Ron Semple Interview, 1975

Ron Semple

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This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.
Ron Semple: A lot of color...a lot of people...anecdotes—colorful stuff like [Duane] Doc Bowler. Doc comes from one of the most prominent newspaper families in Montana. His father [Burly Bowler] was an old weekly newspaper publisher. His brother [Larry] is a weekly newspaper publisher [Daniels County Leader]. His kid nephew [Printer Bowler] works on an underground newspaper in San Francisco. And Larry Bowler, Doc's brother, he's got to be the nastiest bastard west of the divide—east of the divide. Excuse me.

One day, Doc is at the Montana Press Association in the men's room. He was taking off the glasses, and was taking off the coat, because he was going to do combat. And I think it was Ward Fanning—but you can check; it might have been [James] Dicky, one of the guys that made the transition from Anaconda to Lee—walks in and says, "Wait a minute."

And Doc says, “I'm going to flatten him.”

“Why?”

“He called my brother Larry a son of a bitch.”

The answer was "Doc, if you're going to fight everybody who thinks your brother is a son of a bitch, you're going to have to get into a lot better shape."

Doc thought about it, put on his glasses, put on his coat, and left.

Well, I'll give you a story about independence. A couple of years ago, the federal government would not allow cigarette advertising [on television]. For all intents and purposes, newspapers had not had any cigarette advertising for years anyway. Now they had to make decisions as to what they were going to get. There are four [Lee] newspapers in Montana. The Montana Standard in Butte said, “We’ll take all of the cigarette advertising we can get, and we will print it.”

The Helena Independent Record said, "No, we will print no cigarette advertising. We believe the surgeon general's report that cigarette smoking is injurious to health and we want to keep people as healthy as we can.”
The *Billings Gazette* said, “The goddamn government has got no right to restrict this advertising on TV, so we're not going to take any advertising, and we're going to battle this restriction. We'd rather have our competitors have it."

The *Missoulian* said, "We'll take the cigarette advertising, and we'll donate the profits to the American Cancer Society."

Now, I would like for you to figure out for me a broader spectrum of opinions.

The papers also love to get their way. They have great dogfights. The *Missoulian* is very, very liberal. The *Gazette* is sort of a Republican newspaper. Butte is a hard-fisted, Democrat-type paper. Helena is a little more conservative. The *Montana Standard* did something that Sam Reynolds in the *Missoulian* editorial [unintelligible] thought was most terrible. He was attacking it in his editorial one day, and he referred to the *Montana Standard*, “an English language newspaper in Butte.” [It was actually the *Billings Gazette*. Sept. 1, 1964.]

Rivalry, antagonism, jealousy between eastern and western Montana. In essence, it should be the same state. Eastern Montana is the Great Plains. Billings, you know, lots of Indians, buffalo, that kind of thing. They think of themselves more as cowboys. In the west, it's Paul Bunyan country. Trees, mountains, hard rock miners, that kind of thing. Built-in antagonism between the newspapers dates back to that type of thing. People of Billings would be very loath to ever admit that any of the other three newspapers would ever do anything right.

They're better than any of the other newspapers, of course, but pretty [unintelligible] and vice versa. The guys at the other papers would think that Billings, by comparison, is so big that they stumble over their own feet. Also, regardless of this, there isn't anyone in Eastern Montana with intelligence enough to appreciate it if by a miracle they did print anything that was halfway decent.

Well, it makes it more fun than it sounds because they're not afraid to take shots at one another. And [Lloyd] Schermer, when he was out there, encouraged it. We applied in Billings for an FM radio license.

John Newhouse: You mean Lee, and you know the problems that have been going on not to give licenses to newspapers or companies that own newspapers in the same town.

RS: They gave Lee a license in Billings because they had made an investigation of the four newspapers in Montana, the four Lee newspapers, and said, "Hell, if we put a radio station in here, it's only going to make for more diversity because these guys don't agree on a goddamn thing."
So, I guess we're the only people in the world who have the seal of approval from the FCC who says, "No, we do not speak with a single voice.”

The Missoulian, for example, which to us in Billings, endorsed [Democratic president candidate George] McGovern, confirmed everything we had ever thought about those people out there from the beginning. We endorsed [Richard] Nixon, which confirmed everything they thought.

JN: When you say “we,” you mean the Gazette? In Billings?

RS: Yes, the Billings Gazette. The Billings Gazette, the Montana Standard in Butte, the Helena Independent Record, and the Missoulian. There had been five. We had the Livingston Enterprise, but we sold that a few years ago to a fellow who owns a newspaper in my old city. I don't remember his name. I'd seen the original package of six, seven, and eight papers going to the whorehouse when we got the papers. [There was allegedly a whorehouse in the top of the building that housed the Livingston newspaper.]

Don Anderson and maybe George Remington can tell you more about that, but, apparently, it was a whorehouse. We said that a whorehouse occupied the premises that we owned as part of the packaging policy. It is a detail that we have all cherished.

JN: How's it doing now? Or have you unloaded?

RS: I think, frankly, that a [unintelligible] trying to compete with others in the state capitol is just [unintelligible]. I was out there for six years and while I may not sound like it, I consider myself a Montanan.

[End of Interview]