: It's what an education's all about. But if you know you want to be an engineer or a doctor then it doesn't matter, but it's important to have a liberal arts education. It's a traditional way of training the human mind in all of its aspects. And so it is correct, actually, but I didn't do that on purpose. It's only that I could get a degree in that at this university. I didn't work very hard and my record was (unintelligible), except the things that I liked—political science and some things like that and some business courses I did well in. I got out in 1940 and went to work at Bonner and I didn't need a diploma for that job. But I had met my wife and I wanted to get married. I didn't have enough money to get married. In those years you didn't get married until you could support a wife.

One day I was in Helena...She was working for Carter on weekends. I was staying at the Montana Club. The radio was on playing music as a background and suddenly the music stopped and a voice came on and said that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor.
GP: I remember the day. It was a Sunday, December the seventh.

JT: Sunday morning at eleven o'clock on December the seventh. The war had been going on for two years but everyone was worried about getting in it. Then the voice came on again and said, "The Japanese Air Force has attacked Pearl Harbor. The battleships Oklahoma, Arizona, and Utah have been sunk and various smaller craft have been sunk. The Army Air Corps field at Hickem Field in Hawaii has been bombed and strafed. We don't have casualty figures yet. Stay tuned. We'll give you reports."

A fellow across the table said, "You know, this sounds serious. Not only serious," he said, "This is war!"

"Jesus," I thought, what are we going to do now? So I went over to see my wife.

GP: You volunteered?

JT: No; I was drafted.

GP: That fast?

JT: Yes, they accelerated the draft right away. That completely and utterly changed my life.

GP: What effect did the Depression have on you as a person? Do you feel that it markedly affected your life?

JT: Well, it was a good thing for me because it taught me how to work. It taught me some degree of self-reliance: it wasn't going to be handed to me; I had to do it myself. It also taught me the value of a dollar and that it was important to save. This was something that my wife had and she had a tougher time than I did. She had a very, very tough time. She was a student here and she was an expert student.

GP: What field?

JT: Secretarial. She could not finish her degree. She never got her degree. She was here five or six years trying to work her way through, but she never got her degree because she just ran out of money. They were really broke. She was from Great Falls. But the thing that impressed me about the girls was that girls—I don't care how poor they were—they all wore nice dresses, saddle shoes and had pride in their appearance. These people out here now are disgusting, particularly the girls. It's just a shame to have them around that way because they could be attractive and...I don't care what you say, when you know that you've got a reasonably good outfit on any woman her own morale is an upper, but this is demeaning.

GP: I have to agree with you on that, John. Your self-respect goes up. "Clothes make the man,"
they say.

JT: A man or a woman. There are a lot of attractive girls out here, they look like old frumps.

GP: That's right. John, we could go on talking for a couple of days about your interesting career but we don't want to do that today. Is there anything you'd like to add now?

JT: I don't think so. I think I've covered the highlights. Missoula was a fortunate community during the depression. What Mr. Dickson told about Missoula during the depression had a lot of truth to it. You could tell the difference when you went to the Eastern Seaboard. You could tell the difference in New York, and in Washington, and places like that. But you have to remember this: I have nothing it to compare it to really except the Twenties when I was very, very young. You have to look at it historically and take it as a unit of time and a unity of human activity and separate from anything else. We know that it founded, in a fashion, what we are living with today and we know that we've carried on too long. It was such a good thing and now we've got big troubles [deficit] on account of it.

GP: Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]