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Harry and Gretchen Billings and the People's Voice

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HARRY AND GRETCHEN BILLINGS

AND

THE PEOPLE'S VOICE

By

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B.A. English, Cornell College, Mount Vernon, Iowa, 2001

Thesis

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Harry and Gretchen Billings and the *People's Voice*

Chairperson: Dennis Swibold

Though the *People's Voice* was published for three decades and during a time when Montana was undergoing significant change, little has been written about the paper and its long-time editors, Harry and Gretchen Billings. The weekly *Voice*, published in Helena from 1939 to 1969, was conceived in response to frustration over corporate control of most of the state's dailies. As a cooperatively owned paper that refused commercial advertising and gave complete independence to its editor, the *Voice* was an anomaly in mid-twentieth century Montana. As such, the paper and its editors deserve more study. What role did the *Voice* play in Montana politics and journalism? What were Harry and Gretchen's goals and motivations? What resulted from their efforts, and what hardships did they face? Were their sacrifices worth it?

Much of the research for this project consisted of reading thirty years of back issues of the *People's Voice* and studying an extensive archived collection of Harry and Gretchen's correspondence, notes and clippings. An unpublished manuscript that Harry wrote in the late '80s revealed his retrospective thoughts on many issues. Interviews conducted with a variety of people, including former Montana governors, lawmakers, lobbyists and journalists, as well as Harry and Gretchen's sons and friends, provided context and anecdotes to help piece the story together.

Together, the newspapers, archived materials and interviews demonstrated that Harry and Gretchen's influence in Montana has extended considerably further than the limited credit they've received in the history books would indicate. The *Voice* served as a hub that helped bring the state's progressive community together. That Montana's Constitution, which reflects many of Harry and Gretchen's values, was written and ratified at the end of the *Voice*'s era is no coincidence. More than anything else, the Constitution is a reason for people today to learn about Harry and Gretchen's work.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE PAPER AND ITS EDITORS

The *People's Voice*, a weekly newspaper published in Helena from 1939 to 1969, was an anomaly in mid-twentieth-century Montana. Owned by a farmer-labor cooperative, the *Voice* provided a forum for liberal thought and served as an advocate for workers, consumers and minorities at a time when conservatives dominated Montana's politics, economy and daily press.

Two names are synonymous with the *People's Voice*. In 1946, Harry Billings joined the newspaper's staff under the direction of its first editor, H.S. "Cap" Bruce. When Harry was named editor two years later, his wife, Gretchen Garber Billings, joined the staff, as co-editor. For most of the paper's existence, the duo was at the helm of the progressive weekly.

Through the *People's Voice*, Harry and Gretchen fought for a number of challenging causes, including public ownership of utilities, the protection and advancement of civil liberties, abolishment of the death penalty, prohibition of slot machines, more rigorous environmental standards, more money for education, a progressive tax system based on an individual's ability to pay, compensation for workers injured or made ill on the job, health care for the elderly and better mental health care services. The Billingses documented the activities of the ultra-conservative John Birch Society, and they battled the leadership of the American Legion over charges that the *Voice* was a Communist publication. The *Voice* was also vehemently opposed to

involvement in both the Korean War and the Vietnam War.¹ In fact, Harry's opposition to the Vietnam War contributed to the paper's demise: His allies didn't agree with his anti-war views, and many of them withdrew their support of the paper for that reason.

Harry and Gretchen's work often sparked debate, but that achievement frequently came at a high personal cost to the couple and their three sons. In addition to the long hours and low income that came with their jobs, the Billingses also frequently faced attacks by conservatives on their reputations. Groups like the Montana leadership of the American Legion labeled Harry and Gretchen as Communists and called the paper a "Red" sheet. Harry and Gretchen often returned fire, and the Billingses' sons also frequently found themselves defending their parents at school.

Vic Reinemer, an award-winning *Charlotte (N.C.) News* columnist who studied journalism at the University of Montana in the 1940s, described the Billingses' perseverance as a virtual miracle. "I know of the fights their three boys got into in school, defending their parents from vicious slander," he wrote in 1959. "I know something of the privation the family has endured in its almost miraculously successful effort to continue publishing the facts and hard-hitting comment."²

Differing styles

Harry, in particular, seemed to thrive on taking unpopular stands through his writing. He called it being "firmly wedded to the proposition that discussion of

¹ See Harry Billings' rundown of causes that were important to him in "*The People's Voice: The Dream and the Reality*," *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 3 – 4.

² Letter from Vic Reinemer to Howard D. Samuel, executive director of the Sidney Hillman Foundation, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 2, folder 28.

controversy was the lifeblood” of democracy.³ Gretchen also noted that he actually enjoyed it: “Harry was never really happy unless everybody was mad at him.”⁴ Harry’s ethical philosophy might be summed up by a quotation prominently displayed at the top of the *Voice*’s editorial page, greeting readers of Harry’s columns: “the hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in a time of moral crisis, refuse to take a stand.”⁵

Gretchen didn’t thrive on controversy, but she didn’t shy from it, either. She undertook causes on behalf of those who would historically have had no voice: “We felt the mandate was to defend the general welfare, to be the devil’s advocate, and to speak for people who had no voice: for prisoners, for civil rights and for people who had no strong organizational structures to defend them.”⁶

Though she often took a hard stance on unpopular issues, Gretchen was skilled at winning people over and using humor to help ease difficult situations. In an interview published in 1986, Gretchen recalled how she had “done a little lampoon” on Bob Corette, a Montana Power Company lobbyist. “He had quite a raging-bull mien about him, and when he saw me at the legislature he came stomping up,” Gretchen remembered. “I didn’t give him a chance to say a thing. I said, ‘Bob, kiss me, don’t

³ Steve Shirley, “Montana Still Needs Paper For ‘Afflicted,’ Says Billings,” *Missoulian*, April 21, 1976.

⁴ Richard Eggert, “Billingses gave volume to the People’s Voice,” *Missoulian*, Aug. 24, 1979.

⁵ The *People’s Voice* attributed the quotation to Dante, but it was actually President John F. Kennedy who is credited with the quotation now, although some say his remark may have been inspired by a passage from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

⁶ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck, and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 141.

scold me!’ There were legislators all around us in the lobby, and poor old Bob, he didn’t know what the hell to do.”⁷

Gretchen’s attempts to win allies were often made more difficult by Harry’s relentless stream of fiery editorials. “Harry could make enemies faster than I could make friends. I’d be out trying to win them over and he’d be back at the plant, making enemies. When I was out around the state I’d try to get hold of a copy of the latest *Voice* before I went to a meeting, so I’d know what I was going to be faced with when I went in,” she said.⁸

But as a duo, Harry and Gretchen seemed to balance each other out, complementing the other’s strengths and weaknesses. In an interview for the *Missoulian*, Harry said: “We added the one-two punch of Gretchen’s accurate reporting and lovely literary style and a little interpretive acid from my typewriter.”⁹

Perceptions of the paper

People who have described the paper characterized it as a progressive advocate for workers, consumers and minorities. Richard Eggert, writing for the *Missoulian* in 1979, described it as a “populist-labor paper with more than a slight leftward leaning.”¹⁰

A University of Montana news release from 1983 described it as taking a strong and

⁷ Ibid, p. 145.

⁸ Ibid, p. 142.

⁹ Richard Eggert, “Billingses gave volume to the People’s Voice,” *Missoulian*, Aug. 24, 1979.

¹⁰ Ibid.

often unpopular editorial stand on social, political and economic issues.¹¹ Harry himself said that the paper's philosophy was to publish stories no other newspaper in the state would touch.¹²

Reinemer, the newspaper columnist and later aide to U.S. Senator Lee Metcalf, called Harry and Gretchen synonymous with the liberal fight year after year. "I'd say that Harry along with Gretchen were the conscience of Montana," he said.¹³

Harry and Gretchen's granddaughter Erin Billings, herself a journalist who earned a master's degree from the University of Montana, called her grandparents "pioneers of independent journalism and legions for progressive populist ideals."¹⁴ She went on to write that the *Voice* "served as a champion for working people, civil rights and those less fortunate at a time when the powerful corporate giant, the Anaconda Co., owned and dictated the contents of most print media in the state."¹⁵

Many of their allies and supporters were affiliated with the labor movement. Jim Murry, former executive secretary of the state AFL-CIO, said in Harry's obituary that the paper was a model for good journalism. "The People's Voice to many of us was really the Holy Grail of journalism. (Harry Billings) did journalism the way it's supposed to be done – with heart and with compassion, and he was absolutely accurate. He felt that the

¹¹ University of Montana news release, December 1983, available in Harry Billings's alumni file in the School of Journalism at the University of Montana.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Charles S. Johnson, "Harry Billings, liberal voice for decades, dead at 77," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 25, 1990.

¹⁴ Erin P. Billings, "No. 66: Harry and Gretchen Billings," in *The 100 Most Influential Montanans of the Century*, *The Missoulian*, 1999.

¹⁵ Ibid.

media had a responsibility to fight for people who really needed someone to fight for them.”¹⁶

Other admirers included Democratic politicians such as Pat Williams, who represented Montana in the U.S. House from 1979 to 1997 and who counted Harry as one of his early influences.

“Harry was a step ahead of everybody,” Williams said. “When you talked to Harry, he’d make you think something new was possible. He was a forward-thinking kind of character ... he knew what was coming, and what should be done about it.”¹⁷

Former Montana Governor Ted Schwinden called the husband-wife team cheerleaders for Democrats: “They left a mark ... Harry and Gretchen had a role. If nothing else, they kind of furnished a competitive spirit to Democrats who were suffering a long drought.”¹⁸

Of course, the Billingses’ stands won them enemies, too. Mainstream Montanans did not always agree that Harry and Gretchen’s efforts were noteworthy. Many conservatives, such as former governor Tim Babcock, dismissed them as ineffective.¹⁹

Like other journalists, they sometimes took fire from their readers. Subscribers showed their displeasure with the Billingses by canceling their subscriptions to the newspaper or by writing angry letters to the editor.

¹⁶ Charles S. Johnson, “Harry Billings, liberal voice for decades, dead at 77,” *Great Falls Tribune*, April 25, 1990.

¹⁷ Author interview with Pat Williams, Missoula, Mont., March 13, 2006.

¹⁸ Author telephone interview with Ted Schwinden, March 24, 2006.

¹⁹ Author telephone interview with Tim Babcock, March 13, 2006.

At times the discussions became heated, but only once did Harry remember an actual threat of physical violence, when the paper fought alongside Attorney General Arnold Olsen to have slot machines and punchboards banned by the Montana Supreme Court. “The only times my family and I were threatened with physical violence came during that three-year period, 1949 through 1951,” Harry recalled in a *Montana Journalism Review* article. “I remember well one anonymous phone call in which I was warned not to sit in front of a window in our home after dark. So, for many months, we dropped the venetian blinds at dusk.”²⁰ More frequent were anonymous notes sent through the mail during that time, Harry recalled, which advised him to “Lay off the slots, you Communist fink!”²¹

While some disagreements caused readers to cancel their subscriptions, Gretchen believed that other people went to great lengths to read the paper. Like Harry and Gretchen, subscribers often faced difficulties simply from being associated with the *Voice*. In an interview more than a decade after the paper folded, Gretchen talked about how *Voice* subscribers resorted to hiding their copies: “People became afraid to be identified with The *Voice*. They would go to the post office and slide the paper out of their box and turn it upside down and jam it into their pockets so that the masthead wouldn’t show – that type of thing,” she said.²²

²⁰ Harry Billings, “*The People’s Voice: The Dream and the Reality*,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 143.

Sometimes the risk was too great for individuals to continue their subscriptions, Gretchen said. “It didn’t stop with trying to hide the masthead at the post office. We lost subscribers because people were afraid to have the paper come through the mail at all. The local postmaster could identify them. The risk of being smeared was too great, because we were called a Communist or Communist-front publication.”²³

The paper’s circulation

While it was well-read in certain circles, the paper’s circulation was small: in a typical year it reached about 6,000 or 7,000, but jumped to as high as 12,000 during election years.²⁴ Subscribers included not only Montanans, but also people all over the country. “Sometimes, during political campaigns, it seemed almost as though we had more out-of-state subscriptions than in-state,” Gretchen recalled.²⁵

Harry and Gretchen thought that the number of people who actually read the *Voice* was much higher than circulation numbers indicated – a common sentiment among newspaper reporters and editors. “Our paid circulation did not nearly represent the size of the readership – the number of people freeloading on somebody else’s copy,” Harry argued. “We did some checking around, in the railroad clerks’ offices, for example, and found that fifteen to twenty people would be reading one copy every week. It was passed around a great deal. It would go up and down the railroads.”²⁶

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For more circulation details, see an interview with Harry and Gretchen Billings in *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, 1986, p. 141.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Harry and Gretchen's legacy

One award in particular paid tribute to the couple for their work: In 1959, the Billingses won the prestigious Sidney Hillman Award and a trip to New York for their editorial efforts on behalf of civil liberties and the general welfare. An influential adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and an architect of the New Deal, Hillman also was founder and president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America Union. He worked to strengthen the union movement and to improve aspects of union workers' lives both inside and outside the workplace.²⁷ Others receiving the Hillman Award over the years included Edward R. Murrow, John Hersey, Theodore H. White, I.F. Stone, Seymour Hersh, Neil Sheehan, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward.

In a letter nominating Harry and Gretchen for the Hillman award, Reinemer wrote that people in Montana were well-served by the *People's Voice*, and that Harry and Gretchen's work there filled an important niche that otherwise would have been empty. With the Anaconda Company owning most of Montana's daily newspapers – a notable exception was the *Great Falls Tribune* – important state news was ignored and, in general, coverage lacked depth.

“Most of Montana's daily newspapers, including the one published in Helena, the state capital, are owned by the Anaconda Company. These papers, as a matter of policy, ignore much state news and provide no coverage in depth on matters of importance to the state's citizens,” Reinemer wrote. “Montana is one of two states which has no newspaper

²⁷ The Sidney Hillman Foundation, <http://www.hillmanfoundation.org/bio-hillman.html>.

correspondent in Washington, D.C. With few exceptions Montana's weeklies are nondescript. In sum, as various roving newsmen from other parts of the nation have concluded, the level of Montana journalism is many rungs below that in many states."²⁸

In the letter, Reinemer pointed out some victories Harry and Gretchen enjoyed, such as helping bring about state prison reforms and making sure that right-to-work proponents didn't get their proposition on the ballot.²⁹

Some politicians, union leaders and other powerful Montanans went beyond applauding specific accomplishments, and have suggested that Harry and Gretchen's influence was great and that their work helped set the stage for passage of a progressive state constitution that was drafted during Montana's 1972 Constitutional Convention.³⁰

Harry and Gretchen's backgrounds

Who were these people who became a progressive force that conservative media and politicians in Montana had to reckon with?

Both Harry and Gretchen were native Montanans, although Gretchen spent most of her childhood out-of-state.³¹ Harry Billings was born to Ray Billings and Edna Gannaway on Jan. 30, 1913, in Somers. Harry's father worked in the lumber mill there, but Harry's mother reared him in Camas Hot Springs, where she published a weekly newspaper, *The Camas-Hot Springs Exchange*, for about 34 years. As a boy in Montana,

²⁸ Letter from Vic Reinemer to Howard D. Samuel, executive director of the Sidney Hillman Foundation, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 2, folder 28.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See chapter eight: *Harry and Gretchen's Legacy*.

³¹ For more information about Harry and Gretchen's lives, see *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, p. 141-150.

Harry learned how to run a linotype machine. He graduated from Thompson Falls High School in 1929 and then went on to continue his studies at the University of Montana in Missoula (then named Montana State University), where he earned a degree in journalism in 1933.

Gretchen Garber was born Nov. 19, 1914, in Whitefish. Her grandparents were homesteaders in Plains, Montana, in the mid-1880s, and her grandfather worked for the railroad and served as a state representative and senator. Gretchen herself was reared in the Seattle-Tacoma area after her father, who worked as a train dispatcher for the Northern Pacific Railroad, was transferred to the Pacific Coast. From kindergarten through high school, Gretchen was educated in Auburn, Washington.

She was one of four girls, and her childhood was hampered by poor health. Asthma confined Gretchen to bed during most winters, but in the summertime, her medicine was Montana, where she came to stay with her grandparents. “By the end of the summer I would be able to stand up straight, finally, and go back to suffer another winter of asthma,” Gretchen said in an interview published in 1986.³²

Harry and Gretchen met at a summer social function in Plains. Their middle son, Mike, remembers his dad later vowing that it was love at first sight: Harry said he knew immediately that Gretchen was the woman he wanted to marry, Mike recalled.³³

Gretchen and Harry married in the fall of 1933 in Missoula.

³² Ibid, p. 144.

³³ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

Before joining the *People's Voice*, Harry's work was varied. He did survey and engineering work for about seven and a half years, published a weekly for four years, and also did editing and printing work for union publications.

Gretchen began working during World War II, as an assistant rationing clerk in the Seattle-Tacoma shipyards. From there, she returned to Montana with Harry when he started working at the *Voice*.

Together, Harry and Gretchen raised three sons: John, Mike and Leon. Even though they had demanding newspaper jobs, it's clear that Gretchen and Harry felt a tremendous responsibility to raise their sons to be individuals of good moral character. As parents, they stressed the importance of ethical conduct at all times. They encouraged lively discussions and valued rational thought. Mike Billings remembers sitting around the dinner table, talking about issues. "We did sit at the dinner table every night...we were expected to be there," he said. "Mostly we sat and we talked. We debated and argued. We had an intellectual life. That's where we were really affluent."³⁴

Harry and Gretchen's influences

Harry and Gretchen's own parents largely influenced their lives. Harry's mother was as "independent as a hog on ice," Mike Billings recalled.³⁵ As a homesteader in western Montana in the early 1900s, Edna Gannaway built her own house and toted a gun

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

to her first job as a teacher. “She was opinionated,” Mike said. “Nobody messed with her.”

Harry’s father was brilliant, Mike said, though he noted that Edna and Ray obviously were not suited for each other.³⁶ They were together for about 12 years before they split. Edna later remarried, and Ray later moved to California. A socialist, Ray announced the government owed him a living and went on welfare at age 65, Leon Billings said. Harry had a relationship with his father, though they were not close. At times, his relationship with his mother was strained, particularly when Harry and Gretchen were married and living with Edna. “There were a number of years when they were estranged,” Leon said.³⁷

Gretchen and Harry were both close to Gretchen’s parents, Jo and J.R. Garber. J.R. worked as a railroad dispatcher, and the couple raised four daughters. Mike remembers his grandmother as a great role model, and as someone who practiced the moderation that she preached. “She was smart as hell, too,” he said. Both Jo and J.R. were intellectuals, he added, noting that they were also good parents. “Harry thought the world of Jo and J.R.,” Mike said. “They were really his parents.”³⁸

The beginnings of the People’s Voice

Harry started at the *Voice* in 1946, when it was about seven years old. But the inception of the *People’s Voice*, in 1939, actually was a long time in coming. Its

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

³⁸ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

unofficial predecessor was the *Western Progressive*, a newspaper started in 1932 and whose first editor was H.S. “Cap” Bruce, who later became the first editor of the *People’s Voice*.

Bruce was a colorful figure.³⁹ Although he studied engineering at the University of Nebraska, he spent little time as an engineer. He worked as a reporter for the *Chicago Inter Ocean* around 1900. Several years later, he headed west, and became familiar with the wilderness of Montana as a surveyor for land in northwest Montana that, in 1910, would become Glacier National Park.

Bruce was a member of the Montana militia and, in 1916, was part of the force that drove Pancho Villa back into Mexico. During his stint in Europe during World War I, Bruce lost hearing in one ear when a gun fired prematurely. In the early twenties after the war, Bruce published a string of weeklies in Texas. A stint as policy director for Senator Thomas J. Walsh’s successful re-election campaign brought him back to Montana in 1928.

While there were several newspapers in the state that are considered to be part of a more progressive and even radical press, including the *Butte Bulletin*, *Montana Labor News* (Butte), the *Producers News* (Plentywood) and the *Western News* (Hamilton), it was the *Western Progressive* that is often identified as the predecessor of the *People’s Voice*.

³⁹ For Harry Billings’s description of Bruce, see “*The People’s Voice: The Dream and the Reality*,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 2-3.

In 1932, Cap Bruce became the first editor of the *Western Progressive*, a newspaper whose primary purpose, according to Harry Billings, was to “publicize important Montana affairs that all too frequently were overlooked in the Company press.”⁴⁰ Harry wrote that the newspaper’s work was important: “The Progressive, organized as a straight-line corporation, did much to enliven public interest with its hard-hitting comments on the ACM’s influence in state government, alleged corruption of public officials, and corporate control of the legislature.”⁴¹

The *Progressive* fought the Anaconda Copper Mining Company-controlled press, a tradition that the *People’s Voice* would continue. Harry and Gretchen believed the ACM-controlled press was a terrible way for Montanans to get news. Gretchen described it as a dismal situation. “In those days the working man in Montana had no voice in the daily press. Almost every paper in the state was still owned or controlled by Anaconda. The small farmer might belong to an organization with an in-house publication, but he had no way to reach the general public – that was what we tried to do.”⁴²

The *Western Progressive* didn’t survive for long. In 1937, in the midst of both internal and external setbacks to the Montana Democratic Party, and despite attempts to reinvigorate the publication as a daily, the *Progressive* folded.⁴³

⁴⁰ Harry Billings, “*The People’s Voice: The Dream and the Reality*,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 2 – 3.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City, Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 141.

⁴³ Dennis L. Swibold, *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*, Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006, p. 274.

The *Voice* was a relatively young publication when Harry joined the staff in 1946. Bruce was editor of the paper from its inception until Harry Billings took over in 1948.

The *People's Voice* got its start at the tail end of the New Deal reform movement, instituted by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which resulted in an infusion of government funds into projects like Montana's Fort Peck Dam and into such groups as the Civilian Conservation Corps. The New Deal transformed the relationship between federal and state government, and many state governments expanded. The New Deal also protected unions, which would boost the *Voice's* support.

Montana received a great deal of money from the federal government during the New Deal. From 1933 to 1939, the state received nearly \$400,000,000 and got about \$142,000,000 in loans.⁴⁴ But the New Deal reform movement, begun in 1933, had lost momentum by the end of the '30s.⁴⁵ It was in this climate that the *People's Voice* originated.

Journalistic philosophies

People instrumental in founding the *Voice* included then-U.S. Senator James Murray and future U.S. Representative and Senator Lee Metcalf, who was a state legislator at the time of the paper's inception. Of utmost importance to the *Voice's* founders was ensuring that the paper would be free from control by advertisers and any

⁴⁴ For more information about the New Deal in Montana, see *Montana, A History of Two Centuries*, by Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder and William L. Lang, p. 296-297.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

single group or individual.⁴⁶ The Educational Co-operative Publishing Company was arranged, then, where each stockholder would receive one vote. Among the co-op's stockholders were about 700 individuals, most of whom were members of organized labor or the Farmers Union. In addition, about 80 labor and Farmers Union organizations were stockholders.⁴⁷ The arrangement proved its worth for 30 years; the co-op published the *People's Voice* from 1939 to 1969.

Harry and Gretchen, like Bruce before them, reported to the co-op's board of directors. The stockholders elected a board, which hired the editor, and the by-laws endowed that position with unrestricted freedom in editorializing and writing news. The editor was expected to work for what seemed best for the most people, with an understanding that the board could fire the editor but not interfere with his judgments.⁴⁸

The Billingses' loved the policy in theory, but the system had its flaws. The set-up often made Harry and Gretchen's workload immense, without solid support from the board. Harry recalled the board "were good people and absolutely good for nothing. We had all the frustrations of ownership, without owning it."⁴⁹

But the Billingses were advocates of the co-operative arrangement because it meant that they were not beholden to any corporation; the editor had full freedom.

Gretchen explained the set-up in 1986: "We had an office in Helena, right across the

⁴⁶ Draft of article by Stephen Kelley, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 3, folder 4.

⁴⁷ According to the first issue of the *Voice*, all but about 25 of the 700 individual stockholders were members of organized labor or the Farmers Union. See "Educational co-op publishing co. prints 'the Voice,'" *The People's Voice*, Dec. 6, 1939, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 141.

street from the capitol building. The Educational Co-op Publishing Company owned and published the *People's Voice*; the company was also a printing plant. The object was to have a business establishment that would help support the publication – with full knowledge that it would also have to be supported by contributions, to keep it independent.”⁵⁰

Restrictions on advertising also were intended to keep the paper independent. Advertising in the *Voice* was limited to legal, labor, cooperative and political ads. The by-laws prohibited corporate and individual advertising, and the paper was designed as a non-profit publication incorporated as a cooperative wherein each of the 800 stockholders had one vote.⁵¹

To generate the income that most papers brought in through advertising, the *Voice* took on additional printing jobs. The co-op purchased an old printing plant for the paper and did commercial printing jobs for labor and farming groups. Harry explained that subscriptions, individual contributions and the limited advertising made up the three other sources of income for the *Voice*.⁵²

With its office across the street from the capitol building in Helena and sometimes referred to as “in the shadow of the capitol,” the *People's Voice* tried to fulfill its goal of being a watchdog of the government.

And the paper always tried to be a progressive, populist-oriented publication. “We tried to represent voiceless people and defend and promote causes that affected, as near

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Draft of article by Stephen Kelley, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 3, folder 4.

⁵² Ibid.

as we could determine, the greatest number of people against the sources of power –political, economic or whatever,” Gretchen said in an interview with Stephen Kelley in the ’70s.⁵³

The Billingses were suspicious when things seemed tranquil. “We knew that when you have harmony in the legislative halls and peace and quiet in the government, the corporate termites were very busy, and the people took the beating. So we tried to keep everything stirred up,” Harry said in an interview for the same article.⁵⁴

Though they gave their lives to the paper, Gretchen’s and Harry’s careers as journalists ended unhappily. Harry’s editorial opposition to the Vietnam War caused the Billingses’ to fall out of favor with the board. Opposition to the war, along with health problems and fatigue, caused Harry to throw in the towel and resign in 1969, several months before the *Voice* folded. Gretchen had quit several years earlier, in the fall of 1967, because of poor health and long-standing feelings of bitterness.

Lack of financial support from people who called themselves supporters of the *Voice*, the battering Harry, Gretchen and their sons took during the Red scare, the labor movement’s lack of support of civil rights issues and other disappointments all combined to take their toll on Gretchen.

“When I finally quit, it was purely and simply because I had become so bitter,” she said in a 1986 interview. “I was suffering physically, and I couldn’t allow myself to become a permanently embittered woman. I had to get over that. It took me longer to get

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

over the psychological problem – the sense of futility about it all – than to get over the physical damage.”⁵⁵

It’s understandable that she would be discouraged after years of dealing with people who treated her poorly. Gretchen recalled that she was often treated like an outcast. “During the years we were called Communists, I would cover conventions and public meetings and feel like the proverbial skunk at the Sunday School picnic. People who were friendly with me in private, smiled at me from a distance.”⁵⁶

Even years later, after the paper was gone, Gretchen remained unhappy with how it ended: “I got very bitter because I was so exhausted and my health had turned sour. That was a kind of cumulative, nonproductive, self-destructive thing I had to overcome. But we would go to gatherings in the state once in a while, and I’d find that I just didn’t want to go back, because everybody would come around and tell us how dreadfully they missed *The Voice* and how the state needed another *Voice* and how people had tried to get other publications going and how right we were about the war. To me that’s no comfort.”⁵⁷

The *Voice*’s opposition to the Vietnam War certainly caused many of their previous backers to discontinue their financial support, and Harry and Gretchen have admitted that Vietnam was a large part of the *Voice*’s demise. But Harry also attributed the Billingses’ leaving very directly to health. In many letters he wrote once the decision

⁵⁵ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 147.

⁵⁶ Draft of article by Stephen Kelley, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 3, folder 4.

⁵⁷ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 147.

had been made to leave, he told his correspondents that Vietnam wasn't the real reason after all. He said health and needing to spend time away from the rigors of the job was the real impetus behind his departure.

Harry and Gretchen sacrificed much for the paper and it took a toll on their health, but their efforts left a legacy. While they didn't win every battle, the *People's Voice* under Harry and Gretchen's leadership provided a forum for progressives to come together and form alliances. That hub had a major role in shaping the political climate of the state at a time when conservatives dominated Montana's politics, economy and daily press. And that atmosphere subsequently helped pass what many people call one of the most progressive state constitutions in the country, Montana's 1972 Constitution.

CHAPTER TWO: THEMES IN THE *PEOPLE'S VOICE*

If there is one theme in Harry and Gretchen Billingses' work at the *People's Voice*, it is that government should benefit ordinary, working people. Their youngest son, Leon Billings, recalled in a telephone interview that his dad "believed there was a constant struggle between working people and the people who controlled capital. He believed the role of government was to see that capital wasn't abusive."⁵⁸

Harry explained it in a similar way in 1988: "We tried to follow a principle that any time the democratic liberties of a person or a group were trampled upon, and nothing was done to redress, then also are the civil liberties of all endangered."⁵⁹

That theme was reflected over the years in their crusades for a progressive tax system based on an individual's ability to pay, compensation for workers injured or made ill on the job, better mental health care services, equal rights for Native Americans, more rigorous environmental standards, abolishment of the death penalty, limits on gambling and more money for education.

Looking back, Harry said the *Voice* had a "breadth of coverage that to this day astounds even those of us who worked for the publication for so many years."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

⁵⁹ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 21.

⁶⁰ Harry Billings, "The *People's Voice*: The Dream and the Reality," *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 3.

Progressive tax system

Advocating for taxes that they believed were fair was one way in which Harry and Gretchen tried to make sure government helped working people. Throughout their years at the paper, they continually opposed enactment of a general sales tax, a stand the *Voice* had taken since its inception. The Billingses' argued that a sales tax would be regressive – that taxing people the same percentage on goods, regardless of their income, was unfair. Instead, they thought that people who had more money should shoulder more of the tax load.

An editorial in 1955 explained the reasons for Harry's vehement opposition to the sales tax. Corporations had the most to gain from enactment of a sales tax, he wrote, and one strategy they often employed was to make enactment sound inevitable. But Harry maintained that a sales tax was not only unnecessary, but a mistake: "A sales tax would only amount to the shifting of a disproportionate share of the cost of state government to those least able to pay. The beneficiaries, accordingly, would be those most able to pay: Corporations, people in higher income brackets, etc."⁶¹ Rather than a sales tax, Harry advocated for increasing taxes like the personal income tax and the corporation license tax. He argued that those could be "drastically increased with little or no harm resulting to either individual or corporate entity."⁶²

⁶¹ "Sales tax 'brain-washing' in the offing?" *The People's Voice*, April 22, 1955, p. 4.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Harry also kept informed on federal tax issues and wrote about them when he found them pertinent to Montanans. For example, he editorialized against a 1953 proposal for a national sales tax. In that editorial, he reprinted a small section of a story from *U.S. News & World Report* that said Congress had balked at the idea because of “the theory that such levies place heavier burdens on the lower-income groups than on the families that have higher incomes.”⁶³ But Harry feared that Congress might be less inclined to oppose a sales tax when it would mean that taxes on income and profits would be lowered. “Need more be said at this time to bring home to every citizen the need for urging Congress to stand firm against the imposition of any new federal excise or sales taxes?” he asked.⁶⁴

Today, Montana is one of only a handful of states⁶⁵ without a sales tax, and when Harry wrote about taxes in 1988, he took pride in that fact. “It is significant to note that, although the first effort to burden Montana consumers was in 1933, as of 1988 the corporations, mostly out-of-state owned, had not achieved the long-cherished goal in spite of huge expenditures to persuade the people of Montana they must accept a sales tax,” he wrote.⁶⁶ Critics would say, though, that it has kept the state from adequately supporting state institutions.

While opposition to a sales tax was probably the most written-about tax issue in the *Voice*, other tax issues received space in the paper. Harry editorialized about the need

⁶³ “Will you be ‘soap opera-ed’ into a national sales tax?” *The People’s Voice*, May 1, 1953, p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ According to http://www.taxadmin.org/fta/rate/tax_stru.html, as of January 1, 2006, Alaska, Delaware, Montana, New Jersey and Oregon are the only states without a general sales tax.

⁶⁶ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 24.

for laws that would enable the state of Montana to collect income tax on income earned in Montana by people residing out of state. For example, he wrote that Montana Power Company stockholders, whether they lived in Montana or on the East Coast or abroad, should “bear a portion of the responsibility of maintaining Montana government by paying state income tax on their dividends.”⁶⁷

Harry also said that tax breaks weren’t likely to help most people, and consequently that tax cuts weren’t a good idea at certain times: “There is no Santa Claus,” he wrote. “Likewise, for all of the political palaver, there aren’t going to be any tax cuts of importance within the foreseeable future.”⁶⁸ Moreover, taxes were part of living in a society that took care of people, he wrote, and politicians shouldn’t focus on cutting them. Tax cuts would sacrifice funding for education, health care, police and fire systems, and road maintenance, and he thought that was unacceptable.

He wrote that taxes had a value that would not be found elsewhere, and that the value should be recognized: “It is time we came to our senses on this matter of taxes; that taxes are our contribution for the privilege of being a part of an organized society; that taxes are a medium whereby we accomplish collectively those things we may desire but which would be impossible of attainment by individual endeavor.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ “Outstater should be taxed on Montana income,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 15, 1957, p. 2.

⁶⁸ “Let’s stop kidding ourselves,” *The People’s Voice*, May 27, 1960, p. 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Compensation for workers injured or made ill on the job

Rights for workers also received a great deal of coverage in the *Voice*. Harry and Gretchen believed that workers who were injured on the job should be fairly compensated and that people who contracted silicosis and other workplace diseases should qualify for worker's compensation benefits.⁷⁰

Worker's compensation legislation in Montana had a long history, a great deal of which was linked to the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. In an unpublished manuscript, Harry explained that around the year 1915 there had been a "strong effort" made to enact a "meaningful" worker's compensation act in Montana, but that the ACM lobby killed the attempt. However, that effort attracted enough attention that it could no longer be ignored in Montana, because "Montana people began realizing that it was almost impossible for an industrially disabled worker to win damages in the courts because of the overwhelming influence of the company and other employers..."⁷¹

The Anaconda Copper Mining Company tried to control the worker's compensation legislation in the next legislative session, Harry wrote in the manuscript, by proposing a bill, which passed. But Harry reflected years later that although the bill recognized that industry had a responsibility for injured employees, in some ways it actually made the situation for workers worse because "it waived a disabled worker's right to use the judicial process should he be injured on a job covered by the law."⁷²

⁷⁰ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 106.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, p. 107.

Harry also concluded that the weekly benefits, as well as the length of time workers could receive benefits, were “miserly.”

Attempts to improve the law failed for many years. Voters rejected a 1932 initiative that aimed to improve workers’ benefits and the duration of benefits.

Eventually pressure grew to aid workers affected by the miner’s disease, though, and a commission in the late 1930s was charged with studying the matter and making a recommendation to the Legislature.⁷³ It recommended that workers with silicosis be given what Harry called an “inadequate” monthly payment from public welfare, which Harry wrote was “great” for the ACM because the workers disabled by that company became the responsibility of the taxpayers.⁷⁴ “Despite the Act being so inadequate,” Harry wrote, the Legislature made few changes or improvements to the law until the late 1940s.

In 1947, two bills that would increase disabled workers’ benefits were introduced in the House. Although they were eventually killed, the bills raised public awareness of the issue, and in 1948, a bill for a \$2.50 increase in weekly benefits passed.

Four years later, in 1952, a group called the Montana Progressive Party proposed an initiative that, if passed, would cover silicosis under the current worker’s compensation law. The initiative failed, but the proposal brought needed attention to the issue, and in 1959, the Legislature enacted an Occupational Disease Act that specifically covered silicosis as well as several other occupational diseases. Harry attributed passage

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

to a “falling-out” between the ACM and Montana Power Company lobby. The rumor was that Montana Power’s president Jack Corette was unhappy with the ACM because his brother, Robert, wasn’t hired as its counsel. Regardless of whether that was the cause, the Power Company lobby evidently “sat on its hands” while the bill was being considered, and it passed.⁷⁵

Throughout those years, the *Voice* kept its readers informed on workplace issues. Harry thought that the *Voice*’s coverage focused attention on those issues, such as when it wrote about two House bills that were killed in 1949: “The fat was in the fire, in no small part due to *The Voice* placing the justice of the two measures before the people of Montana.”⁷⁶ Harry concluded that he was glad to fight for what he considered to be an important issue. He vowed that “if the opportunity ever came to be a part of a campaign to promote sanitary safety conditions in Montana mines and smelters, and more adequate compensation for victims of such diseases that such employment spawned, I’d do everything I could. Fortunately, I did have the opportunity via the *Voice*.”⁷⁷

Striking workers had the *Voice*’s full support, too. A front-page report that Gretchen wrote in January of 1960 heralded workers who were striking in Butte and Great Falls as courageous, saying that: “Montana people, like people everywhere, have difficulty grasping the kind of courage being displayed by people faced with hunger and want.”⁷⁸ In this instance, the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Butte and Great Falls were in the midst of a long strike and “determined to starve before submitting” to the

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 111-112.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 108.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 112.

⁷⁸ “The miners today – YOU tomorrow?” *The People’s Voice*, Jan. 8, 1960, p. 1-2.

Anaconda Company, which seemed equally determined to “starve the Miners and Smeltermen into submission.”⁷⁹

Gretchen argued that the chief importance of strikes wasn’t the potential for increased wages and benefits, but for the right for people to organize as a group and be able to have input in their jobs. “They are fighting, as the fight was made by working men in the past, for the right to organize and bargain in good faith, for the right to organize and work in the social and economic field, for the dignity of the working man,” Gretchen wrote.

While the strike was justified – workers legitimately wanted higher wages and better working conditions – it was also symbolic of a bigger fight, and one that affected all Montanans. Gretchen wrote: “This fight is not just for today. It is not just for the Miners and Smeltermen. It is for working men and their families all over Montana, and it is against the same corporate powers who have wielded their economic, social and political power without consideration for human values since the beginning of time.”⁸⁰ Gretchen urged her readers to demand fair treatment for the workers, to exert political pressure on the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, and to donate food or a few dollars to the striking workers and their families.

In late January, the strike still had not ended, and the *Voice* ran a front-page article detailing how dire the situation had become.⁸¹ The article talked about how workers and their families who, facing starvation, were “literally locked in a life and

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “7,500 face starvation in Butte,” *The People’s Voice*, Jan. 29, 1960, p. 1.

death struggle” with the ACM. The *Voice* reported that the strikers were beginning to receive more support from others around the state, but that they were facing discrimination when they tried to get part-time jobs and were being denied unemployment benefits from the Welfare Commission.

Several weeks later, the *Voice* reported that the 177-day strike had ended and that the “Anaconda Company domination met and went down before a substantial challenge.” A *Voice* editorial called the settlement of Montana’s longest-ever strike a victory not only for the “3,300 courageous miners and smelters and their families, but in a broader sense, for all the people of Montana.”⁸²

Echoing Gretchen’s January report, Harry’s editorial charged that the strikers were not fighting for food and money alone, but “were striking for a principle; were determined to withstand every conceivable hardship that the company be made to understand the striker’s right to his dignity as an individual...”⁸³

Harry concluded that a new public awareness in Montana of the “low value Anaconda places on human health and welfare” might help erase a misconception among “eastern” corporations that the state was “a colony to be exploited to the hilt.”⁸⁴

Public health

Harry and Gretchen often wrote about health care in conjunction with taxes, as Gretchen did in a 1962 column. “How often when we pay our taxes, or turn in our W2

⁸² “A victory for all Montana,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 19, 1960, p. 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

form do we feel a surge of thankfulness for the silent guardian of the public health?” she wrote. “These people who are today trying to impress you with the need for money to prevent you from drinking your neighbor’s sewage, or sending your sewage to your neighbor to drink? These people who are trying to tell you water is your most precious commodity today and you are wasting it and misusing it.”⁸⁵

Gretchen argued that people would not be able to provide these services for themselves, but that it could only be done collectively. “My entire tax payment would be a drop in the bucket if I had to try and find myself a source of water let alone clean water.”⁸⁶

In addition to praising public health professionals and the work they did, the *Voice* strongly supported enactment of Medicare.⁸⁷ Frequently, Gretchen engaged in debates on the issue with doctors in various Montana cities.⁸⁸

Better mental health care

Another group for whom the newspaper advocated were those who needed mental health care. Harry recalled years later that the paper “was always in the forefront to gain improved facilities and personnel at the state institutions.”⁸⁹

Gretchen, especially, was devoted to mental health issues. In addition to writing about them, she also served as a member of the Governor’s Committee for Mental Health

⁸⁵ “What do you think?” *The People’s Voice*, Jan. 12, 1962, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Harry Billings, “*The People’s Voice: The Dream and the Reality*,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

under Governors John Bonner and Hugo Aronson, and worked on bond campaigns that would finance improvements at state institutions.⁹⁰

Gretchen's commitment was rooted in personal experience and a long-held belief that the public had a responsibility to those less fortunate. She divulged that she had personally witnessed the devastation of mental retardation, thereby removing the misperception that mental illness affected "other" people. "I stood beside a member of my family while a mentally-retarded child was taken from our arms for permanent residence in an institution," she told her readers.⁹¹

She wrote that it went beyond personal experience, though: "I have always had a deep conviction about the responsibility of citizens through their state government to provide the necessary facilities and services in the mental health field."⁹²

Realizing that much was unknown about mental health issues, Gretchen set out in the spring of 1950 to document the conditions and needs of people who lived and worked at the state mental institution in Warm Springs and a vocational school for girls in Boulder.

Gretchen's articles about her trips demonstrated a writing style that made her popular with readers: She wrote articles as though she were writing letters to old friends, inserting details she found interesting and including her own reactions to what she learned.

⁹⁰ "How can we best provide mental health services?" *The People's Voice*, March 11, 1965, p. 1, 8.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

“The neat and spotless kitchen are a complete satisfaction to see,” she wrote in 1950 about a vocational school. “Yes, the cottage is a large and comfortable house!”⁹³

These details and personal observations helped Gretchen connect to her readers, and her points were likely better made because of it. In this case, Gretchen argued that challenges at the school should not be underestimated: “There are great emotional problems to be dealt with within the girls themselves.”⁹⁴

If one part of the battle at the time was convincing people that there was a problem, another challenge was that Montana’s large geographic area coupled with inadequate numbers of mental health professionals made it difficult to serve everyone who needed help. Gretchen tried to raise awareness of this problem, too, and argued for a deeper commitment in the form of increased funding.

“In Montana, our population distribution spread as it is over so many miles, does not make feasible the concentration of special centers for training and care of the mentally deficient child in any local area,” she explained.⁹⁵

Years before the problems were generally known, she reported that state institutions at both Warm Springs and Boulder were “dangerously and illegally overcrowded,” and argued that larger, better trained staffs were desperately needed.⁹⁶

“Warm Springs and Boulder must receive the financial support of the state if they are going to meet the minimum requirements demanded of them in the field of mental health,” she concluded.⁹⁷

⁹³ “Institutions... vocational school for girls,” *The People’s Voice*, April 7, 1950, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “In the world of shadows...” *The People’s Voice*, March 7, 1952, p. 1.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Native American rights

Another concern of Harry and Gretchen's involved the treatment and well-being of the state's Native Americans.

Gretchen and Harry called for better understanding between the Indian and non-Indian communities and worked to provide the framework for that understanding. They reported on the need to improve health services, counseling and social services, sanitation in housing and water supplies, education, economic development, better rehabilitation and resettlement programs, and better ways of informing Montanans about Indians.⁹⁸

Making improvements in the Indian communities would be more complicated than merely allocating more money to certain services, Gretchen wrote. Long-term solutions would require patience and a willingness to try to understand other communities. In a front-page article outlining areas that a Montana committee on human relations believed needed work, Gretchen reported on what needed to be done. "The most fundamental needs, the committee felt, were a better feeling and understanding both between the Indians themselves and members of the community, a greater feeling of the need of a community approach to problems, a common law enforcement agency, a feeling among the Indians that they have the ability and the responsibility of solving many of their own problems."⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ "Montana human relations committee investigates Indian problems," *The People's Voice*, Nov. 12, 1954, p. 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

In an in-depth article several years later, Gretchen continued her efforts to raise awareness about problems in Montana Indian communities. In one community, for example, Gretchen wrote that Indians comprised only one percent of the city's population, but made up 10 percent of welfare cases and 25 percent of the medical load. She reported that the social climate in that city was marked by "fear, suspicion and hostility."¹⁰⁰ Gretchen's article coincided with Congressional efforts to eliminate the reservation status of Indians nationwide – a move which would create even greater problems for the Native population, she argued. "The most significant fact coming out of the surveys and materials presented to Congress and through the press of the nation is, probably, that the Indian who has not been able to make a go of it on the reservation finds himself even less prepared to cope with conditions off the reservation, and therefore the problem must be considered as a group – from a 'total approach.'"¹⁰¹

Such a policy would be a continuation of other ill-conceived government policies toward Indians, Gretchen charged. "The relocation program has caused hundreds of Indians to leave the reservation without the benefits of the [relocation] program – on their own – but above and beyond that, has it, like so many other programs that were supposed to benefit the Indian, been an attempt to accomplish too much with too little money?"¹⁰²

Harry addressed Native American issues, too. Skeptical about a proposal to withdraw federal supervision of Indians, he claimed that the proposal was merely "another manifestation of the all-out drive currently being staged by predatory interests to

¹⁰⁰ "American Indian being pushed further into never-never land," *The People's Voice*, Aug. 17, 1956, p. 2-3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

gather unto themselves what remains of the nation's natural resources.”¹⁰³ He speculated that rather than caring about what would be in the best interests of the Indians, “unscrupulous” people were merely trying to extract what natural wealth they could from the Natives.¹⁰⁴

Specifically, he warned that Native Americans could be deprived of a valuable resource: “Over in northwestern Montana the drive to give the Indians “freedom,” if successful, could well find the Flatheads whizzed out of a most prized resource—hydroelectric power development and sites. Kerr Dam today pays many thousands of dollars into Indian coffers each year, by way of a lease of the site to Montana Power Company. In originally drafting the lease agreement about a quarter of a century ago, federal authorities did a pretty fair job of looking after the financial interests of the people comprising the Flathead tribe. Had there been no federal supervision, the Flatheads, in their general lack of knowledge on financial matters, would have undoubtedly let the site go for little or nothing.”¹⁰⁵

Also, he wrote that oil companies could more easily obtain leases on land in eastern Montana if Native Americans didn't own the land. Timber, agricultural lands, and minerals owned by Native Americans were also at risk without federal supervision.¹⁰⁶

More rigorous environmental standards

¹⁰³ “Another ‘grab’ in the offing?” *The People's Voice*, Oct. 9, 1953, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Harry and Gretchen were ahead of their time in arguing for legislation that would both maintain a quality environment and protect natural resources. The positions they took on the environment wouldn't seem unusual in today's political climate, but at the time, they stood out. The *People's Voice* "reported about potential pollution problems years before other publications covered them," journalist Charles S. Johnson noted in Harry's obituary.¹⁰⁷

While the Anaconda Copper Mining Company-controlled papers – known as the Copper Press – suppressed environmental reports, the *People's Voice* worked to make environmental issues public. In fact, Pat Williams, a Democrat who represented Montana in the U.S. House from 1979 to 1997, identified Harry as one of Montana's first environmentalists. "Harry was an early environmentalist," he said. "There's no question about it."¹⁰⁸

Over the years, Harry and Gretchen reported and editorialized about a variety of environmental issues, including the dangers associated with building an aluminum plant in the Flathead Valley, the need for air pollution controls and protection of water, and the damage done by pollution, including stream pollution's devastating effects on fish.

For example, in a front-page article in the summer of 1958, the *Voice* reported that waste from a pulp mill had caused a heavy fish kill in the Clark Fork River west of Missoula. The paper ran the article 12 years before the first Earth Day and the beginning

¹⁰⁷ Charles S. Johnson, "Harry Billings, liberal voice for decades, dead at 77," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 25, 1990.

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with Pat Williams, Missoula, Mont., March 13, 2006.

of a national environmental movement, and 14 years before the state Constitution's guarantee to the right of a clean and healthful environment.

In addition to explaining the events that had prompted Montana Fish and Game's effort to prevent more kills, the article explained other dangers associated with the waste discharge. "In addition to the fish kill, state fish and game biologists stated that 'excessive growths of slime have resulted from the pulp mill discharges.' These smother fish food organisms and prevent fish from reproducing," the article warned.¹⁰⁹

That fall, Harry editorialized about the need to address rising levels of pollution in the air. He wrote that air pollution "is a growing problem, both state and nationwide with which we must come to grips if the health of the great majority of Americans is to be spared material impairment."¹¹⁰ He pointed out a number of examples of how poor air affected Montanans, including how pollution from a pulpmill west of Missoula and obnoxious odors from oil refineries and potentially harmful chemical residues from smelters, aluminum fabrication plants and sawmills could make people's eyes sting and cause a poor skin complexion.¹¹¹

Harry's editorial noted that Montana's State Board of Health would be asking the Legislature for legislation that would effectively control air pollution, as well as the money to see it carried out. "Why wait any longer?" he wrote. "What better investment

¹⁰⁹ "Pulp mill pollution of Clark Fork blamed for fish kill," *The People's Voice*, Aug. 15, 1958, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ "Montana must come to grips with growing air pollution problem," *The People's Voice*, Oct. 17, 1958, p. 2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

can we make than to have the control machinery in readiness before this monster has a chance to overwhelm all of us?”¹¹²

When the legislation failed the next winter after industries “agreed” to add clean-up programs, Harry noted that some observers called the agreement a behind-the-scenes deal, and editorialized that the trade-off meant Montanans lost and industry won. He wrote: “The fact remains that air pollution is a growing menace to the air we breathe in Montana ... That some industries may have agreed to initiate “clean-up” programs if HB 84 were permitted to quietly die, looks like a poor exchange so far as the health of Montana people is concerned.”¹¹³

Harry and Gretchen called for stricter environmental standards not because they believed that the land should be untouched, but because they believed resources should be used wisely and stricter environmental controls would be healthier for people.

Historically, concern about economic costs trumped stricter environmental standards, and Harry and Gretchen addressed that value system head-on. In an editorial about a proposed aluminum plant at Columbia Falls, the *Voice* weighed the economic costs of effective pollution controls, and argued that despite the cost, “100 per cent effective air and water pollution control” were absolutely necessary, not only to protect the public but also to protect the “fabulously-beautiful” Flathead River.¹¹⁴

Harry and Gretchen’s environmental stances illustrated an attitude that can also be found in other areas of their work. Their writings on the environment reflected their

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

belief that the health and welfare of people were more important than property and material things. A *Voice* editorial on values succinctly states this idea. “The emphasis placed on property “values” as compared with human “values” continues to be something most worthy of unceasing protest.”¹¹⁵

Abolishment of the death penalty

The *People’s Voice* opposed capital punishment, and Harry and Gretchen wrote about the case of Frank R. Dryman, also known as Frank Valentine, who had been sentenced to death by hanging for slaying a Shelby businessman. In a summary of the issue years later, Harry wrote that he and Gretchen looked into Dryman’s case because a district judge imposed his sentence after only a hearing and without a trial by jury. “No matter how heinous the crime,” Harry wrote, Dryman “was entitled to the full recourse of law.”¹¹⁶

As he looked back on the case, Harry concluded that the successful fight the *Voice* launched to save Dryman from the gallows was one of his and Gretchen’s most notable achievements.¹¹⁷

In their investigation of his case, the Billingses found copies of Dryman’s discharge from the Navy and learned that his medical records classified him as

¹¹⁵ “Speaking of ‘values,’” *The People’s Voice*, April 8, 1955, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ Notes by Harry L. Billings, “The Frank Dryman Case,” 7/26/84, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 9, folder 12.

¹¹⁷ Harry Billings, “*The People’s Voice: The Dream and the Reality*,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 3.

“permanently insane.” While Dryman was in the Navy’s charge, they kept him under guard, but released him at his home in Vallejo, Calif.

Citing numerous errors in the 1950 hearing in Shelby, the Montana State Supreme Court ordered a new trial for Dryman. The jury subsequently found Dryman guilty, and he again received the death sentence. After another appeal, Dryman received a new trial in a different venue. Clearly devoted to the case, Harry and Gretchen donated \$300 to have a Billings psychiatrist evaluate Dryman’s mental condition and testify at that trial on what he found. The psychiatrist found that Dryman was a schizophrenic, and he was sentenced to life in prison.¹¹⁸

The case so affected Harry, he wrote, that he couldn’t cover it for the *Voice*. “I was so mentally torn-up by this case that I had to have Gretchen handle the reporting – a job she did superbly.”¹¹⁹

Incidentally, Dryman later corresponded with Gretchen and told her that he had not “wasted” the years spent in prison, but that he had, among other things, read extensively and earned a high school diploma.¹²⁰ He was named the Junior Chamber of Commerce Prisoner of the Year in 1964 and paroled in the 1960s.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Notes by Harry L. Billings, “The Frank Dryman Case,” 7/26/84, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 9, folder 12.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Letter from Frank Dryman to Gretchen Billings, July 16, 1962, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 9, folder 12.

¹²¹ Notes by Harry L. Billings, “The Frank Dryman Case,” 7/26/84, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 9, folder 12.

Harry and Gretchen were proud of “saving ... a mentally-deranged transient youth” from the death sentence,¹²² and son Leon Billings agreed that it was their efforts that made the difference. “They saved a life,” he said about Harry and Gretchen’s role in the case. “How many people can say that?”¹²³

Prohibition of slot machines

Harry and Gretchen also wrote about the need to prohibit slot machines, and, years later, noted that they were proud to have backed Attorney General Arnold Olsen’s successful fight to have slot machines and punchboards banned by the State Supreme Court.¹²⁴

Editorials argued that too much money – more than 10 percent – of the state’s total wage income was annually being “frittered away” on slots and punchboards. “This should be a source of alarm for the entire citizenry, whether businessmen, ministers, politicians, and all others interested in the economic welfare of the state,” Harry wrote.¹²⁵

He applauded when the Legislature appropriated \$40,000 to the Attorney General’s office and attached a mandate that the office enforce gambling laws, although

¹²² Letter from Harry and Gretchen Billings to Howard D. Samuel, Jan. 19, 1959, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 2, folder 28.

¹²³ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

¹²⁴ Harry Billings, “*The People’s Voice: The Dream and the Reality*,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 4.

¹²⁵ “‘Slots,’ a luxury our state can ill afford,” *The People’s Voice*, Dec. 23, 1949, p. 2.

he also argued for the need for more money.¹²⁶ In the same column, Harry reminded readers that without funding, enforcement was impossible.¹²⁷

When there was a push for legalized gambling in the mid 1950s, the *Voice* devoted full pages to articles on the issue and often included legislators' voting records with the articles. In 1956, for example, Harry wrote that the "liquor-gambling fraternity" was trying to elect state legislators who were friendly to the industry and subsequently pass laws legalizing slot machines, punchboards and other sorts of gambling.

The controversy came up many times over the years, and Harry later noted that it was the issue from which his family took the most heat: "The only times my family and I were threatened with physical violence came during that three-year period... I remember well one anonymous phone call in which I was warned not to sit in front of a window in our home after dark. So, for many months, we dropped the Venetian blinds at dusk. We also received numerous unsigned notes through the mail. In one of these, from Butte, the courageous soul told us: 'Lay off the slots, you Communist fink!'"¹²⁸

But the *Voice's* efforts to prohibit slot machines failed in the long-term. Even though Harry and Gretchen created enough sentiment against gambling that advocates of slot machines considered the couple a threat, slot machines later worked their way into Montana.

More money for education

¹²⁶ "Money well spent," *The People's Voice*, Dec. 29, 1950, p. 2.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Harry Billings, "The People's Voice: The Dream and the Reality," *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 3.

The *Voice* also continuously argued for improved financing of education at all levels, fair salaries for teachers and granting the profession the right to engage in collective bargaining.¹²⁹

Conclusion

The Billingses' reporting on these myriad issues spanned the course of many years. Their efforts sometimes yielded tangible results, but it often was difficult for Harry and Gretchen to see immediate, quantifiable changes. They lost battles regularly, but winning the Hillman Award provided some recognition of their successes.

Though some of the issues that Harry and Gretchen covered were quickly resolved, many others required coverage that unfolded over many years. Nowhere is that more evident than their crusade against Montana Power Company, a powerhouse they battled for decades in the hopes of reducing consumers' utility rates.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CRUSADE AGAINST MONTANA POWER COMPANY

In 1949, Montana's U.S. Congressman Mike Mansfield declared that Montana's fight over public power was basic to the future welfare of the state, and Harry and Gretchen Billings echoed Mansfield in the *People's Voice*.¹³⁰ Harry and Gretchen frequently wrote articles about power issues and editorialized that energy and transmission lines should be owned publicly. Over the years, their arguments in favor of utility regulation reform in the public interest received more space in the *People's Voice* than any other issue.

The Montana Power Company, especially, often found its way into the headlines and news articles at the *Voice*. From the paper's start under Cap Bruce to the paper's demise in 1969, the *Voice* was relentless in its criticism of the company.

Over and over again, the *Voice* argued that Montana's citizens, not Montana Power, should benefit from the state's transmission lines and power supplies. But arguing for such a policy would be an uphill battle.

¹³⁰ See Congressman Mike Mansfield's statement reprinted in the Aug. 5, 1949, issue of the *People's Voice*.

The “Montana Twins”

Today, the state capital in Helena sports a copper dome, which serves as a reminder that copper has played a large role in Montana’s history.

In the late 1880s and 1890s, huge amounts of copper deposits in Butte equaled development and prosperity, but many thought it came at a high price. Even though copper made the economy grow, historians have written that it also “rule[d] the roost politically, sometimes with grim results.”¹³¹

Various individuals and companies invested in copper over the years, but it is the Anaconda Copper Mining Company whose name is synonymous with copper mining in Montana.¹³²

At its height, the ACM was a huge force in the state. Historians have noted that the ACM “clearly dominated” Montana’s economy and politics by 1910-15.¹³³ “To many observers, both inside and outside the state, Montana appeared to be the classic example of a “one-company state,” a commonwealth where one corporation ruled,” historians wrote.¹³⁴

Because it was closely associated with the ACM, the Montana Power Company had a role in the ACM’s domination of Montana’s economy and politics. As an

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² For more history on the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, see *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, by Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder and William L. Lang, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 230-231.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

outgrowth of the ACM, Montana Power's initial purpose was to provide the company with cheap industrial power.

The opposition to Montana Power came from the same people and groups who generally opposed the Anaconda Company – progressives, Socialists, and labor and farm groups, particularly rural farm groups that benefited from New Deal legislation. Some of Montana Power's harshest critics were New Dealers who promoted rural co-ops and failed public power projects like the Missouri Valley Authority, the Paradise Dam, and the Knowles Dam. Those critics included long-time Senator James Murray and Senator Lee Metcalf, who were both *Voice* supporters.

Eventually, Anaconda and Montana Power drifted further and further apart, and, by the late 1960s, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company was not the powerhouse it had once been. But during the time when the two companies – also sometimes called the “Montana Twins” – dominated the state politically and economically, the People's Voice was relentless in its criticism of the two. Harry and Gretchen's chief complaint about Montana Power was that its rates were too high and the company didn't make the energy as widely available as it should be. They frequently accused the company of being greedy, for example, when it applied for rate increases.

Harry and Gretchen didn't win the war, or even many battles, against the Montana Power Company. As Harry wrote years later in an unpublished manuscript, he editorially opposed numerous rate increase requests to the Public Service Commission, but for the

most part he had only minimal success.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, Harry and Gretchen's constant criticism helped bring attention to power issues, and their efforts may have delayed even higher rates to Montana energy consumers.

The paper's support of public power dated back to its earliest days. Beginning in the early 1950s in eastern Montana, the *Voice* fought for the preservation of rural electric co-ops, and criticized private utilities' attempts to buy-out these rural co-ops.¹³⁶ Since the transmission lines and utilities were financed publicly and locally, the argument went, so should they be publicly and locally owned and controlled.

As would be expected, many of the people who agreed with the *Voice* and supported this idea were part of the rural farmer base. But the Montana Twins clearly had reasons to oppose public power, and the struggle between the two factions was bitter and ongoing.

Criticism of Montana Power Company

The *Voice's* criticism of Montana Power Company dated back to before Harry and Gretchen's time, to the first year the paper was published. A month after the first issue of the *People's Voice* came out, a front-page story ran, accusing the power giant of only paying taxes on half or less than the value of its assets.¹³⁷ The paper reported a

¹³⁵ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 90.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³⁷ "MT Power Co. taxed on millions less than half value," *The People's Voice*, Jan. 10, 1940, p. 1.

discrepancy of nearly five million dollars between MPC's assets and the amount it paid on taxes.¹³⁸

After Harry and Gretchen took over the *Voice*, they continued the scathing articles against Montana Power Company that had begun under Bruce's leadership, often echoing arguments from early articles in the *Voice*.

For example, in 1956, a rural electric co-operative in Livingston, Mont., Park Electric, wanted to buy power from Montana Power Company to use to serve their rural customers, but the larger company resisted, saying that it preferred to supply it. The situation illustrated several points that the *People's Voice* made again and again over the years.

Harry editorialized about the dangers of allowing Montana Power Company to refuse to sell power to Park Electric. He warned that if MPC denied power to one co-op – publicly produced power that Park Electric needed in order to adequately serve its rural customers – it could quickly become a pattern with other co-ops, too.¹³⁹

Harry charged that such a move was actually part of a “deliberate, calculated policy” by Montana Power to eliminate rural electric co-ops from Montana and subsequently establish Montana Power as a monopoly over two-thirds of the state.¹⁴⁰ He argued that co-ops whose only option when they needed more energy was to buy from the uncooperative and expensive Montana Power would eventually become so dissatisfied that they would be forced to sell.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ “Power monopoly shows its teeth,” *The People's Voice*, Aug. 17, 1956, p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Close to a year later, the *Voice* reported in a front-page article that Montana Power had “gotten away with its refusal to supply Park Electric with additional juice.”¹⁴¹ Harry predicted that other rural co-ops would soon face similar fates. “What rural electric co-op will be next to feel the sharp teeth of the power monopoly?”¹⁴²

Following Harry’s editorial, the *Voice* printed a letter from the president of Park Electric to the superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, explaining Park Electric’s decision to withdraw its proposal to furnish power to Yellowstone.

According to the letter, Park Electric requested a wholesale power rate from Montana Power Company, and they were “advised firmly” from Montana Power that they would not receive the wholesale rate. Instead, Park Electric had learned that Montana Power preferred to furnish the power to Yellowstone directly.

While Park Electric regretted the move, the president wrote that they were withdrawing their proposal because they thought that fighting for the power would result in a long delay in service.¹⁴³

The points Park Electric’s president made in the letter mirrored Harry’s. The company’s president wrote that he thought the situation illustrated the need for a new source of power. Like Harry, the co-op thought that forcing people to rely on a private utility for procuring power was absurd. “The fact is emphasized that we are at the mercy of a private utility whose power may not be furnished us in future vital instances.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ “MPCo. squeezes co-op out of power contract,” *The People’s Voice*, July 26, 1957, p. 1.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 1, 4.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Harry also frequently argued that Montana Power was simply too prosperous. In June 1960, he wrote that dividends were up 15 per cent and the company's president, with a salary of \$75,000, should be "indeed happy."¹⁴⁵

Less than a year later, when MPC sought a rate increase and argued that the company needed it because of numerous employee wage increases over the last several years, Harry disagreed. He wrote that the wage increases MPC gave to its employees were small compared to the increases in revenues and dividend worth.¹⁴⁶ "MPCo.'s total wage bill the past five years has gone up less than five per cent while its net revenues (after taxes) were soaring by almost 30 per cent, and common stock dividends were skyrocketing by almost 80 per cent."¹⁴⁷

He pointed out that Montana Power had close to 100 fewer employees in 1960 than ten years earlier, and that during the same time the company's number of electric customers increased by 30 per cent and its gas customers by 70 per cent. Instead of increasing rates, Harry suggested cutting the salary of the company president and other management officials.¹⁴⁸

One theme, then, was that Montana Power Company was doing well financially – too well, in fact, to be in consumers' best interests. Harry wrote that the company's profits often came at the expense of its consumers. A front-page story in 1953 showcased discrepancies between Montana Power's expenses and the rate increases they charged their consumers, arguing that the rate increases were much higher than they needed to

¹⁴⁵ "Montana Power finds "business climate" already better," *The People's Voice*, June 17, 1960, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ "Eureka, I've found it!" *The People's Voice*, May 5, 1961, p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

be.¹⁴⁹ While traditional *Voice* supporters tended to agree with Harry that utility rates were high, Montana Power argued that the rates were necessary due to rising costs and so that they could compensate employees well, an argument that the Public Service Commission regularly agreed with.

Headlines over the years reinforced the idea that Montana Power Company was doing well financially. Examples included: “Montana Power Does Right Well,”¹⁵⁰ “Montana Power Continues To Prosper,”¹⁵¹ “None More Prosperous,”¹⁵² and “MPCo. Profits Soar Some More.”¹⁵³ In these editorials and others, Harry argued that the company’s wealth was unconscionable, given the cost to consumers.¹⁵⁴

Other editorials, with headlines such as “That Pocket-Pickin’ Power Company,”¹⁵⁵ and “MPCo. Gets Green Light For Further Plundering,”¹⁵⁶ simply express outrage over what Harry regarded as egregiously high rates. He wrote: “Just why, may I ask, should Montana people undergo one round after another of officially approved plundering of their purses for the benefit of the utility’s stockholders ... whose principal interest in Montana is how much they can extract from its people via power company dividends?”¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁹ “Montana Power’s income per MCF up 20 per cent in decade,” *The People’s Voice*, June 5, 1953, p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ “Montana Power does right well,” *The People’s Voice*, June 7, 1957, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ “Montana Power continues to prosper,” *The People’s Voice*, Nov. 10, 1961, p. 4.

¹⁵² “None more prosperous,” *The People’s Voice*, June 1, 1962, p. 2.

¹⁵³ “MPCo. profits soar some more,” *The People’s Voice*, May 13, 1966, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ “That pocket-pickin’ power company,” *The People’s Voice*, April 21, 1961, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ “MPCo. gets green light for further plundering,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 9, 1962, p. 1.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Another common theme in Harry's editorials criticizing Montana Power was that the majority of its stockholders were not Montanans. In the mid-Sixties, especially, it was a theme he returned to again and again: Roughly 85 per cent of MPC stockholders were from out of state, and he argued that the money they earned was spent outside Montana, too.¹⁵⁸

Harry also argued that Montana Power tried to get mileage out of fooling Montanans into believing they owned a large percentage of the company. He wrote that people deserved more accurate information. "Over the years it's been a fond hope of the VOICE that some day "YOUR" Montana Power Company would come clean with the people of Montana as to how that utility's management ... is actually dictated by EBASCO Service of New York," he wrote. "We've also hoped that the day might arrive when MPCo. would point out that it's highly-publicised 11,875 Montana stockholders own only 15 per cent of the company's common stock; that those 11, 875 Montana have less stock than the total held by 10 big eastern financial houses."¹⁵⁹

The following year, Harry wrote that Montana Power was a "monopolistic "milking machine" of the Montana economy, almost wholly for the benefit of financial houses and other out-of-state stockholders."¹⁶⁰

In addition to pointing out the company's profits and the percentage of out-of-state people who benefited from those profits, the paper also exposed what it considered to be underhanded associations that Montana Power had with various individuals and

¹⁵⁸ "MPCo. successfully pursues it's own 'outer space' program," *The People's Voice*, Oct. 11, 1963, p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ "Precious little 'your' in "YOUR Montana Power Company," *The People's Voice*, Sept. 6, 1963, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ "Montana Power's stock ownership," *The People's Voice*, Jan. 17, 1964, p. 4.

organizations. A front page article in 1950, for example, declared that “Montana Power Co. Contributed \$3,000 To ‘Most Fascist Outfit in America.’”¹⁶¹ The so-called fascist outfit was the Committee for Constitutional Government, an organization that the *Voice* reported as having been “repeatedly branded in the Halls of Congress as ‘the most fascistic outfit in America,’” and whose head was a “convicted World War I traitor who was recently cited for contempt by Congress.”

In the same article, the *Voice* included a list of undesirable people to whom Montana Power gave money, including a man who had allegedly tried to stop construction of low-cost federal housing units in Helena, and many leaders in the Montana Chamber of Commerce, a group that was regularly at odds with the *People’s Voice*.¹⁶² Significantly, the article noted that the papers owned by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company didn’t report Montana Power’s expenditures.

The paper also accused Montana Power Company of “perpetrating gigantic hoaxes” on Montanans.¹⁶³ In September of 1966, Harry objected to a MPC ad that he said was misleading and contained at least one factual error. Montana Power’s ad suggesting that rural electrics were being subsidized while Montana Power was not was simply inaccurate. Further, contrary to what Montana Power claimed, rural electrics were not trying to steal customers from Montana Power. “There isn’t a single instance of

¹⁶¹ “Montana Power Co. contributed \$3,000 to ‘most fascist outfit in America,’” *The People’s Voice*, Nov. 3, 1950, p. 1.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ “‘Cease and desist’ order needed,” *The People’s Voice*, Sept. 2, 1966, p. 2.

a Montana rural electric attempting to ‘take’ MPCo. customers and Montana Power officialdom knows that, too!,” he wrote.¹⁶⁴

Harry also frequently lamented the company’s lack of competition. In a 1961 editorial attempting to prove that Montana Power was actively seeking a monopoly, he quoted a letter written by Montana Power Company President Jack Corette. Harry wrote that Corette declared: “We must and will be constantly on the alert to prevent the competitive expansion of federally-owned and financed electric operations.”¹⁶⁵ Harry concluded: “Too bad Jack doesn’t believe...that competition is the thing that has made America great.”¹⁶⁶

Gretchen took aim at Montana Power, too, such as when she reported on a hearing for a gas rate increase in a lengthy front-page article. Gretchen argued that the process for rate making was too confusing and had too many unknown variables and factors to leave “little hope of any justice or reasonableness in any conclusions.”¹⁶⁷

Taxes and Montana Power

The *People’s Voice* frequently wrote about Montana Power Company’s taxes. Harry often depicted Montana Power as trying to get mileage out of the fact that they provided a great deal of tax revenue to the state, when in fact, Harry argued, Montana Power didn’t actually pay – the consumers did.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ “Montana Power continues to prosper,” *The People’s Voice*, Nov. 10, 1961, p. 4.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ “MPCo. uses ‘numbers game’ to bolster higher gas rates’ request,” *The People’s Voice*, July 28, 1961, p. 1, 3.

He wrote: “Each year at tax-paying time Montana Power Company makes a great to-do about the amount of taxes that privately-owned, “tax-paying” utility pays into the coffers of many Montana counties....There’s nothing new about the fact that neither Montana Power nor any other regulated utility pays a cent in taxes. The power company gets the credit in the headlines, but, actually it is the poor forgotten power consumer who pays the bill...and gets no credit for so doing.”¹⁶⁸

Harry also argued that Montana Power and other utility companies fared well on “the fatted calf of federal subsidies.”¹⁶⁹ He reported that in a two-and-a-half year period, Montana Power received a subsidy of more than two million dollars, and that this subsidy came from “fast tax write-offs which in part amounted to interest free loans.”¹⁷⁰

Harry contended that Montana Power and other utilities were different from such other taxpayers as the individual property owner, main street businessman or a manufacturing corporation. He argued that the rates for Montana Power, determined by the Public Service Commission, were purposely set high enough to cover tax costs: “Montana Power and other utilities are classified as regulatory businesses. Their rates are set by public regulatory bodies. Those rates are set sufficiently high to permit each utility to cover all operating costs (and taxes are an operating cost) and yet permit fair and reasonable earnings.”¹⁷¹

Several months later, Gretchen reported in a front-page article about a hearing before the Public Service Commission in which Montana Power requested a \$3.7 million

¹⁶⁸ “Power Companies lap up lush federal handouts,” *The People’s Voice*, Aug. 26, 1955, p. 2.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ “Commission should order utility rate reductions,” *The People’s Voice*, Oct. 16, 1959, p. 2.

increase in natural gas rates. She characterized the hearing as being filled with an unusually large number of protesters, and reported that Montana Power Company refused to allow a consumers' rate expert to examine the company's federal tax returns to determine whether the company's request for higher rates was appropriate.¹⁷² The commission turned down the consumers' request to see the returns, but kept open the possibility of ordering the company to make the returns available to the commission.¹⁷³

Gretchen also noted that Montana Power was exploring for gas and oil in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, and wrote that Montana ratepayers actually were financing, at least to some extent, that exploration. But while the explorations in Canada were more expensive, Montana Power claimed, Gretchen charged that they weren't benefiting Montanans. Gretchen reported that the company didn't plan to use those resources for Montanans' consumption, and that the exploration had "retarded development of Montana resources."¹⁷⁴

In an editorial that accompanied Gretchen's article, Harry questioned why the Public Service Commission wouldn't divulge MPC's tax records.¹⁷⁵ Harry sided with the people who claimed the information was necessary to determine whether the power company was setting rates based on fair and accurate financial assessments: "Without this information...it is not possible for protestants to cross-examine on evidence that it is not available. Protestants are definitely "shooting in the dark."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² "Power Co. adamant over not disclosing income tax returns," *The People's Voice*, July 21, 1961, p. 1.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ "What Is MPCo. trying to hide?" *The People's Voice*, July 21, 1961, p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Harry argued that Montana Power should be held to a higher standard than the local corner grocery or retail store, because its investments and operating costs were protected by statute. Since it was a monopoly, he wrote, it also had a greater responsibility to the public than other businesses. “If the public is to also be protected, all of the utility’s financial structure should be in a glass house. Otherwise, there is no factual way to determine whether rates are fair.”¹⁷⁷

Public Service Commission

The Public Service Commission was a frequent target of the *People’s Voice*. As an elected body, it was in charge of deciding Montana Power’s requests for rate increases. Harry characterized the commission as too eager to grant Montana Power the rate increases it requested, and he editorialized about the need to hold the commissioners accountable.

After a May 1962 vote in which the Public Service Commission agreed to a gas rate increase, which Montana Power argued was necessary based on higher costs of importing Canadian gas, Harry argued the opposite. “The commission has granted Montana Power an increase totaling more than \$2.2 million per year,” he wrote in an editorial. “Does MPCo. need the increase to maintain a stable profit picture on investment and on gross dollar income? Was the commission justified in granting such

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

an increased drain on the purchasing power of Montana people? Our answer to both questions is a resounding NO!”¹⁷⁸

Harry contended that if Montana utilities and other corporations such as Montana-Dakota Utilities, Mountain States Telephone, and Pacific Power & Light didn’t voluntarily reduce their rates to their “over-charged” Montana customers, the Public Service Commission had “a duty to order them to lower their rates.”¹⁷⁹

Frequently, Harry offered examples of what he considered to be the Public Service Commission’s poor decisions. In a 1964 editorial, in which Harry charged that Montana Power Company overcharged its customers by more than \$7.5 million dollars, he contended that if the commission truly had the public interest at heart, it would order Montana Power to “slash” its electric rates.¹⁸⁰ He contended Montana Power should have to prove why its “unreasonably high” rates shouldn’t be cut. And he concluded that such a cut would help reinvigorate Montana’s “continuing depressed economy.”¹⁸¹

After the Public Service Commission granted Montana Power’s application in February of 1962 for a 60 per cent increase in gas rates – based on what Harry called “dubious grounds of higher costs surrounding importation of Canadian gas” – Harry called for an end to the elected body. He suggested that Montanans would be better off if the commission were abolished.”¹⁸² After a lengthy article, he suggested “either the

¹⁷⁸ “MPCo. gets green light for further plundering,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 9, 1962, p. 1.

¹⁷⁹ “Since taxpayer-paid for, why not taxpayer owned?” *The People’s Voice*, April 3, 1964, p. 4.

¹⁸⁰ “PSC should order MPCo. to justify unreasonable electric-gas rates,” *The People’s Voice*, July 5, 1963, p. 2.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² “MPCo. gets green light for further plundering,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 9, 1962, p. 1.

abolishment of a worthless regulatory commission, or better still, legislation to transfer the utility from private to State ownership.”¹⁸³

The *Voice*'s answer: Public power

Harry and Gretchen wrote that public power would be the best solution to many of the problems they articulated about Montana Power Company.

In a 1949 article, the *Voice* suggested that Montanans should establish public utility districts as in Washington state and elsewhere. The *Voice* asserted that such a change would “make it possible for the people to throw off the yoke of the power monopoly,” and argued that while it was important for Montana people to receive a just share of the power, they shouldn’t have to pay an exorbitant price for it. “We don’t want them to have to pay through the nose to Montana Power Co. in order to receive the benefits of such power.”¹⁸⁴

The newspaper continued to advocate for public utilities in later years, frequently including examples of other cities and states that did so. A 1951 editorial explained how the city of Tacoma, Washington, had owned its own power system for years. The *Voice* argued that it was a smart move, not only because Tacoma’s electricity rates were the lowest in the country, but also because profits from operation of the utility were funneled right back to the people by paying for a significant portion of the cost of city government. “Similar beneficial economic results can accrue to Great Falls, Kalispell, Helena and

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁸⁴ “Let’s not play sucker to Montana Power Company,” *The People’s Voice*, Dec. 16, 1949, p. 2.

other Montana cities, providing the people wish it – and providing that legislation not in the public interest is kept off the statute books,” the *Voice* argued.¹⁸⁵

Those cities, the *Voice* claimed, could all decide to replace private power suppliers with facilities owned by municipalities. The editorial pointed out that inexpensive power supplies were readily available in those cities: Fort Peck Dam was available for Great Falls, Canyon Ferry Dam for Helena, and Hungry Horse Dam for Kalispell. City owned utilities could produce significant savings in power bills, the *Voice* contended. “The step into municipal ownership can cut the power bills of individual consumers in half,” the article concluded.¹⁸⁶

In other editorials, Harry reported that there were nearly 2,000 such enterprises nationally, not including rural electric co-ops, mutual electric systems, federal power systems and rural public power districts. With the exception of Montana and Hawaii, he reported, every state had at least one electric enterprise that was publicly owned.¹⁸⁷

The article argued that publicly owned utilities not only had less expensive rates for consumers, but also, in other states, had proven to lower the rates of private utilities, as well. Harry estimated that public ownership of MPC would result in annual user savings of about \$20 million, and he contended that would be an additional \$20 million “spent across the counters of Montana merchants.”

In other articles, Harry argued that lower cost power would attract new industries and stimulate the economy. However, he cautioned that the initial cost of purchasing

¹⁸⁵ “HB 39, 40, 41, 42: Their effect on urban power users,” *The People’s Voice*, March 23, 1951, p. 4.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ “Much publicly-owned power in Republican Midwest,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 9, 1962, p. 4.

utilities might translate into a larger tax load initially, and it might be some years – he said five at the most – before rate reductions would be felt. Harry concluded that such short-term costs would be worth it, given that it “would keep in Montana some nine million dollars a year now flowing into the federal treasury, and over nine million dollars more accruing to the out-of-state stockholders who own 85 per cent of that utility’s stock.”¹⁸⁸

Harry also wrote about the importance of finding new sources of power. He frequently advocated for new dams and editorialized about ones he thought would be smart choices. For example, in 1960, he wrote that Paradise Dam along the Clark Fork River in western Montana’s Sanders County should be developed, largely so that a steel mill in Anaconda could open and bring in more jobs. “It is timely that attention of Montana voters should be focused on Paradise and its more than one million kilowatt potential,” he wrote. “Broadcasting Montana’s job and tax base, via bringing new industry to Montana, is the principal plank in the platforms of several candidates for Governor and for federal offices. Whether the city of Anaconda gets a 1,000-man steel mill appears to hinge primarily on an assured supply of interruptible power at a cost not to exceed four mills per kilowatt-hour.”¹⁸⁹

Harry estimated that Paradise Dam could bring in around 10,000 jobs to Western Montana. With that figure in mind, he argued that politicians should either be in favor of Paradise Dam, or they should immediately give voters a good reason why they were

¹⁸⁸ “Why not a state power corporation?” *The People’s Voice*, Jan. 1, 1965, p. 2.

¹⁸⁹ “Power – key to a broadened job base,” *The People’s Voice*, May 6, 1960, p. 2.

opposed to it. “Merely plugging in generalities for industrial development and promising the creation of still another duplication in state government function is putting the cart before the horse and constitutes nothing more than a device to snare the electorate at the polls,” he wrote. “It’s time all major candidates join ... in urging the immediate construction of Paradise, or tell the voters why they are opposed to the project.”¹⁹⁰

Wheeling agreements

But public power faced plenty of obstacles.

In the early 1950s, the *Voice* reported that the Department of the Interior and Montana Power Company had signed a wheeling agreement, which provided for the transportation of electric power over transmission lines.¹⁹¹ The contract allowed Montana Power to pay a fee for the use of the transmission lines, rather than owning them. The *Voice*, a vocal critic of wheeling agreements, had previously characterized them as “selling out” a public power transmission to a private company.¹⁹²

The *Voice* reported that control of publicly funded dams, such as Canyon Ferry Dam, was given to Montana Power Company, and that the contractual agreements the Company had signed would prohibit the rural electric associations and other public distribution systems in Montana from cheaply distributing the power. The *Voice* contended that the Department of the Interior was manipulating the situation so that instead of the consumers receiving the financial benefits of their investment in dams (in

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ “REA patrons, please note,” *The People’s Voice*, July 6, 1951, p. 4.

¹⁹² “Power trust moving in seven-league boots,” *The People’s Voice*, April 30, 1954, p. 4.

the form of lost-cost power), they were instead prisoner to higher rates from Montana Power. Harry wrote: “Many are wondering why this should be – how come our public power development program is being turned over to the private power interests for exploitation?”¹⁹³

The battles continued. Several years later, Harry warned that “the power trust crowd is moving on all fronts to grab control of publicly financed and built power developments and to filch from the public yet undeveloped sources of electrical energy.”¹⁹⁴ As evidence, he cited decreased appropriations for a public power administration, manipulations of long-term contracts for publicly generated power, a monopoly on transmission of publicly produced power, and a look “with covetous eyes” on the possibility of electricity produced with atomic energy.¹⁹⁵

Later in the article, Harry charged that a “friendly” Federal Power Commission’s decision to allow Montana Power Company to investigate and survey the feasibility of a hydro-electric dam at Lake County’s Buffalo Rapids on the Flathead River was the “latest sortie against the public interest.”¹⁹⁶

Harry contended that if Montana Power constructed a dam at Buffalo Rapids, the result would “deprive the power-starved northwest” of a potentially valuable source of power because it would make another project, the Paradise Dam, unfeasible.¹⁹⁷ Further, he claimed that power from a dam at Buffalo Rapids would cost at least double the cost

¹⁹³ “REA patrons, please note,” *The People’s Voice*, July 6, 1951, p. 4.

¹⁹⁴ “Power trust moving in seven-league boots,” *The People’s Voice*, April 30, 1954, p. 4.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid and “Montana Power out to block proposed Paradise Dam,” *The People’s Voice*, Sept. 18, 1953, p. 1.

of power from the multi-purpose Paradise Dam. He argued that other environmental and “downstream” benefits, such as flood control, stream flow regulation, and irrigation supply, would be wiped out if a dam were put in at Buffalo Rapids.¹⁹⁸ Incidentally, as an aspiring candidate to the U.S. Senate, long-time *Voice* supporter Lee Metcalf supported construction of Paradise Dam, as did then-Congressional candidates Arnold Olsen and Milton Colvin.¹⁹⁹

But the project did not happen, which was a lasting disappointment to Harry. Despite efforts of people in the Farmers Union and labor groups, Harry wrote years later, Montana Power and other interested parties “blitzed” the statehouse with busloads of opponents and successfully blocked resolutions that would have urged authorization of the dams.²⁰⁰

Conclusion

While Harry and Gretchen didn’t win the war against Montana Power Company, their constant criticism of the company and their opposition to actions such as rate increases helped bring attention to power issues. Their work may have been little more than a delay, though, in what they would have considered a downward spiral for Montana energy consumers and workers as resulting from the company’s breakup following the deregulation of utilities in the state in 1997.

¹⁹⁸ “Power trust moving in seven-league boots,” *The People’s Voice*, April 30, 1954, p. 4.

¹⁹⁹ “Power – key to a broadened job base,” *The People’s Voice*, May 6, 1960, p. 2.

²⁰⁰ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 68.

Harry and Gretchen's constant criticism of companies like Montana Power, as well as other editorials that advocated for consumers, prompted charges that the *Voice* was a Communist publication.

In 1988, Harry wrote: "Our being on the opposite side of the tracks from the utilities applied across a wide range of activities. We fought them in the political arena, at the legislative, executive and judicial levels. We exposed their shenanigans time and again. In turn, their favorite weapon against us was copious quantities of red paint."²⁰¹

Their jobs at the *People's Voice* clearly affected Harry and Gretchen's personal lives, and being called Communists is the strongest example of how the work would negatively affect Harry, Gretchen and their family.

²⁰¹ Ibid, p. 96.

CHAPTER FOUR: MCCARTHYISM HITS MONTANA

Over the years, Harry and Gretchen's work at the *People's Voice* often spilled over into their personal lives. Long hours with meager and sometimes late compensation was a reality. They also regularly received criticism from people who didn't agree with them, and sometimes they even faced personal attacks. But while many battles were welcomed as controversies that would further encourage public dialogue, some battles were more personally draining. Nowhere is this more evident than during the years when the *Voice* was labeled a "Red" sheet and its editors were called Communists. The labels hurt Harry, Gretchen and their sons, and they were untrue – the *People's Voice* was committed to democracy, and Harry and Gretchen were Socialists but not Communists, their sons John and Mike said.²⁰²

Brief history of McCarthyism

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, the United States was gripped by a fear that Communism was growing in the nation. Soviet espionage, Eastern European domination by the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Revolution and the Korean War all helped increase fears of a Communist influence. Additionally, the Communist Party of the United States increased its membership throughout the 1930s, reaching a peak in 1942.

Historians now refer to that period as "McCarthyism," after Senator Joseph

²⁰² Author telephone interview with John Billings, March 6, 2006, and author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, who became known for exposing Communists. In 1950, McCarthy made a speech claiming to have a list of 57 people in the State Department who were known to be members of the American Communist Party.

For the next two years, a committee McCarthy chaired investigated various government departments and questioned a large number of people about their political affiliations. Some lost their jobs after they admitted they had been members of the Communist Party.

McCarthy mainly targeted Democrats associated with the New Deal policies of the 1930s. He accused President Truman of being soft on Communism, and McCarthy's campaign helped the Republican candidate, Dwight Eisenhower, win the presidential election in 1952.

Early on, many politicians and mainstream journalists didn't aggressively challenge McCarthy, and after an election in which his opponents were weakened, many politicians were afraid to cross him. However, in the mid to late 1950s, McCarthyism waned, probably due to both increased media challenges and several court rulings.

McCarthyism in Montana

In Montana, politicians and citizens felt the effects of McCarthyism, too.²⁰³ In fact, a graduate student who studied McCarthyism in the state, William D. Miller, wrote

²⁰³ For more information, see William D. Miller's professional paper, "Montana and the Specter of McCarthyism, 1952-54," Montana State University, July 1969.

that Montana “serves as an excellent example of the use of McCarthyism and exemplifies quite accurately the McCarthyism phenomenon in a national context.”²⁰⁴

“The tactic of McCarthyism was designed to capitalize on popular concern and fear of Communists and Communism by associating the Democratic party and individual Democrats with Communism,” Miller wrote.²⁰⁵ But he concluded that he found little evidence to indicate that McCarthyism was used in any political campaigns in Montana except those in 1952 and 1954.²⁰⁶

McCarthyism may have helped influence the outcome of several Montana elections in those years, and it also influenced the Montana legislature when it decided to form an interim committee to investigate subversive and un-American activities.²⁰⁷

Montana’s American Legion leaders and McCarthyism

Like other patriotic organizations in the late 1940s and early 1950s, some leaders and members of the Montana American Legion labeled people and groups who didn’t mirror their concept of patriotism as “subversive.” At the core of this behavior was the organization’s belief that Communism was growing in the United States and a fear that it would threaten the security of the nation.²⁰⁸

Years later, Harry and Gretchen explained McCarthyism and the Legion’s role in the “Red smear” this way, and noted that it was certainly nothing new in Montana: “What

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 1.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 72.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 1-2.

²⁰⁸ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 74

came to be known as “McCarthyism” ran rampant across the land with the (American) Legion leading the pack of hounds on Montana,” they wrote. “Fear for personal status and economic survival was evident everywhere. Suspicion of anyone with innovative, creative or new political approaches in a post war society prevailed. Tried and proven ideas were thrown to the dogs. There were few liberal heroes who stood firm and survived without grievous and lasting wounds from those years.”²⁰⁹

Legion seminar

One of Harry’s run-ins with the Legion happened in the late 1940s, before Senator McCarthy made his well-known speech. The Helena, Montana, chapter of the American Legion scheduled a seminar for December 5, 1948, in which it planned to propose forming a Montana investigating body that would theoretically expose “subversives.” In an article printed in the *Voice* several weeks before the seminar, Harry sarcastically wrote that: “in these days of stress and tension it is indeed reassuring to learn that the commonwealth of Montana henceforth and hereafter shall be eternally free of subversive subversives. No longer will the Communists (all 42 of them) terrorize our fair countryside.”²¹⁰

Harry heeded advice he had given to readers in his editorial and attended the seminar, which was open to the public. The meeting provided a forum for the Legion’s National Un-American Committee chairman to talk “at length on the subversive forces

²⁰⁹ Gretchen and Harry Billings, “Rightwing extremism...for those who’ve forgotten, or don’t know,” *The Montana Democrat*, September 1977. MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 9, folder 11.

²¹⁰ “We shall be saved,” *The People’s Voice*, Nov. 26, 1948, p. 2.

afoot in post-World War II America and the need to be ever vigilant.”²¹¹ Later, Harry wrote, someone asked whether there were any active un-American forces in Montana, to which they received an affirmative reply. The seminar leaders told the audience that there were Communists everywhere in Montana – in Labor and farm groups, for example, and that their publication was the *People’s Voice*. “The ringleaders then proceeded to dissect the publication and its Editor as effectively as a butcher eviscerates a chicken,” Harry later wrote.²¹²

With his stomach “getting jumpier by the minute,” Harry recalled letting the “tub-thumping” go on for a bit before standing up and requesting permission to ask a question. The chairman wouldn’t allow it, and instead “bellowed” at Harry to “sit down and shut up!” Harry recalled. The exchange prompted “a degree of pandemonium” before several Legionnaires who, apparently unsympathetic to the purposes of the symposium, “threw their Legion lapel emblems on the floor and stomped out.”²¹³

Even though the seminar upset Harry – he later wrote that even years later, there remained no outfit he’d rather “go to the mat with” than the leadership of the Montana American Legion²¹⁴ – he responded to the attack in a direct way, with an editorial in the *Voice* called “Americanism? Why Not Try Plain Democracy?”²¹⁵ In it, he reported that the Legion wanted to form a Montana un-American committee to monitor and investigate subversive activities across the state. In two years, a similar committee of “witch-

²¹¹ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 71.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid, p. 71-72.

²¹⁵ “Americanism? Why not try plain Democracy?” *The People’s Voice*, Dec. 10, 1948, p. 1.

hunting” cost the citizens of Washington state around \$300,000, not to mention the damage it did by smearing “the good names of countless Washington citizens,” he noted.²¹⁶ Harry also informed his readers that the Legion had labeled the *Voice* a Communist publication: “One of the California un-American committee hot shots informed the audience that there was a ‘Communist’ publication in their state, but he could not remember its name. Later on a question from the audience on same was answered by seminar chairman Col. Charles Dawley by his pointing out that The Voice had been declared such by the House Un-American committee.”²¹⁷

Actually, the national House Un-American committee had not identified the *People’s Voice* based in Helena, Mont., as a Communist publication, and Harry wrote to several people trying to obtain a statement to that effect. After corresponding with at least two government officials -- Senator James E. Murray and the Attorney General’s office in Washington, D.C. – Harry received a letter from William H. Coburn, executive secretary of the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs.²¹⁸ Dated October 23, 1950, the letter reassured Harry that the *Voice* was not being investigated as a Communist publication. It also noted that there were other publications that were considered to be suspicious, including a *People’s Voice* in New York: “Upon checking certain files here, we found that there are a couple of other ‘People’s Voice’ newspapers which are considered subversive, but your publication, so far as we can determine, has been given a

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Suzanne Lagoni MacDonald, “The War with the Legion,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 9.

clean bill.”²¹⁹ Harry kept the letter from Coburn in his safe, an indication of the gravity of the charge of being identified with Communism, and often mentioned the letter when defending the *Voice* against people who claimed it was a Red sheet.

Radio station broadcasts ‘subversive’ essay

Harry believed the Helena American Legion seminar had targeted the *Voice* because of Harry’s first major run-in with the organization, which had happened earlier that year. “I can’t prove it,” he wrote in his manuscript, “but this public humiliation of the local Legion’s leadership, I’ve always felt, had something to do with the continuing attempts to destroy the Voice.”²²⁰ The incident began in February 1948, when a local radio station broadcast an essay written by a Helena High School girl that the Legion called “subversive.” But Harry felt differently about the essay that called for tolerance of other religions and beliefs and an understanding of other nations.²²¹ Years later, Harry wrote that “having gone over the essay, it looked to us like its message was in line with the highest ideals the United State purports to believe in and we said so, emphatically!”²²²

While Harry believed the essay deserved praise rather than condemnation, the Legion’s Americanism Committee believed that the broadcast was evidence that “teachings contrary to the American way of life are being encouraged in the schools.”²²³ The committee asked that the school board set up a watchdog committee. Made up of

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 70.

²²¹ Suzanne Lagoni MacDonald, “The War with the Legion,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 8.

²²² Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 70.

²²³ “What is Americanism,” *The People’s Voice*, April 9, 1948, p. 1-2.

various members of civic and patriotic groups, the chosen committee members would guard against “un-Americanism” in the schools.

In an editorial, Harry took issue with the proposal. He argued that the committee’s aim was to intimidate the school faculty and said committee members “are the real transgressors upon our American way of life.”²²⁴

In fact, the editorial questioned the Legion’s very definition of Americanism. Harry argued that the term had a much broader definition than the Legion was allowing: “What is Americanism? Who shall define what constitutes being a good American? Has the American Legion or any other group the divine or legal right to pontificate standards for Americanism? Is being a good American determined by how strictly a citizen conforms to the status quo, or is being for peace, brotherhood and understanding any less American than being for war, hate and intolerance?”²²⁵

Several weeks later, the *Voice* printed a copy of the letter the Legion sent to the school board withdrawing its proposal for a watchdog committee. Harry’s delight with the Legion’s change of plan is evidenced by the headline: “Helena Legion Beats a Hasty Retreat.”²²⁶ In the letter, the chairman of the Americanism Committee wrote that the committee requested that their proposal be withdrawn, that they were “very sorry that the matter was brought up,” and that the Americanism Committee would recommend that the Legion Post endorse the recommendation as well.²²⁷

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ “Helena Legion beats a hasty retreat,” *The People’s Voice*, April 23, 1948, p. 1.

²²⁷ Ibid.

Below the Legion's letter Harry printed information from the Montana Education Association that detailed the time that the Helena Schools had devoted to American Legion programs for the two weeks preceding the Legion's watchdog committee proposal. The letter was meant to show that the school system actually had devoted a significant amount of time to Legion-sponsored programs. When the Legion argued that the school neglected fundamentals such as spelling, grammar, composition and American history, the MEA argued that Legion programs were monopolizing students' time. Evidence included the submission of a dozen student compositions to an American Legion Auxiliary essay contest; attendance by the entire student body at a two-hour oratorical contest sponsored by the Legion; leave and preparation time granted to teachers for that contest and other oratorical contests; submission of twenty-six posters to a Legion-sponsored poppy poster contest; time needed for the junior girls to select three girls to attend the Legion-sponsored Girls State; and time Helena school principals and superintendent spent selecting the Legion-sponsored Boys State. If "the fundamentals of spelling, English grammar and composition, and American history are being neglected," the letter concluded, "might not the time devoted to the above mentioned activities have been better spent on the fundamentals?"²²⁸

Editorializing against un-American committee in Montana

²²⁸ "Report shows Legion programs given much attention by Helena High School," *The People's Voice*, April 23, 1948, p. 1.

The next year, *The Voice* and the Legion were sparring again. In January 1949, Harry reported on a bill that had again been introduced in the Legislature to form a Montana un-American committee, a move, Harry wrote, that would “leave the door wide open for the damndest ‘witchhunt’ imaginable.”²²⁹

His editorial warned that proponents of the bill intimated the bill would merely make government more efficient and economical. But he disagreed with that view and wrote that the bill would be “extremely dangerous” to Montanans’ civil liberties: “In this bill I believe is the implementation for a campaign of character assassination and ‘trial by press’ such as this state has never before seen; for headline (and head) hunting legislators to have a field day the next two years as the reactionaries and their corporate financial angels attempt to again gain complete control of our legislative bodies.”²³⁰

Other groups also opposed the formation of an un-American committee, and the *People’s Voice* provided a forum for them to publicly do so. The *Voice* published letters from unions opposing the committee; one letter, for example, said that the people of Cascade Labor could not understand “why the Montana American Legion is willing to become a pawn in the hands of the selfish interests that place power and control above the misery of the people.” It likened the creation of a committee to “any Gestapo that will cause the average citizen to live the life of a hunted animal trying to shake off its enemy.”²³¹

²²⁹ “This is it!” *The People’s Voice*, Jan. 21, 1949, p. 1.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ “Cascade Labor condemns witch-hunting,” *The People’s Voice*, Dec. 17, 1948, p. 1.

The attention elicited strong response from readers, who in turn demanded public hearings on the bill. Harry believed that hearings would be a good idea; even though it seemed inconceivable that any people besides the Legion brass would take the bill seriously, he felt that there would be merit in hearings nevertheless. Part of the benefit would come, Harry wrote, from exposing the names of many “super Americans” in Montana who would “nullify the Bill of Rights.”²³²

It’s not clear whether any hearings ever were held. Regardless, Harry reported in February that the Legion had lobbied successfully in the Senate for an un-American committee.²³³ But the proposal didn’t pass in the House, and the Senate committee eventually recommended that senators should consider themselves each a “committee of one.”²³⁴ The 1949 Legislature, then, ended without any witch hunt.

Legislature approves Montana Un-American Committee

In 1951, the Legislature voted to form a committee that would study the need for an interim committee on un-American activities.²³⁵ That committee eventually ended up forming the Montana Un-American Committee, also known as MUC. As he had done in previous years, Harry editorialized about the dangers of MUC, and argued that it infringed on citizens’ rights because they would not have the right to cross-examine their accusers.

²³² “An opportunity to “put up or shut up,” *The People’s Voice*, Jan. 28, 1949, p. 2.

²³³ “Senate sets up temporary ‘bird dog committee,’” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 11, 1949, p. 1, 4.

²³⁴ “Important roll call votes of 1949 Legislature,” *The People’s Voice*, March 11, 1949, p. 1.

²³⁵ Suzanne Lagoni MacDonald, “The War with the Legion,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 13.

From the beginning, and perhaps by design, the committee was doomed by a lack of funding. That May, Harry reported that the Legislature didn't leave any money in its accounts to finance the committee. He jokingly suggested that his readers could send contributions to the chairman of the committee in the form of "any old Confederate bills, Japanese invasion money, or other 'odd' change..."²³⁶ With no money with which to investigate and expose "subversives," the MUC committee was rendered inactive.

1952 election gains

Many candidates in both the 1952 and 1954 Montana elections made fighting Communism a central part of their campaigns. While it is impossible to measure exactly how the issue of Communism influenced voters, several key races ended up being close battles, an indication that Communism was on voters' minds.

In addition, historians have written that McCarthyism in Montana mirrored its national role. William D. Miller, the graduate student from Montana State who wrote about McCarthyism's Montana influences, explained that:

The political phenomenon of McCarthyism as it existed in a national contest was typified by the use of McCarthyism in the Montana senatorial campaigns of 1952 and 1954. Nationally, the Republican Party adopted McCarthyism as its basic campaign strategy and used it extensively in 1952 and 1954 because they believed it presented a politically expedient opportunity to gain and hold national office. Both national parties were very conscious of the importance of the Montana senatorial campaigns, and as a political expedient McCarthyism was adopted and practiced by the Republican senatorial candidates and Republican supporting organizations in Montana."²³⁷

²³⁶ "A program for Rep. Weidman, et al," *The People's Voice*, May 18, 1951, p. 4.

²³⁷ William D. Miller, "Montana and the Specter of McCarthyism, 1952-54," Montana State University, July 1969, p. 72.

In both 1952 and 1954 the Republican senatorial candidates and their supporters in Montana accused their Democratic opponents of being Commie-coddlers, dupes of the Communists, and soft on communism. Democrats were accused of associating with and identifying with known Communists and Communist organizations.²³⁸

Miller concluded that Communism was a real issue in Montana, especially in the 1952 campaign. McCarthyism declined, though, he wrote, when “Republicans degenerated the issue into a campaign of character assassination directed at their Democratic opponents. When this occurred, McCarthyism as a rather unsavory means to an end was apparent.”²³⁹

In Montana in 1952, a one-term Republican, Senator Zales Ecton, campaigned for re-election against western district congressman Mike Mansfield. Ecton had accomplished little in his first Senate term, while Mansfield had been popular as a Congressman and had secured a significant amount in appropriations for Montanans.²⁴⁰ However, Ecton – whom McCarthy supported – pledged to fight against Communism, while red baiters painted Mansfield as a friend of Communists and national speakers visiting the state tried to distort Mansfield’s record.²⁴¹ It was close, but Mansfield pulled off the win, with 51 percent of the vote to Ecton’s 49 percent.

Meanwhile, Wellington Rankin ran as a Republican candidate for a seat in the U.S. House against Lee Metcalf, who was then an associate justice of the Montana Supreme Court. Rankin, too, pledged to fight Communism, while Metcalf attempted to

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Jon Bennion, *Big Sky Politics: Campaigns and Elections in Modern Montana*, Missoula, Mont: Five Valleys Publishing, 2004, p. 31-32.

²⁴¹ Ibid, p. 32.

neutralize the redbaiting he faced.²⁴² Rankin's anti-Communist stance was ironic, because early in his career he had associated freely with Montana radicals and had even helped them establish a newspaper, the *Butte Bulletin*.²⁴³ Metcalf's margin of victory was small, but heavily unionized counties helped him enough to win. Metcalf earned 50.3 percent of the vote to Rankin's 48.9 percent.²⁴⁴

Also in 1952, incumbent Wesley D'Ewart handily won the U.S. House seat in the eastern congressional district, carrying every county. His opponent, Democrat Willard Fraser, had also run against him four years earlier, but D'Ewart's margin of victory was much greater in 1952 than it had been in 1948.²⁴⁵ D'Ewart secured 62 percent of the vote to Fraser's 38 percent.

In the race for governor that year, incumbent Democratic Governor John Bonner couldn't weather a tough fight from Republican J. Hugo Aronson, who was a state senator. Aronson, who made business policies a central issue of the race, unseated Bonner, winning 51 percent of the vote to Bonner's 49 percent.

Two years later, Wesley D'Ewart sought to build on his solid win in the House by unseating Senator James Murray, who was a well-known liberal. Even though McCarthyism had already peaked, D'Ewart's campaign attempted to paint Murray as a friend of Communists.²⁴⁶ Campaign literature accused Murray of writing for Communist

²⁴² Ibid, p. 33.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ In 1948, D'Ewart won only 51 percent of the vote to Fraser's 49 percent. See Jon Bennion's *Big Sky Politics: Campaigns and Elections in Modern Montana*, p. 26.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 35.

publications, making favorable comments towards Communist nations employing Communist-leaning workers.²⁴⁷

Murray defended himself and pulled off a win, although his margin of victory was small: Out of about 227,000 ballots cast, Murray won by less than 2,000 votes, securing 50.4 percent to D'Ewart's 49.6 percent.

Montana's Congressional delegation corresponds with Harry and Gretchen

Several Democratic members of Montana's Congressional Delegation corresponded with Harry and Gretchen over the years. These exchanges illustrate an important point: Harry and Gretchen put principle ahead of political friendships.

For example, during the time when Harry and Gretchen were concerned about being labeled Communists, they communicated with Mike Mansfield about it. One exchange of letters between Mansfield and Gretchen came about after the senator voted to appropriate money to the un-American Activities Committee in 1950.²⁴⁸

Although Gretchen didn't come right out in her letter and say that's what she was getting at, Mansfield responded to her letter and wrote that he believed that topic was what Gretchen had in mind when she wrote. He also wrote that he hoped they could respectfully disagree with each other on the subject: "What I am going to say is not to be construed as an alibi but I hope it will be understood as an explanation of an honest

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Letter from Mike Mansfield to Gretchen G. Billings, April 5, 1950, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 13, folder 22.

difference of opinion. I respect your feelings and opinions on all matters; I hope that you will extend to me the same courtesy.”²⁴⁹

Previously, Mansfield believed that the committee hadn’t sufficiently protected the rights of people who were accused of crimes, so he voted against an appropriation, he wrote. But since then, the committee changed so that they respected the rules of evidence and witnesses’ rights “to a degree which has been very encouraging,” he wrote.

More generally, Mansfield defended the way he made decisions by saying that he studied the issues carefully, tried to make informed decisions, and tried to always keep in mind the people he represented. Mansfield was still being true to himself, he wrote: “I still smoke the same size pipe, I still go around in my shirt sleeves, and I hope that I am still seeing the trees in the forest and not just the forest itself.”²⁵⁰

Mansfield’s assumption that Gretchen was displeased with his vote would have been accurate, given an editorial that appeared in the *Voice* just two days after her letter was dated and three days before his.²⁵¹

At issue in the editorial was the vote to which Mansfield referred in his letter – the vote that appropriated \$150,000 to the House un-American Activities Committee to fund preparation of a “Bible” on subversive activities, which would also include an index of the names of more than one million people. “Cong. Mike Mansfield was not of the minority who unswervingly fought to uphold American civil liberties,” Harry’s editorial charged.

²⁴⁹ Ibid

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ “3600 subversive Montanans?” *The People’s Voice*, March 31, 1950, p. 2.

Harry also argued that the people who were being targeted weren't disloyal, or subversive, but simply "refuse[d] to bow to the curse of conformity...because they refuse[d] to along with the broken promises of the Trumanites [and] because they question[ed] the wisdom of our handling of the 'cold war.'"²⁵²

Harry charged that Mansfield knew all those things to be true, and then questioned his understanding of the Bill of Rights: "Does he approve of the black band of suppression currently being placed on the minds of men? Does he consider thinking to be the cardinal sin of our 20th Century?"²⁵³

The editorial ended by questioning Mansfield's qualifications to run for the U.S. Senate, which he did in the next election: "I wonder, in view of his consistently poor record concerning civil liberties ... if he is of sufficient stature to merit placing of the senatorial toga upon his shoulders by the electorate."²⁵⁴

Harry and Gretchen did not support Mansfield in his first senatorial election, and Harry later explained that they had been "utterly disgusted with the way he had shilly-shallied on a number of important matters during his decade in the House."²⁵⁵ But Mansfield went on to serve four terms in the U.S. Senate, and, in later years, the Billingses' supported him, especially in his stand against the war in Vietnam.

The Communist label affects Harry, Gretchen and their sons

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 122.

The years when the *Voice* battled the Legion and when it was simultaneously labeled Communist were some of the most difficult ones personally for Harry and Gretchen and their sons.

In her letter to Mansfield in 1950, Gretchen also described how the Red Scare was hurting her family. She declared she was writing to Mansfield independent of any political belief, and instead was writing as a parent: “Of necessity, and working closely with Harry, politics are a constant factor in my life – but above and beyond politics I am an humanitarian, I hope.”²⁵⁶

The letter noted that the *People’s Voice* had been targeted at a 1948 American Legion seminar, which was held when sons John, Mike, and Leon were in their teens and pre-teens. Gretchen wrote that it deeply affected the way they were treated at school: “They were taunted at school. Their school mates hooted them. [Leon] was beaten up and his clothes torn as he was jeered and told to tell his dad to go back to Russia with Joe. Mike’s teacher in school was continually baiting him to tell the class how the communists felt on such and so until he would come home in a shaking rage – completely embittered and at a loss as to what to do. John met with much the same as the other two but his temperament being different he drew within himself and put up a noncommittal shell to the outside world.”²⁵⁷

Dealing with that treatment was difficult not only for their sons, but for Harry and Gretchen as parents. “It is no slight proposition for a parent to face,” she wrote. “We

²⁵⁶ Letter from Gretchen Billings to Mike Mansfield, March 29, 1950, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 1, folder 2.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

have high ideals in our family and we work at making our sons men of caliber for their place in this world and the problems they must face. I pray to God they may be able to face the world and its problems, and not guns. Through their subsequent personal conduct they have been a credit to us and to themselves, but it has made them carry burdens not intended for children.”²⁵⁸

“Our kids had a terrible time during the McCarthy era,” Gretchen again recalled years later. “In school some of the other kids would harass them and say: ‘Go back to Russia, you dirty little Communists!’ They’d come home and ask, ‘Mom, is Dad a Communist? What’s a Communist?’”²⁵⁹

Gretchen tried to explain Harry’s philosophy to their sons by reading to them. “I decided I could read them the Bill of Rights, and explain how their father worked under that; and I could read from liberal philosophers, and explain the basic philosophies of their dad,” she explained.²⁶⁰ Gretchen told the boys that their father was “deeply, traditionally democratic,” – democratic with a small “d,” she said.

Gretchen believed that the boys eventually understood, and that the situation helped them become strong, principled men. “I tried to impress on them the importance of their personal conduct, that they should be proud of the way their dad felt,” she said. And even though she didn’t dismiss the toll those years took on the family, she said: “...we look back in retrospect, and see we have three strong, beautiful men for sons, and

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 144.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

I can't help but believe that those struggles gave them some of the strength and guts that they have."²⁶¹

In addition to trying to help John, Mike and Leon understand their parents' political beliefs, Gretchen and Harry were also concerned for their children's safety during those years. Leon Billings, their youngest son, remembers a period of time when he and his brothers were in middle school and high school and his parents picked them up from school every day.²⁶² "I never knew until I was an adult why," Leon said, but later realized it was because their sons' safety was weighing on Harry and Gretchen's minds. "It was because of the threat of kidnapping," Leon explained. Harry and Gretchen didn't have a car at that time, so Harry's mother gave them one, allowing Harry and Gretchen to pick the boys up, Mike Billings said.²⁶³ Another time, Mike said, an anonymous phone caller tried to upset Harry and Gretchen, asking them if Mike was home from school yet.²⁶⁴

Harry and Gretchen had good reason to be concerned. In addition to worrying about their sons' safety, Harry admitted to keeping a wrench on his desk, "in case the Legion boys came galloping in, which they did one time."²⁶⁵ And even more alarming, Leon remembered a time when "some bullets came through the window of our house."²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

²⁶³ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 4.

²⁶⁶ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

The family never knew who had fired the shots, Leon said, but it happened during a period of time when Harry and Gretchen were waging two major fights in the pages of the *Voice*: one against McCarthyism and one against illegal gambling. “It was a very scary time,” Leon said.²⁶⁷ While being identified with Communism was a big price to pay as a family, Mike said the challenges also made them stronger. “I think all of us feel blessed in a way to have been part of it,” he said.²⁶⁸

Given the effect on their family and the intensity of the battle, though, it’s not surprising that, even years later, Harry and Gretchen still felt strongly about their fight against the Communist label.

Decades afterward, Harry wrote that the smear tactics used against the *Voice* made him angrier than anything else: “Here it is 1988, yet there remains no outfit I’d rather go to the mat with than the leadership of the Montana American Legion in those years – the most un-American rabble rousers I ever met up with.”²⁶⁹

In later years, others also acknowledged how difficult the McCarthyism was for Harry and Gretchen. In a 1959 letter nominating Harry and Gretchen for an award, Vic Reinemer, who was an aide to Sen. Lee Metcalf, wrote that the couple’s perseverance during the McCarthy years was noteworthy. “I well remember, when I was going to school in Montana, the attacks on the *Voice* as a ‘Red’ sheet, by the vested interests The *People’s Voice* was attacking,” Reinemer wrote.²⁷⁰ “I know of the fights their three boys

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

²⁶⁹ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 71-72.

²⁷⁰ Letter from Vic Reinemer to Howard D. Samuel, executive director of the Sidney Hillman Foundation, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 2, folder 28.

got into in school, defending their parents from vicious slander. I know something of the privation the family has endured in its almost miraculously successful effort to continue publishing the facts and hard-hitting comment.”²⁷¹

Similarly, when Harry retired, Senator Mike Mansfield, with whom the *Voice* was frequently at odds, told the couple that, even though he didn’t always agree with them, he admired the couple’s courage and integrity in the midst of challenges. “I know that many times you are like voices crying in the wilderness, but you have always stuck to your guns, following the dictates of your conscience and you represent, in my opinion, journalism at its best,” Mansfield wrote.²⁷²

Theme: The necessity of independent thought

The constant theme in Harry and Gretchen’s arguments during the years of the Red Scare mirrored a theme evident in other battles too: The importance of independent thinking over conformity. “For several years,” Harry wrote, “all during the ‘cold war’ period in fact, there has been a growing trend of intolerance toward those of independent thought.”²⁷³

In the case of Communism, Harry and Gretchen believed that people pandering to others’ fears used the red smear to try to have their own way politically: “[T]he motivating desire of these reactionaries is to stamp out all liberalism in America and to

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Letter from Mike Mansfield to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Billings, September 7, 1968, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 13, folder 22.

²⁷³ “Communism or conformity?” *The People’s Voice*, Oct. 21, 1949, p. 2.

destroy those who have given leadership to the people's determination for a better America, within the framework of democracy."²⁷⁴

Editorials in the *People's Voice* said that the hunt for Communists was merely a strategy and that Communism wasn't the real issue that Sen. Joe McCarthy and others like him were fighting against. Instead, McCarthy "besmirched" people's reputations because he disagreed with liberals' advocacy of public power, labor rights, business protection and prepaid medical insurance.²⁷⁵

Harry encouraged his readers to see through the red labeling and smear tactics, and to decide for themselves if there was actually a Communist threat. "All this, they cry, is "Communitic,"" he wrote. "Is it? You be the judge."²⁷⁶

Conclusion

It is impossible to know how much Harry and Gretchen influenced Montanans' thoughts and votes during the Red Scare, as well as legislators' votes on issues like the formation of a Montana un-American committee.

Harry and Gretchen's supporters, though, believe their articles and editorials helped to weaken McCarthyism in the state. Evidence of their influence is that Montana never adequately funded an un-American affairs committee in the state. Were it not for outspoken opposition to such a committee, and a reminder to the public that the

²⁷⁴ "Concerning 'McCarthyism,'" *The People's Voice*, Sept. 22, 1950, p. 2.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

committee might endanger civil liberties, it's likely that the legislature would have approved it.

Harry, especially, exhibited “absolute undaunted courage” in the fight, said their youngest son, Leon Billings. Referring to a blacklist in Hollywood against entertainers for their alleged Communist ties or sympathies,²⁷⁷ he said: “But for [Harry], but for the *People's Voice*, the [House Un-American Committee] and the American Legion would have succeeded doing in Montana what they succeeded doing in Hollywood.”²⁷⁸ What could have been an all-out hunt for subversives was avoided. “Harry stopped that. That was single-handed.”²⁷⁹

Given the intensity of the battles, though, and the personal effect it had on their family, their successes must have been bittersweet. Years later, they concluded that although McCarthyism lasted less than a decade and died “as violently as it had lived,” it was nevertheless “deadly and destructive,” and “the forces behind it remained ready and willing.”²⁸⁰

Fighting the Communist label wasn't the only battle that Harry and Gretchen waged against conservatives. They also took on the John Birch Society, in a fight that demonstrated the network of progressive people around the state who were banding together.

²⁷⁷ In 1947, ten writers and directors in Hollywood were cited for contempt of Congress after refusing to testify before the House Un-American Committee. Later, the blacklist expanded, denying employment to people in the entertainment industry because of their perceived political beliefs.

²⁷⁸ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Gretchen and Harry Billings, “Rightwing extremism...for those who've forgotten, or don't know,” *The Montana Democrat*, September 1977. MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 9, folder 11.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY TAKES A TOLL ON MONTANA

After World War II, political, economic, and ideological differences between capitalist and Communist states were at a height. The race for nuclear weapons, a network of military alliances, and events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, made nuclear war a real threat. In the 1950s and 1960s, then, Communism inspired real and rampant feelings of fear in the United States.

As in other parts of the country, Montana had its share of people gripped by the fear of Communist influences, and Montana's leftist history helped fuel the fear of a Communist presence. In the Nonpartisan League, agrarian socialism, the Industrial Workers of the World, (whose members were known as the Wobblies), and the farmers' union and co-op movement, citizens could see vestiges of socialism and progressive ideologies in Montana. In addition, citizens witnessed Communist influences in the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which later merged with the American Federation of Labor to become the AFL-CIO, and in the press, such as a Communist paper published in Plentywood called the *Producers News*.²⁸¹

To combat Communism and other negatively perceived liberal ideologies, a conservative movement composed of members of the John Birch Society hit Montana in the late 1950s, just as it did nationally. Harry and Gretchen were committed to keeping tabs on the group's activities in the state, and, in some ways, the Birch Society was a

²⁸¹ For more information about the *Producers News*, see "The Producers New and the Farmers' Movement in Northeastern Montana, 1918-1937," by Verlaine Stoner McDonald in *Montana Legacy: Essays on history, People, and Place*, edited by Harry W. Fritz, Mary Murphy, and Robert R. Swartout, Jr., Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2002.

useful enemy for the paper to have. Because the Society often represented the extreme right, it was a group that *Voice* supporters could rally against.

Rallying against the Birch Society meant that people opposed to that group counted on one another to keep informed about the Society's tactics, which helped create a network of progressive people around the state. And Harry and Gretchen were at the center of that network.

The John Birch Society in Montana

In April 1961, during the height of the Cold War, Montana Governor Donald Nutter received a letter from Charles Cerovski, a legislator from Fergus County. In it, Cerovski alerted Nutter to the growing influence of the John Birch Society in the majority of states in the nation, including Montana.²⁸² Cervoski warned Nutter that according to a story that had recently run in the *New York Times*, the John Birch Society had organized chapters in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia, including Montana. In some of those states, there could be as many as one hundred chapters.²⁸³

Birch Society members were encouraged to use community groups like the PTA and the Chambers of Commerce to advance their agendas, without disclosing their affiliations with the Birch Society, Cerovski wrote in the letter and a similar press release.

²⁸² Letter from Charles Cerovski to Honorable Donald Nutter, Governor of the State of Montana, April 8, 1962, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 16.

²⁸³ Ibid.

“It appears we Montanans may presently be suffering a totalitarian brainwashing without even knowing it,” he wrote.²⁸⁴

Cerovski urged Nutter “to use the tremendously impressive and effective moral force of your office to call upon John Birch members in Montana to stand up and be counted.”²⁸⁵ Cerovski believed that members should not use front organizations to “cloak their activities.” Montana citizens deserved to “be alerted to the totalitarian danger abroad among us,” he wrote.

John Birch Society history

The John Birch Society had not been around for long before Cerovski and others considered it a threat in Montana.

Robert Welch founded the organization in December 1958 in Indianapolis, Indiana.²⁸⁶ A 1962 John Birch Society brochure described the society’s long-range objective as “less government, more responsibility, and a better world.” According to its handbook, called the Blue Book, the society was organized to operate “under completely authoritative control at all levels,” and Welch personally selected all leaders of the group. The Blue Book also made clear that differences of opinion and debates among group members would not be tolerated: “We are not going to be in the position of having the society’s work weakened by raging debates. We are not going to have factions

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ For more information on the Birch Society’s history, see MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 16, folder 8.

developing on the two-sides-to-every-question theme.”²⁸⁷ Annual dues of \$24.00 for men and \$12.00 for women, literature sales and other member contributions financed the group.

The spread of Communism was the central concern of the John Birch Society. Founder Welch came up with the term “comsymps,” which meant the line between Communists and Communist sympathizers should be blurred: “You don’t have to tell how much they are Communists and how much sympathizers.”²⁸⁸

According to a series of articles that appeared in the *Missoulian* and were written by staff writer Lou Linley, Welch had estimated that several years after the society’s inception, it had more than 100,000 members, with the highest concentration in southern California.²⁸⁹

Welch named the society after John Birch, a fundamentalist Baptist preacher from Georgia who later worked as a missionary in China. He also worked as an intelligence officer for the U.S. Army during World War II, and eventually became a captain. Ten days after V-J Day, Birch was allegedly murdered in a Chinese village by Chinese Communists.²⁹⁰

Welch identified with Birch. “In Birch, Welch found the symbol for all that he thought the society should stand for. In Welch’s mind Birch was the first casualty – or

²⁸⁷ Lou Linley, “Has reason gone underground? John Birch Society says commies just about run U.S. government,” *Missoulian*, April 2, 1961.

²⁸⁸ Document called “John Birch Society, Inc.,” May 1, 1962, quoting *New York Post* article, May 3, 1961, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 16, folder 8.

²⁸⁹ Lou Linley, “Has reason gone underground? John Birch Society says commies just about run U.S. government,” *Missoulian*, April 2, 1961.

²⁹⁰ “The John Birch Society, ‘a strange threat to democracy,’” *The People’s Voice*, March 10, 1961, p. 1, 4.

martyr – of the third world war, a fight to the death between Communism and “Christian-style” civilization,” Linley wrote.²⁹¹

The second article in the *Missoulian* series detailed what was known about Birch Society membership in Montana. There were members in the Bitterroot Valley, and there was a chapter in Sidney and probably Billings, Linley wrote. The group had also been laying the groundwork for membership in Missoula.²⁹² For the most part, though, Birch membership in Montana was still “wrapped in darkness,” Linley concluded.²⁹³

Further, he wrote that the Society had few scruples about the methods they used to fight for their causes: “The society’s war on Communism, or against what it passionately hates in the United States government, i.e. federal income tax, social security, Earl Warren, etc., is conducted on a fight-fire-with-fire, chips-fall-where-they-may basis...”²⁹⁴

The *People’s Voice* criticizes the John Birch Society

Harry and Gretchen Billings similarly believed that the John Birch Society’s growing influence in Montana and their secretive tactics were cause for alarm. They devoted a great deal of space in the *People’s Voice* to articles about what they considered to be the dangers of the John Birch Society.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Lou Linley, “Has reason gone underground? John Birch Society spreads its influence into Montana,” *Missoulian*, April 6, 1961.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

As in the McCarthy years, the battles during this time often pitted the political right against the political left, or ultraconservatives against liberals.

In March 1961, the *Voice* ran an in-depth three-part series of articles that Gretchen wrote about the John Birch Society.

In her first article, Gretchen focused on alarming details about the Birch Society's philosophy and methods, including the Society's secrecy and its attempt to avoid publicity. She described its goal of having one million members and detailed founder Robert Welch's description of himself as "hard boiled, dictatorial and dynamic boss" and the absolute and unquestioned head of the Birch Society. Welch, she wrote, had even once accused former President Dwight Eisenhower of being a Communist and of treason.²⁹⁵

Gretchen's article emphasized that although Welch's book and statements were shocking, sometimes even to his followers, the movement nevertheless was growing. Although the book was being withdrawn because it repelled more members than it attracted, Welch simultaneously was viewed as a persuasive speaker who was able to attract people to the society because of the "lofty aims," he expressed.²⁹⁶ An article in the *Chicago Daily News* put it more bluntly, and Gretchen quoted its words in her article: "Quietly [Welch] has been gaining strong support among both prominent conservatives and thousands of ordinary people who seek to fight communism. They should know the thinking of the man to whom they are pledging their energies and loyalty".

²⁹⁵ "The John Birch Society, 'a strange threat to democracy,'" *The People's Voice*, March 10, 1961, p. 1, 4.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

Gretchen's article focused on persuading readers that, by labeling President Eisenhower a Communist and accusing him of treason, and by calling for impeachment of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Welch and the John Birch Society were threats to democracy.²⁹⁷ In the second article of the series, Gretchen spent more time making her point that the group should be denounced in Montana. She wrote that concern was growing about the society all over the country: "Across the nation an alarm is being sounded over the increasing membership and spreading influence of a relatively new organization called the John Birch Society."²⁹⁸

Gretchen's front-page article detailed part of a congressional record in which Republican Senator Milton Young of North Dakota expressed concern about growth of the society. She also wrote that Montana's Senator Mike Mansfield said that he had been unsuccessful in his attempts to get information about the John Birch Society.

Seeking to make the point that not only liberals were concerned about the influence of the Birch Society and threatened by the group, Gretchen reprinted a statement from Senator Young, whom she labeled a "middle-of-the-road" Republican. He, too, believed that the Birch society was a threat, even to conservatives themselves. He wrote: "This organization is ultra-conservative in nature and has among its members some of the most able and influential people in each community. Strangely enough, most

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ "Suspicion and distrust, Birch Society's long suit," *The People's Voice*, March 17, 1961, p. 1, 4.

of its criticism is leveled, not against liberal public officials, but against the more middle-of-the-road, and even conservative Republicans.”²⁹⁹

In boldface type, Gretchen wrote that for years Republicans had used the same methods the Birch Society was currently using to advance their ideas while ignoring the evil the society represented. But now the differences between the “Birchers” and some of those Republicans were becoming starker and more alarming. “Now the conservatives suddenly find their house is haunted,” she wrote.³⁰⁰

Gretchen was not surprised by the growth of an ultraconservative group, she wrote, especially given what she, Harry and the *People’s Voice* had endured from the right wing. No doubt referring to the *Voice’s* struggle against the Communist label, Gretchen wrote: “Back in 1948 when the VOICE was a first target of the ultraconservatives we predicted that what is springing up in the form of John Birch Society philosophy was inevitable. Piece by piece the ultraconservatives have discredited individuals and organizations until they have pushed into their own fort.”³⁰¹

The *Voice* points out the Birch Society’s tactics

Birch Society members were notorious for not identifying themselves, Gretchen reported. In Montana, that method dated back to 1958, when Helen Wood Birnie came to the state. She had been in Montana earlier, in 1934 and 1935, working for Communist causes, but apparently had a change in political philosophy some years later. She

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

returned to Montana in 1958 to do anticommunist work. Her tactics, Gretchen wrote, involved creating an “anonymous and unsettling presence” and included what Gretchen called “so-called” study groups, reports from those groups, letters to local newspaper editors, large ads, and announcements of speakers on Communism.³⁰²

Gretchen included an example of a report of a study group in a Sidney paper from October 1960. “When you wake up tomorrow be sure to take a good look at yourself in the mirror, ask yourself what am I doing to keep America strong? The next few years will be the years of decision. If we do not waver, if the tide can be turned from liberalism to conservatism we stand a good chance to keep our freedom. If not, reconcile yourself to the likelihood that you and your sons will be eunuch slaves and your wife and daughters in the brothels of a communist state.”³⁰³

Like seminars the American Legion sponsored during McCarthyism, the John Birch Society also held seminars on subversion, such as one in Sidney in 1960, Gretchen wrote. As during the McCarthy years, liberal Democrats tended to be the people that the Birch Society members called subversive. Helen Wood Birnie was featured there, as well as other speakers who were prominent in the Birch Society scene in Montana.

Apparently many people in Sidney responded favorably to the seminar and the study group. The study group held frequent meetings that were well attended; at one meeting as many as 228 people were there, Gretchen reported. The group also had long

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ “Suspicion and distrust, Birch Society’s long suit,” *The People’s Voice*, March 17, 1961, p. 1.

reports published in the local newspaper, and it showed a film borrowed from the John Birch Society, called “Communism and the Map.”³⁰⁴

The result of this Birch Society activity in Sidney was distrust and fear, Gretchen wrote: “In the Sidney area neighbor has turned against neighbor; confusion, fear and sorrow have marked the path of the “anti-communist, communist-style” organizations.”³⁰⁵

She concluded that the Birch Society’s influence was being felt in Montana and wrote that if the society continued to gain support, its political influence would be felt heavily in the elections in 1962 and 1964.

The third article in Gretchen’s series reiterated many of the points she had made in earlier articles. She began the article by writing that conservative newspapers and politicians, including the *Los Angeles Times* and former Vice President Richard Nixon, were decrying the tactics the Birch Society was using to advance its agenda.³⁰⁶ She reprinted statements from both Nixon and the *Times*; those statements challenged the Birch Society’s tactic of using the end to justify the means, often by “smearing” its enemies as traitors.

As in her earlier articles, Gretchen wrote that Birch Society members were encouraged to secretly infiltrate such groups as local parent-teacher associations. She again reported a statement that had been attributed to founder Robert Welch in the

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ ““Subversion, whether of the left or right, is still subversion,”” *The People’s Voice*, March 24, 1961, p. 1, 3.

society's "Bible," in which he wrote that: "democracy is merely a deceptive phrase, a weapon of demagoguery and a perennial fraud."³⁰⁷

Finally, she argued the Birch Society was already influencing Montana's Legislature in a concrete way, though she didn't specify how: "In the 37th Legislative Assembly the radical rightists had visible influence and were at no time challenged by the Republican leadership in the House or Administrative department. They were provided a daily forum from the Republican side of the aisle, and several of their proposals passed the lower house."³⁰⁸

Keeping tabs on the Birch Society: A network around Montana

Through correspondence with friends and contacts, and through articles from various newspapers, Harry and Gretchen kept unofficial tabs on Birch Society activity in different parts of Montana.

Helen Wood Birnie, a self-described ex-Communist who said she had since realized its dangers, was the subject of many exchanges. Birnie traveled around the state, speaking in churches and community halls, and the *People's Voice* carefully monitored her whereabouts. In 1959, Harry wrote to a man in Hogeland, Mont., thanking him for information he had sent to Harry about Birnie and asking for more.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Letter From Harry L. Billings to Mr. Sudan, Dec. 21, 1959, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 13.

Harry and Gretchen had known that Birnie was speaking in northern Montana's Hi-Line area, but Harry said that the published information was inconsequential enough that they hadn't paid close attention.

Harry asked one *Voice* subscriber with whom he corresponded to elaborate: Were there any articles in the Chinook or Harlem papers about Birnie? Did he know who was sponsoring Birnie and making reservations for speaking locations? Were there any more meetings scheduled?³¹⁰

In his letter to the subscriber, Harry asked for information on upcoming meetings because he said he would possibly want his attorney and other witnesses to be present, in case "first hand evidence could very possibly lay groundwork for a suit – and a suit could be dynamite for the sponsors of this stuff."³¹¹

In another exchange of letters with Francis Bardanouve, who would become Montana's longest-serving legislator, Harry wrote that Birnie had spoken earlier in the week at a community meeting in Turner, which is near Harlem, and at that meeting had labeled the *Voice* a Communist sheet.³¹²

Harry wrote that he'd like to expose Birnie's charge as false and use it to weaken her credibility: "I'd like to get a line on what she is saying because there might be real political campaign capital to be made out of it if she and her sponsorship were blown out

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Letter from Harry Billings to Francis Bardanouve, Dec. 21, 1959, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 13.

of the water (I mean mud). I'm used to this kind of junk, but I think there may be real value, if we can nail 'er down, for further harassment of the God Orful party."³¹³

Harry speculated that Birnie was attacking the *People's Voice* because the newspaper was effective in advancing its own agenda. "Whenever the VOICE is having a telling effect on Republicans, Montana Power, the telephone company, etc., they unloose their smear guns," Harry wrote. "We're quite convinced that the PV's relentless pursuing of Highway problem, keeping a steady fire on the Board of Equalization, and a number of other things, has been hitting home. So, they're back at it again."³¹⁴

Harry also corresponded with a man in Hamilton who, several weeks later, reported on a speech Birnie gave at a weekly meeting of the Hamilton Lions Club. The man told Harry that Birnie had declared, among other things, that out of a labor union with 10,000 members, a person could safely assume that 6,000 of them were Communists. Also, she said the Democratic Party was more likely to make an issue out of Communism than were Republicans, and that a strategy of Communists was to work for a strike in order to weaken the economy.³¹⁵

Harry frequently warned Birnie's potential sponsors that Birnie was not someone they should associate with. In early 1960, for example, Harry wrote to a man who belonged to the Assembly of God church in Culbertson, warning him that Birnie had a history of being sponsored at churches in Minnesota, only later to be "dropt [sic] ... like a

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Letter from Ralph Owings to Harry Billings, Jan. 14, 1960, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 13.

hot potato,” when she “embarrassed” them.³¹⁶ Because Communism was believed to be Godless and a threat to Christianity, churches often were chosen as meeting places for anticommunist gatherings.

Harry suggested that the church surely wouldn’t approve of Birnie’s kind of “patriotism with a partisan Tinge,” and he charged that Birnie’s real goal was to use the “cloak of anti-Communism” to weaken Democrats and liberals in general and the *People’s Voice*, Montana labor movement and the Farmer’s Union – both groups whose members were closely aligned with the *Voice* – specifically.³¹⁷

In other letters, Harry wrote to friends and asked them to keep a close watch out for Birnie.³¹⁸ In some of those letters, Harry detailed the network of friends around the state who were monitoring Birch Society members’ activities. He also wrote about how his children were involved in the fight, too. Son Mike had attended a meeting in Missoula where Birnie spoke, Harry wrote, and challenged some of her statements. Birnie “became quite emotional when they asked her to name names of alleged “communists” in Montana,” Harry wrote. Birnie’s response, he said, was to refuse to answer on grounds that she could be sued for libel: “Our second son, Mike, then asked [Birnie] if it isn’t law that ‘the truth is the strongest defense there is’ in a libel action. To

³¹⁶ Letter from Harry Billings to Mr. Alfred Anderson, Jan. 19, 1960, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 13.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Letter from Harry Billings to Ed Fike, Feb. 4, 1960, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 13.

this she blew and yelled ‘all you want to do is get me written up in the People’s Voice’. To that he replied, ‘That’s right, Mrs. B[i]rnie.’”³¹⁹

The next day, the *People’s Voice* published a profile of Birnie in which Gretchen wrote that it was not unusual to have speakers like Birnie in Montana, given that it was an election year, and she argued that Birnie’s tactic of emphasizing her regret over her former Communist affiliations wasn’t alarming in itself. But Gretchen was concerned about Birnie’s influence because she believed people “haven’t been able to separate her repentance from her political inspirations.”³²⁰ Birnie’s strategy of playing on people’s emotions while simultaneously making statements “with little factual data” was a dangerous combination, Gretchen wrote, adding, “The effectiveness of this woman should not be underestimated according to many who have heard her. She has a dramatic and commanding manner.” Gretchen concluded that only “rational consideration” would put Birnie’s and any other “extreme political pronouncement in proper perspective.”³²¹

Other exchanges between Harry and Gretchen and their network around the state detailed places where there were active “cells” of the John Birch Society. Harry, especially, corresponded with friends and acquaintances in various parts of the state to obtain information on the John Birch Society in their areas.³²² For example, Dale L. McGarvey, a Kalispell lawyer who had served as a state representative in the late 1950s, wrote an October 1961 letter to Harry in which he told him that there was at least one

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ “A political profile,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 5, 1960.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Letter from Harry L. Billings to Mr. J. Hackethorn, Oct. 24, 1961, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 14.

active Birch Society cell in the Flathead Valley of northwestern Montana. McGarvey's letter was similar to many other letters Harry and Gretchen received:

Evidently we have at least one cell of the John Birch Society in Flathead County. They are extremely active here, and were active particularly in the last campaign. They have made the same attempts on curricular here as in other areas, and have been [successful] in getting the showing of "Operation Abolition and Communism" on the map all over this county. They have also been successful in forming other groups, or at least have had a hand in them, such as the Christian Patriots. We had a meeting and had Charles Dillon come from Victor to speak on their activities in his area, and the same pattern is being following in the Flathead. Some of the Birchers attended this meeting.³²³

Like other correspondence the Billingses received, McGarvey's letter included a name of a person he suspected of being a member of the John Birch Society.

Other newspapers' reports on the John Birch Society

Other newspapers joined the *People's Voice* in writing and publishing editorials and articles about the Birch Society, underlining the growing presence the Society enjoyed in the state.

Of course, some newspaper articles and editorials spoke out in favor of the John Birch Society. Some of those articles illustrated how contentious the issue had become. An editorial in Helena's *Independent Record*, for example, defended Society members as people who simply were working to uphold the government, fight Communism and expose Marxist ideas that had seeped into public life.³²⁴

³²³ Letter from Dale L. McGarvey to Harry L. Billings, Oct. 11, 1961, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 14.

³²⁴ "The John Birch Society," *The (Helena) Independent Record*, date unknown, p. 4, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 15, folder 4.

While the editorial mentioned disliking the way the Society was organized – with one top person holding all the power – and disagreed with the Society’s advocacy of the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren, it contended that overall, negative press about the Society was exaggerated. Further, the editorial argued that the Society should be left alone rather than criticized. “We assert that the John Birch Society has every right to exist and to carry out its purposes.... We believe that the recent charges against the John Birch Society have been based on gross exaggerations or falsehoods.”³²⁵ Finally, inaccurate information circulated by the “society’s enemies” had created an unfair buzz about the Birch Society – a charge that forced the paper to conclude that “we need the John Birch Society.”³²⁶ Though the editorial didn’t identify the society’s enemies by name, the writer was undoubtedly including the *People’s Voice*, as a harsh critic of the movement, in the list of enemies.

While many papers defended the Birch Society – the Helena *Independent Record*’s editorial conclusion that people needed the John Birch Society was a prime example³²⁷ -- the *People’s Voice* wasn’t alone in decrying the organization. Articles in several other Montana papers made similar points.

A 1965 editorial in the *Great Falls Tribune* called attention to the growth of the John Birch Society, and, years after its inception, applauded “responsible conservatives” who “finally are realizing the danger of an extremist group like the Birch Society.”³²⁸

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ “It’s time to take a good, hard look at ‘good, sincere’ John Birchers,” *Great Falls Tribune*, Aug. 21, 1965.

The editorial concluded that Montanans should take a good, hard look at members of the John Birch Society. “The fact they are against Communism – as all but a very tiny percentage of our population are – should not excuse the preposterous chain of fear, hate and intolerance that emanates from the Birch movement.”³²⁹

In other cases, newspapers wrote articles questioning the negative influence of what was considered an extremist group. The *Missoulian*'s three-part series by staff writer Lou Linley, for example, was inspired by questions like “are extremes of viewpoint on Communism creating an atmosphere of distrust? Setting neighbor against neighbor?”³³⁰

In 1961, the *Missoulian* also devoted space to relaying to its readers a statement from U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, who declared that the Birch Society was “ridiculous.”³³¹

At the same time, a small paper in Lewistown, Mont., ran a United Press International Story reporting that, contrary to what John Birch Society literature claimed, the namesake of the organization was not a hero and did not die in glory.³³²

People outside Montana were taking note of Birch Society growth in the state, too. In 1963, the *New York Times* published an article that quoted a leader of the Birch Society in the area, Victor G. Overcash, who said the Society was “becoming much

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Lou Linley, “Has reason gone underground?” *Missoulian*, April 2, 1961.

³³¹ Associated Press, “Atty. Gen. Kennedy believes Birch Society is ridiculous,” *Missoulian*, April 7, 1961.

³³² “Officer for whom John Birch Society was named no hero,” *Lewistown Daily News*, April 2, 1961.

stronger” in Montana.³³³ Overcash also declared that some leaders in state government – both elected and appointed – were involved in the movement, but he declined to name names or provide numbers.

Another group under fire from the *Voice*

The John Birch Society was not the only conservative organization that the *People's Voice* criticized at that time. Young Americans for Freedom was a group described as a “nation-wide conservative political youth organization” by president James Dullenty of the Montana State University chapter in Missoula.³³⁴ Dullenty wrote in the student newspaper at the university that YAF was not affiliated with any other group, that it was funded by donations, and that its purpose was to “educate young people on and off campus in resurgent conservative philosophy and to work to elect conservatives to local, state and national office.”

The national YAF organization opposed socialized medicine, supported the loyalty oath, and supported the activities of the House Committee on Un-American activities. Members of the group, Dullenty wrote, shared several important principles, including a “desire to maintain the free enterprise system, a belief that an ever-expanding federal government is infringing on the liberties of the individual and a belief that tax

³³³ Wallace Turner, “Birch aid cites gain in Montana,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1963, clipping at MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 15, folder 9.

³³⁴ James Dullenty, “Young Americans for Freedom...a voice of conservatism,” *Montana Kaimin*, May 23, 1962, p. 2.

money can best be spent by local officials rather than the federal government in all but a few cases.”³³⁵

Dullenty traded attacks with the *Voice*. In a 1961 article in the *Montana Kaimin*, the newspaper of Montana State University (now the University of Montana), Dullenty took issue with a *People's Voice* article that had listed what they called “notorious right-wing extremists,” in Montana. Dullenty wrote that the article was an example of an attempt “throughout the nation in the left-wing press designed to lump all conservatives into one pot.”³³⁶

Dullenty charged that by listing names and implying that those people on the list had similar political philosophies, the *People's Voice* and other similar publications were making people guilty by association, exactly the same tactic ascribed to the Birch Society by the *People's Voice*. He wrote: “It is just as bad for the extremists on the left ... to list everyone with a conservative viewpoint as “notorious extremists” and imply that they all belong to one supposedly sinister organization as it is for the conservatives to insist that all so-called liberals are socialists or communists.” Dullenty argued that political opinions were more complicated and that “there is room in America for all shades of political opinion...”³³⁷

Dullenty's claim that the *Voice* was unfairly lumping conservatives together was a valid criticism. Not all conservatives were Birch Society members, and to imply that they all had the same beliefs and tactics was inaccurate.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ “University political thought,” by James Dullenty, *Montana Kaimin*, Feb. 16, 1961, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 12, folder 13.

³³⁷ Ibid.

In another letter around the same time, Dullenty also questioned why the paper never addressed “the danger from communism, the enemy we are spending billions of dollars to defend against?”³³⁸ The *Voice* printed Dullenty’s letter, but didn’t respond to it directly.³³⁹ Dullenty wasn’t the only person to charge that the *Voice* was being friendly to Communists; over the years, the newspaper was frequently accused of being a Communist mouthpiece.

But calling the *Voice* a Communist mouthpiece was unfair. The paper didn’t attack Communists like members of the John Birch Society did, but it didn’t advocate for Communism, either. Rather, the paper was committed to democracy. To call Harry and Gretchen and their family Communists, as their enemies frequently did, was similarly untrue.³⁴⁰

In 1964, Harry wrote a lengthy letter to a woman in Troy, Montana, Mrs. Lewis Sloan. “I wish Overcash or any of his Birchers would come right out and say THE VOICE and its Editor are ‘Communist’. I can assure that, once any of them put it down in black and white, immediate court action will ensue.”³⁴¹ Harry, apparently frustrated with the secretive, anonymous attacks, wanted a chance to defend himself.

In the letter, he did just that, and told Sloan the facts of the “purity” of the newspaper: “We have in our safe letters ... stating that the People’s Voice of Helena,

³³⁸ Letter from James Dullenty to the editor of the *People’s Voice*, June 14, 1963, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 12, folder 8.

³³⁹ “Reader’s Forum,” *The People’s Voice*, June 21, 1963, p. 2.

³⁴⁰ For more on Harry and Gretchen’s political philosophy, see *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, p. 144.

³⁴¹ Letter from Harry L. Billings to Mrs. Lewis W. Sloan, April 10, 1964, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 14, folder 16.

Montana has never once been cited in any way as being a part of either the Communist mechanism or as a fellow traveler...”³⁴² Harry also noted that Senator Lee Metcalf was an ardent supporter of the *People’s Voice*, as evidenced by being a stockholder and previously going “to bat” for the paper.

Dullenty had other criticisms of the *Voice*. On one occasion, he wrote to the editor of the *Voice*, demanding a retraction of a *People’s Voice* article that quoted Sen. Thomas Kuchel of California. The Republican senator had labeled several groups, including YAF and the Birch Society, as “fright peddlers.”³⁴³

Dullenty included a copy of Kuchel’s remarks, and argued that “nowhere does he impugn – nor, to my knowledge, has he ever impugned – the loyalty of such patriotic organizations as the Elks, the American Legion, the D.A.R. or the Young Americans for Freedom.”³⁴⁴ Dullenty also included a letter from Sen. Mike Mansfield and claimed that according to Mansfield, Kuchel was not including YAF in his “fright peddler” speech.

The *Voice* printed Dullenty’s letter, but this time they responded to it in an editorial with the title, “YAFs Protest Too Loudly!”³⁴⁵

The editorial argued that Dullenty missed the point: “I am at a loss to understand their relying on Mike in defense of their being a ‘patriotic organization.’” The editorial argued that no one had inferred that members of the YAF organization were unpatriotic,

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Letter from James Dullenty to editor of the *People’s Voice*, April 18, 1964, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 12, folder 8.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ “YAFs protest too loudly!” *The People’s Voice*, April 24, 1964, p. 2, 4.

but rather were “misguided in their zeal to join Barry Goldwater and Tim Babcock in attempting to turn the clock back a century or two.”³⁴⁶

Harry’s editorial also included a list of the organization’s goals, including opposition to the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency program, and federal aid for education, as well as support of enactment of right-to-work laws.³⁴⁷ He wrote that the goals were the same as the goals of other right-wing organizations, and argued that those goals connected the groups.

He also included names of people on the national roster of the YAF, and pointed out that many of them were also active in the John Birch Society and other right-wing organizations.

Conclusion

In Montana, the John Birch Society fizzled as it did in other parts of the country. By the late 1960s, the more virulent phase of anti-Communism had died with the Vietnam War. But even though the Birch Society weakened, the damage it inflicted was long lasting.

Years later, when Harry reflected on the Birch Society and other conservative groups, it wasn’t the fact that he and Gretchen had to endure charges of Communism that bothered him. Nor did he say he was pleased about how many people around the state were concerned about the Birch Society and subsequently kept Harry informed on the

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

group's activities. Rather, Harry viewed the gradual progress the Birch Society had made to advance conservatism as negative.

In his unpublished manuscript, which he wrote in 1988, Harry concluded that although progress from the right wing had slowed over the years, it was slowly but surely having an impact on all sorts of issues. Not only was the threat still there, Harry wrote, but it was growing:

In recent years, the "right" has been less flamboyant; they have revised their tactics, if not their goals. They've become more "refined" in their pronouncements and less strident. While they didn't secure the impeachment of Earl Warren, they, through Presidents Nixon and Reagan, achieved substantial change toward conservatism on the U.S. Supreme Court. While we're still in the United Nations, that body is no longer held in the high esteem it once was, and a major reason was the incessant clamoring of the "right."

In other areas, too, their efforts have influenced the nation into more conservative outlooks, particularly during the Reagan years, toward public welfare, on alleviation of poverty, on educational expenditures, on social programs such as enforcement of fair employment laws, and other goals aimed at enhancing the internal strength of our nation. Their simplistic solutions to the most complex of problems have been bought by all too many people in all economic strata of American life. In part, the Birchers and allies have achieved the internal decay of many of our institutions, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of the trade union movement; of liberal farm organizations such as the Farmers Union; of the Democratic party itself. While there seems less enthusiasm for the bill-of-goods they've been peddling the last three decades, here in mid-1988, I fear they may yet cut more of the national fabric into shambles unless there's a major change in the direction the nation will be taking in the new year.³⁴⁸

Just as the *Voice* was a constant critic of the John Birch Society, over the years it was also a consistent critic of newspapers that were owned by the Anaconda Copper

³⁴⁸ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 87-88.

Mining Company. That criticism, however, had a more concrete effect than criticism of the Birch Society.

CHAPTER SIX: THE *PEOPLE'S VOICE* AS ANTITHESIS OF THE COPPER PRESS

The very existence of the *People's Voice* was, in large part, a protest against the newspapers that were believed to be owned by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company – also known as the copper press – and the *Voice* made no secret of its disenchantment with those newspapers. From its first issue, the *Voice's* editors made a point of giving their readers detailed information about the company's press ownership. They reported on the annual corporation reports the newspapers were required to file and emphasized stories that the copper press ignored or underplayed. Alone among Montana newspapers, the *Voice* played a role in stopping the company from getting into broadcasting. When Lee Enterprises bought Anaconda's newspapers in 1959, Gretchen Billings was one of the few journalists to publicly welcome Lee to the state, a stance for which she received flak from many *Voice* supporters. But even after the copper press was gone, the *People's Voice* published for another 10 years, an indication that the *Voice* still served as a counterpoint to the conservatism of the Lee papers in their early years.

Existence as protest

In the late 1880s and 1890s, Butte's huge copper deposits meant development and prosperity, but many thought the wealth came at too high a price. Even though copper

made the economy grow, historians have written that it also “rule[d] the roost politically, sometimes with grim results.”³⁴⁹

Various people and companies invested in copper over the years, but it was the Anaconda Copper Mining Company -- or simply “the company” – that was synonymous with copper mining in Montana.³⁵⁰

At its height, the ACM was a powerful force in the state. Historians have noted that the company “clearly dominated” Montana’s economy and politics by 1910-15.³⁵¹ “To many observers, both inside and outside the state, Montana appeared to be the classic example of a “one-company state,” a commonwealth where one corporation ruled.”³⁵²

In 1937, after a state legislative session that Harry Billings later called a “corporate-controlled disaster for the people of Montana,”³⁵³ liberal Democrats felt there was a need for a new statewide newspaper. “Near the end of the session, a dozen or so frustrated legislators and representatives of farm and labor groups met in a Helena café and determined that the shameful activities of the corporate lobby never again would be hidden from the public,” Harry wrote.³⁵⁴

The *Voice* intended to pick up, in part, where another liberal newspaper had left off. The *Western Progressive*, launched in 1932, intended to publicize Montana affairs

³⁴⁹ Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976, p. 201.

³⁵⁰ For more history on the ACM, see *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, by Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder and William L. Lang, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230-231.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ Harry L. Billings, “*The People’s Voice: The Dream and the Reality*,” *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 3.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

that the copper press overlooked. But the *Western Progressive* was organized as a corporation, which allowed stockholders to influence the paper's editorial content. "This came about in its final year when a liquor broker gained control and turned the publication to his own selfish interests," Harry wrote. The *Progressive* folded in 1937.

Determined that the *Voice* would not meet the same fate, the founders of the *People's Voice* decided that the new paper should be organized as a cooperative, with each interest receiving one vote. Furthermore, that cooperative, the Educational Cooperative Publishing Company, decided to accept no advertising except that of nonprofit, cooperatively owned organizations. Lee Metcalf, a lawyer and legislator from Ravalli County who would later represent Montana in the U.S. Senate, prepared the incorporation papers.

Thanks to Cap Bruce, the *Voice's* first editor, who had previously edited the *Western Progressive*, the *Voice* picked up where the *Progressive* had left off, immediately publishing articles that were highly critical of the state's biggest corporate powers. When the first issue of the *People's Voice* ran on December 6, 1939, its lead article was about the control of many of the daily papers in the state.

The article asserted that editorial policies of the state's daily papers were "clearly controlled by the corporate interests," and only published news that favored big business or was inconsequential. "Charges have been repeatedly made that the Anaconda Copper Mining Company controls most of the daily papers in Montana and the statements have

never been denied by the company,” the article continued.³⁵⁵ While it wasn’t until 1947 that Anaconda publicly revealed its ownership in the annual statement filed with postal officials, the secret wasn’t well kept. Long before ownership was announced, the *Voice* believed that the papers were being published for the purpose of influencing public opinion for the benefit of the company.

As evidence of their corporate ownership, the *Voice* pointed out that the papers would not be viable on their own and thus had vested backers and a purpose other than financial gain. “The annual reports of the corporations which publish these papers, show clearly that they could not have operated for several years past, had they been compelled to operate as any ordinary business institution has to operate,” the article charged. For example, the Standard Publishing Company, publishers of Butte’s *Montana Standard*, made \$100,000 in 1938 but had debts totaling more than \$433,000, the *Voice* wrote.³⁵⁶

The article concluded by vowing to discuss more “interesting features” that were connected to the publishing company.³⁵⁷

Information about press ownership

An article in the second issue of the *People’s Voice* charged that one company in Helena, identified as the News Publishing Company, actually had no real connection to

³⁵⁵ “Control of many daily papers by big business detrimental to public,” *The People’s Voice*, Dec. 6, 1939, p. 1.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

publishing.³⁵⁸ The *Voice* article correctly contended that the company was merely a blind used by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company to hide its connection to newspapers in the state.³⁵⁹ Similarly, the article charged that a New York company, the Fairmont Investment Company, was likely part of the ACM. As evidence, the article reported that Fairmont owned stock in the Standard Publishing Company, publishers of Butte's *Montana Standard*.

The *Voice* made no secret of its disapproval of these arrangements. "The People's Voice condemns this control and ownership of these publications which should be channels of unprejudiced information for the people of the state whose patronage gives them their only reason for existence."³⁶⁰

Again, the *Voice* article contended that the large debts the papers recorded in their annual reports was proof that the papers did not survive because of public support, but because of Anaconda's wealth and influence. The *Voice* called the apparent strategy "deliberately misleading" and challenged the ACM to prove that its intent was not to deceive Montanans. They also requested that the company provide sworn statements that the ACM had not contributed large sums to the various publishing companies.³⁶¹

The *Voice* was the first to reveal other links between the Anaconda Copper Mining Company and the press, too, according to Dennis L. Swibold in *Copper Chorus*:

³⁵⁸ "News Pub. Co., Fairmont Investment Co. heavy daily press stockhold's," *The People's Voice*, Dec. 13, 1939, p. 1.

³⁵⁹ For a detailed look at the ACM's newspapers, see *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*, by Dennis L. Swibold, Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006.

³⁶⁰ "News Pub. Co., Fairmont Investment Co. heavy daily press stockhold's," *The People's Voice*, Dec. 13, 1939, p. 1.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959. The *People's Voice* reported on ACM executive James Dickey Jr.'s official oversight of several newspapers, including the *Butte Daily Post*, Butte's *Montana Standard*, the *Livingston Enterprise*, and Helena's *Independent* and *Montana Record-Herald*.³⁶² The *Voice* also informed its readers when Dickey moved his office from the building where the *Butte Daily Post* operated to Anaconda's headquarters in Butte.³⁶³ And the *Voice* tried to assess the company's influence on weekly newspapers in the state, concluding that, for the most part and unlike the dailies, most weeklies were independently owned and responsible to local interests.³⁶⁴

Unlike many of the state's dailies, the *People's Voice* was quick to run stories that showed Anaconda in a negative light. In 1943, the paper was the first to report that an Anaconda subsidiary had been indicted for knowingly supplying the military with defective communications wire.³⁶⁵ Later, after a second subsidiary was indicted, some company papers offered brief accounts of the story, but others ignored the subsequent convictions.³⁶⁶

Several years later, in 1947, the *Voice's* claims of Anaconda influence over the papers were confirmed when the annual ownership statements of the copper dailies finally disclosed the Fairmont Investment Company in New York as a subsidiary of the

³⁶² Dennis L. Swibold, *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*, Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006, p. 277.

³⁶³ "News pub. Co., Fairmont Invest Co. heavy daily press stockhold's," *The People's Voice*, Dec. 13, 1939, p. 1.

³⁶⁴ Dennis L. Swibold, *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*, Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006, p. 277.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 281-282.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

Anaconda Copper Mining Company.³⁶⁷ The information was buried near the legal ads in small type, though, and, for the most part, the details of Anaconda's newspaper ownership remained obscure. That changed when the company tried to expand into broadcasting, a move that opened up the possibility of public scrutiny.³⁶⁸

The *Voice* criticizes Anaconda's attempt to further its media holdings

In early 1951, the Fairmont Investment Corporation requested that the Federal Communications Commission approve its purchase of a controlling interest of a Great Falls radio station. Though the purchase had been in the works for several years, the application provided the first detailed report of Fairmont's holdings and policies. In fact, Fairmont owned 100 percent of the companies that published Butte's *Montana Standard*, the *Butte Daily Post*, the *Missoulian*, and the *Missoula Sentinel*, as well as controlling interests in a handful of others, including the *Helena Independent Record*, the *Billings Gazette*, and the *Livingston Enterprise*. And, as the *Voice* hypothesized in articles published in 1939, the FCC application materials showed that the company had a large investment in the newspapers, but made little or no profit on those investments over the years.³⁶⁹

News of the application spread quickly through the state's labor unions and farm organizations. Worried that the sale might be approved without public scrutiny, the

³⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 286.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 286, 290.

groups lobbied heavily against it.³⁷⁰ Critics “feared the company’s influence would extend to FCC officials themselves and made certain commissioners knew they were watching.”³⁷¹ The *People’s Voice* was among those critics, and, when Harry wrote to Senator James Murray, expressing his dismay, Murray forwarded his letter to the FCC.³⁷²

The controversy was never reported in Montana’s daily press, but the *People’s Voice* gave it prominent coverage. In several front-page articles in the fall of 1951, the *Voice* alerted its readers that Anaconda was trying to expand its media control in a state where it already owned at least seven large newspapers. The outcome of Anaconda’s application, though, rested on an FCC hearing to determine whether the ACM had the “character qualifications” that were needed to get into broadcasting.³⁷³ The *Voice* questioned whether the acquisition would be in the public’s best interest, since control of the station “would add measurably to Anaconda’s already substantial influence in the state of Montana stemming from their extensive newspaper, business, mining, timber and industrial holdings in the state” and because of Anaconda’s 1941 conviction for conspiring to fix the price of lumber.³⁷⁴ The commission would also have to determine how the company’s acquisition of the station would effect diversification and competition in the state’s media.

Several days before the FCC’s first hearing, the *Voice* printed an account detailing examples of negative Anaconda characteristics, from a person identified only as an “old

³⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 291.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid, p. 292.

³⁷³ *The People’s Voice*, Sept. 7, 1951, p. 1.

³⁷⁴ Ibid and Dennis L. Swibold, *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*, Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006, p. 292.

timer” from Butte. The old timer speculated about a variety of Anaconda dealings he thought were shady, including years of back taxes the company owed in Butte, the death of Wobbly organizer Frank Little, and deliberate equipment tampering.³⁷⁵

The *Voice* included an editorial with the account, in which Harry concluded that it would be in everyone’s best interests for the FCC to proceed cautiously. “The FCC should go slow in permitting the proposed sale, if the public interest is to be best served,” he wrote.³⁷⁶

The Anaconda Company did its best to make sure a public hearing in Montana would never take place. Hoping to avoid scrutiny, Anaconda’s lawyers protested the parameters of the FCC’s disclosure requests and tried to negotiate the ground rules for any hearing. Meanwhile, critics of the company worried that Anaconda might end up getting its way by avoiding a hearing, or, worse, that the deal had already been approved.³⁷⁷

When news finally reached the state that the FCC had postponed the hearing, Harry grew suspicious, fearing that all parties, including the FCC, were trying to prevent news about the case from reaching Montanans. In an October 1951 letter to Senator Murray, he speculated that the FCC or the national media were stifling the story.³⁷⁸ If his suspicions were correct, he wondered, who was behind it, and why?³⁷⁹

³⁷⁵ “The ‘Old Timer’ writes to Mr. Hoover,” *The People’s Voice*, Sept. 21, 1951, p. 1, 3.

³⁷⁶ “Do ACM’s ‘character qualifications’ justify giving company control of KFBB?” *The People’s Voice*, Sept. 21, 1951, p. 1.

³⁷⁷ Dennis L. Swibold, *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*, Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006, p. 293.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Early the next year, Fairmont's request that the FCC approve its purchase of the radio station without a hearing was denied. In May of 1952, the FCC restated concerns about the company's influence in Montana and then decided that the sale couldn't be approved without a hearing, a development that the *People's Voice* gave front-page coverage.³⁸⁰

Anaconda must have decided it wasn't worth the public scrutiny, and Fairmont withdrew its application soon after the FCC's ruling. Interestingly, in the issues of the *People's Voice* published after Fairmont's withdrawal, Harry and Gretchen didn't report that the company had dropped the deal, but instead focused coverage on the upcoming local elections.³⁸¹

Focused on stories the copper press ignored or underplayed

The copper press became notorious, especially in its later years, for its effectiveness in controlling or blunting debate on a number of issues. Rather than risk embarrassment and backlash from negative news about Anaconda, the copper press instead frequently chose to ignore or underplay important stories, including those about workers' compensation, taxation, and utility prices.³⁸²

These tactics became especially apparent by the late 1930s. Before then, copper editors had frequently fought for things like regulations and taxes that would favor the

³⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 294, 295, and "KFBB license won't be transferred to ACM without a public hearing," *The People's Voice*, June 27, 1952.

³⁸¹ *The People's Voice*, July 18, 25, 1952.

³⁸² For more information, see chapter nine in *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*.

company, but they had been more vocal about it, often using the editorial pages. But in later years, copper writers employed a more distant tone, perhaps hoping to distract readers. “Rarely did Anaconda’s papers show the company or its associates in a bad light, and their sensitivity to controversy seemed heightened as the state entered the tumult of the Great Depression.”³⁸³ It was common, for example, to refuse to print news about workers killed in mining accidents.

Deaths of mine workers weren’t the only omissions. When western lumber companies were accused of price fixing in 1940, the *People’s Voice* broke the story, but several copper papers reported the story without divulging that Anaconda’s timber division was included in the list.³⁸⁴ And they were infamous for omitting controversial legislation from their legislative reports, such as legislation that would affect workers’ rights, industrial standards and tax laws.

While the copper papers routinely ignored or underplayed workers’ strikes, legislation regarding taxation and regulations, and other controversial issues, the *People’s Voice* prided itself on printing news that people would talk about. Fair compensation for workers injured or made ill on the job received a great deal of *Voice* coverage, as did striking workers in Butte.

An important point about Harry and Gretchen’s criticism of the company is that it was directed primarily at the company, not at individuals. While they did frequently name Anaconda’s big players, the *Voice* focused on bringing down the company, not

³⁸³ Ibid, p. 262.

³⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 282.

Anaconda's employees. Anaconda lobbyist Lloyd Crippen recalled in a 2006 interview that he didn't consider Harry and Gretchen to be his friends. However, they were cordial to one another when their paths crossed at the legislature, despite the fact that there were competing loyalties underlying their relationship.³⁸⁵

Similarly, Harry and Gretchen's son Leon Billings remembered a story that illustrated the distinction between criticizing the company rather than individuals. One day during a legislative session, Leon said, a critic of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company gave Harry photographs of an ACM lobbyist talking to a lawmaker during a vote, which was against the rules. The source wanted Harry to print the photographs so that the lobbyist would be exposed. Instead, Leon said, his father called the lobbyist and asked him to come over to the *Voice*. "Dad said, 'These were given to me and I'd like to give them to you.' (The lobbyist) was shocked," Leon said.³⁸⁶

In later years, the lobbyist expressed to Leon his appreciation for Harry's ethics. "Your dad and I were on opposite sides of the fence, but it was not personal," the lobbyist told Leon. Leon thought the distinction was important; Harry's fight was with the company, not the lobbyist.³⁸⁷

Anaconda sells its papers, and Gretchen welcomes the new owners

By the fall of 1958, the Anaconda Company began searching for a buyer for its newspapers. The company's chief officers were no longer Montanans, and the company

³⁸⁵ Author telephone interview with Lloyd Crippen, Nov. 10, 2006.

³⁸⁶ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

started to view the papers as a liability. The papers weren't worth the trouble financially, and company executives continued to question their value as political and public relations tools.³⁸⁸ In May of 1959, after months of negotiations, the news broke that the Lee Syndicate, a small Midwestern media chain, had purchased the Anaconda papers.³⁸⁹

The *People's Voice* was quick to welcome Lee to Montana, applauding their purchase as a possible "new era" in the state. In a June 5, 1959, column, Gretchen wrote that Lee's acquisition earlier that week of Anaconda's eight newspapers might spell a "historic change" in Montana's political and economic scene. "The importance is not going to lie in what philosophy the Lee owners set forth for their newspapers so much as whether they set one," she wrote.³⁹⁰ In other words, whether the papers had a liberal or conservative slant didn't matter to Gretchen. What did matter was that they function as a source of information, rather than omitting or underplaying stories as the Anaconda papers did.

Similarly, Anaconda's crime wasn't its philosophy but the fact that they didn't appear to have one, she argued. "Their state Capitol publication floated through crucial legislative sessions with editorial columns that kept the fact the state was grappling with tremendous issues a well-guarded secret." Gretchen hoped that Lee would "contribute to the local scene by taking a part in the solution of our many problems by creating discussion about them." If Lee did so, the sale could free citizens "from the paper bands that have bound us" and drop "the paper curtain that has shielded us." In turn, the Lee

³⁸⁸ Dennis L. Swibold, *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*, Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, p. 282.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 322. For an in-depth explanation of the sale, see chapter 11, "Emancipation."

³⁹⁰ "What do you think?" *The People's Voice*, June 5, 1959, p. 2.

papers could help Montana enjoy an “alert and argumentative public, in the interest of local democracy,” Gretchen wrote.³⁹¹

Turning the Anaconda Copper Mining Company’s papers around wouldn’t be an easy task, Gretchen predicted, but she wished Lee well in its endeavor. And, if it was willing to work for the state’s trust, Montana needed Lee, she concluded.³⁹²

A week after her column appeared, Don Anderson, who negotiated the sale for Lee, wrote to Gretchen after a friend sent him a clipping of her article. He thanked her for the “fairness” of her welcome but said the chain hadn’t had time yet to craft a news and editorial policy.³⁹³ However, Anderson expected that whatever policies the papers eventually agreed to, they would certainly take a stance. “In all of our other newspapers we have policies and we take stands, and I’ll be greatly disappointed if our management in Montana does not follow this program,” he wrote.

Anderson enjoyed open discussion on any subject, he continued, and said that “communities develop best when their newspapers indulge in lively controversy on public issues.” Predicting that getting to that point would take time, though, he hoped Montanans would be patient as Lee worked to get such a program under way. And even though he predicted that the Lee papers and the *People’s Voice* would often disagree, he expected that both would respect the other.³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Letter to Gretchen Billings from Don Anderson, June 11, 1959, University of Montana K. Ross Toole special collections, MSS 157, box 7, folder 10.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

Gretchen welcomed the controversy, she wrote in a reply to Anderson. “Our mutual respect for the constitutional provisions of the first amendment should give us a substantial common meeting ground,” she wrote. Getting the papers in the hands of newspaper people would be “a breath of freedom long needed in Montana.” But she warned Anderson that people in the state were impatient and watching closely for changes in the newspapers’ policies.³⁹⁵

Gretchen’s friends, though, questioned her acceptance of Lee’s takeover. As she explained to Anderson, when a local paper in Helena reprinted part of her column welcoming Lee to the scene, her phone rang that morning off the hook from friends wanting to know when she had sold out to the company press. “My dull wits left me without proper retort,” she recounted, but she reminded her friends that they no longer had a company press.

Conclusion

The *Voice* had been started, in part, as a response to Anaconda’s papers, but even though the copper press’s hold on Montana was broken, the *People’s Voice* published for ten years after they were gone. It was an indication that the *Voice* still served a role as a counterpoint to the conservatism of the Lee papers in their early years. As Gretchen and Don Anderson had predicted after Lee purchased the newspapers, Lee’s fairly conservative editorial philosophy differed greatly from that of the *People’s Voice*.

³⁹⁵ Letter to Don Anderson from Gretchen G. Billings, June 15, 1959, University of Montana, K. Ross Toole special collections, MSS 157, box 7, folder 10.

Harry and Gretchen were used to having an editorial philosophy that differed from their opponents, but disagreements with their allies were harder to deal with. When Harry editorially opposed the Vietnam War, his former supporters became his harshest critics. Harry had gone head to head with his supporters on other issues previously, and he characteristically refused to compromise on his Vietnam stance. This time, though, the consequences were much graver.

CHAPTER SEVEN: VIETNAM WAR MARKS A TURNING POINT AT THE *VOICE*

Many people who had traditionally been allies of the *People's Voice* couldn't swallow Harry's editorial opposition to the Vietnam War. It wasn't the first time the Billingses had gone head to head with their supporters, but, characteristically, Harry wouldn't compromise. The paper lost financial support from its former allies, a fact which, when coupled with failing health and exhaustion, precipitated Harry's leaving the *Voice* in December of 1968. Another editor replaced Harry, but the *Voice* went out of business in the summer of 1969. Disagreement over Vietnam illustrates not only the difficulties of running a paper without accepting commercial advertising, but it also provides insights into both Harry's and Gretchen's personalities. How they each responded to the falling out with old friends highlights differences between the two. Harry enjoyed the fight up to the end, but Gretchen disliked it and had a hard time forgiving people who turned their backs on the paper.

Background on Vietnam

The Vietnam War began in the late '50s, when Communist-led rebels began mounting terrorist attacks on South Vietnam.³⁹⁶ Those terrorist attacks intensified in the next several years, and, in 1960, the Northern Communist Party formed the National Liberation Front, with the hope of reunifying the country. In response, U.S. President John F. Kennedy began supplying military equipment and advisors in 1961. It wasn't

³⁹⁶ Encyclopedia Americana, International Edition, Grolier Incorporation, 2000, "Vietnam War."

until 1965, though, that the United States formally got involved, when it sent American forces to defend South Vietnam.

Matters escalated when North Vietnam launched an attack against two American ships in 1964. In response, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution allowing for an expanded war effort. Despite hopes for a limited, controlled war, the conflict would drag itself out for another decade, and in early 1965, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson ordered the first of many bombing missions over North Vietnam.

The Tet Offensive in 1968, in which the North attacked major South Vietnam cities, may have been a turning point in the conflict. By January of 1973, both sides signed a cease-fire agreement, and several months later most U.S. troops had withdrawn. However, the conflict persisted until April of 1975, when South Vietnam's capital fell to the Communists and the South surrendered.

But the war's effects were far-reaching. The war proved divisive in the United States, as the struggle between the editors of the *People's Voice* and the state's labor leadership during that time shows. While many in the U.S. opposed the fighting in Vietnam, many others agreed with the administration's determination to fight to halt the spread of Communism.

Harry's editorial opposition to the war

Over the years, Harry wrote many editorials on Vietnam, and he made his opposition to the war clear. He had numerous problems with the administration's stance,

and while he sometimes suggested alternatives, he didn't always offer them. Often, his editorials were merely disagreements with others' pro-war arguments.

At first, the United States could have withdrawn, he wrote, but as early as November 1965 he wrote that "irrespective of the immorality of our military actions in Viet Nam, withdrawal is out of the question."³⁹⁷ Instead of withdrawing at that point, he argued that the United States should involve the United Nations in the process.

"Although spokesmen for the Johnson Administration have paid lip service to the world body," he wrote, "we are in violation of the terms of the UN Charter to which we are signatory because of our unilateral intervention in Viet Nam."³⁹⁸

In general, Harry opposed involvement because he thought it was, as he wrote in 1966, "essentially a civil war."³⁹⁹ In the same 1966 article, he also speculated that the repercussions of the war could be catastrophic. "Continued escalation will force both the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to capitulate or instead, will result in Red China throwing millions into the fray against us – millions who can only be offset by all-out nuclear war," he wrote. And, although less than a year earlier he had written that withdrawal was not a good option, Harry argued then that the U.S. could withdraw and let the United Nations and non-aligned nations work for a cease-fire.⁴⁰⁰

Most importantly, though, Harry thought that the executive branch of government had too much authority and that the checks and balances system wasn't working. In his article, Harry quoted a columnist from popular *Newsweek* magazine to that effect, who

³⁹⁷ "Why don't we place Viet Nam matter before the UN?" *The People's Voice*, Nov. 12, 1965, p. 2.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ "All to the good," *The People's Voice*, Feb. 25, 1966, p. 2.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

argued that the division of powers needed reworking. “A government of checks and balances cannot act with integrity if the Executive Branch is free to determine the gravest matters of war and peace with no operative brake on its power other than the President’s own prudence or restraint,” he wrote⁴⁰¹

In another editorial, Harry questioned the validity of arguments for war in Vietnam. “What “freedom” are we supposedly defending when Hitler-loving Marshall Ky is attempting to stamp out with the bayonet and American-made bullets all dissent in that unhappy little country,” he asked. “What ‘national interest’ of ours is involved that we should risk an all-out land and nuclear war against China and much of the rest of Asia?”⁴⁰² And he wrote that the argument that the U.S. was attempting to defeat the “communist aggression” held little weight when there were other, closer Communist states on which the U.S. could focus.⁴⁰³

When Montana groups argued in favor of war, Harry challenged them. A 1966 editorial with the headline “Mass enlistment anticipated” reported that the Young Americans for Freedom group in Montana had publicly taken the position that the war should be fought and won, rather than settled by negotiations.⁴⁰⁴ If the government indeed operated by that philosophy, Harry contended that it would be necessary for members of the YAF to enlist and that they should recognize the consequences of their support for the war: “The presumption is that the next time [the YAF] wire the President

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² “The people are restive,” *The People’s Voice*, May 27, 1966, p. 2.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ “Mass enlistment anticipated,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 4, 1966, p. 4.

it will be to inform him how much they are enjoying helping bring about that “victory” by deeds rather than words, in the jungles and rice paddies of South Viet Nam.”⁴⁰⁵

Harry also devoted space to defending the media’s work in Vietnam. News organizations had been taking flak for inaccuracies that Harry attributed to unavoidable difficulties that confront journalists in tough situations. But the American people shouldn’t focus on the errors, he argued, but instead be grateful that journalists were in Vietnam, digging up information. “The American people should be most thankful that various major news gathering media have scores of correspondents on the spot in Viet Nam,” he wrote.⁴⁰⁶ If that weren’t the case, he argued, citizens would hear only the facts that the government decided to release, which alone set democracies apart from other governments. While “totalitarian countries, whether fascist, communist, or home-grown type of dictatorship,” were spoon-fed information, he wrote, democracies needed reporters to keep a watch on the government.⁴⁰⁷ Instead of criticizing the media, Harry concluded that citizens should be holding the administration more accountable about the validity of the war itself. “In view of the Johnson administration’s continued lack of candor in explaining why it is necessary to send hundreds of thousands of Americans to far off Southeast Asia; of the recurring deliberate attempts to mislead and deceive the American people as to the war’s merits and battlefield successes, the American people should be most thankful that various major news gathering media have scores of

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ “Viet Nam war reporting,” *The People’s Voice*, June 10, 1966, p. 2.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

correspondents on the spot in Viet Nam,” he wrote. “Otherwise we’d know only what the Administration found to its advantage to publicise.”⁴⁰⁸

In other articles, Harry frequently argued that the war simply wasn’t working. “[F]or all our expenditure of young lives and national treasure, the war appears no nearer a military victory now,” he argued in 1968.⁴⁰⁹ With a mounting concern that the administration would resort to nuclear warfare, Harry again questioned the very motives for going to war. Rather than attacking Communism, he argued, the “suspicion grows that we are more concerned with imperialistic aggrandizement.”⁴¹⁰ Harry agreed with a proposed policy that would require U.S. forces to immediately cease bombing of North Vietnam and gradually withdraw U.S. troops from South Vietnam.⁴¹¹

The backlash to Harry’s Vietnam editorials

But the war in Vietnam was as divisive in Montana as it was nationally. Many people and organizations that had financially supported the *People’s Voice* over the years took Harry to task for his editorial opposition to Vietnam.

A letter to the editor of the *Voice* from reader Leon Anderson, of Billings, took issue with Harry’s condemning of the President and administration for the way the war

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ “Alternatives to Viet War need discussion, implementation,” *The People’s Voice*, March 1, 1968, p. 2.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

was being handled, and argued that “the Administration was sincere and in possession of better facts than we are.”⁴¹²

Anderson made a point of saying that he liked the *People’s Voice* and the quality of the paper’s reporting, and further that he did “not like war with any of its complications, any more than anyone else.”⁴¹³ Nevertheless, he didn’t agree with Harry’s editorial opposition and thought the *Voice* should lighten up.

Anderson’s letter was an example of how the *Voice*’s editorial stance on Vietnam was being received. Long-time readers who otherwise liked the *Voice* were finding it impossible to support Harry’s stance.

And the *Voice* faced grave consequences because of that disagreement.

“Vietnam was what finally destroyed us,” Harry recalled in a 1986 interview published in *The Native Home of Hope*. “The damage we took during the Vietnam War made the McCarthy era look like a Sunday School picnic,” Gretchen added in the same interview.⁴¹⁴

While not all Montanans supported the war, opposing it was difficult for a labor paper, Harry explained, since the national AFL-CIO strongly supported it. In addition, being a voice of dissent during a war was frequently seen as being unpatriotic, he said. “You had to stand by your country in times of stress: that old nonsense about ‘My country, right or wrong,’ which is nothing but a bunch of words like ‘Montana water for

⁴¹² O. Leon Anderson, “Can’t go along with PV on Viet Nam War,” *The People’s Voice*, Feb. 25, 1966, p. 3.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck, and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 145.

Montana people,’” Harry explained. “But, as more people’s kids got killed – and they had to find some meaning in it – they turned against us.”⁴¹⁵

Gretchen explained how *Voice* supporters tried to persuade Harry to change his editorials. “They’d troop through the office and sit there and argue with him,” she said.⁴¹⁶

Harry valued the editorial independence he had at the *Voice*, and he characteristically refused to change his stance. Of course, those who disagreed with him tried in many different ways to try to convince him he was wrong. When arguing didn’t work, Gretchen said, people would try to reason with Harry that he was going to hurt Senator Lee Metcalf’s re-election chances, since Metcalf was pro-war. The argument fell on deaf ears, Gretchen said. “Lee Metcalf was a very dear friend of ours and we certainly wanted him to remain in the United States Senate, but it wouldn’t have made any difference to Harry – he disagreed with Lee, and said so.”⁴¹⁷

Attempts to get Harry to stay silent on the matter also failed, and, finally, people tried to make their voices heard by withholding their financial contributions. Many of those people who stopped giving money were members of the Democratic Party and the labor movement, both groups that traditionally had been important supporters of the paper.

The withdrawal of support was devastating to the paper from a financial standpoint. With individuals withholding their annual contributions and labor groups

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, p. 147.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, p. 146.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

dropping group subscriptions, the cumulative effect was enormous. “We could cope with attacks on us from the traditional enemies of Montana – Anaconda, the Farm Bureau, the American Legion, that bunch – but we could not cope financially, with our own former close allies dropping us,” Harry said.⁴¹⁸

It wasn’t the first time Harry’s editorial stances had turned his friends against him, but most of those disagreements were of short duration. During a 1968 primary election for U.S. House Representative from the First District, AFL-CIO Executive Secretary Jim Murry and others in labor disagreed with Harry over Harry’s endorsement of Harriet Miller, who was retiring as Superintendent of Public Instruction. The state AFL-CIO wanted Harry to support instead her opponent, incumbent Congressman Arnold Olsen.

Harry remembered Murry and several other people, who normally supported the *Voice*, bursting into his office, demanding that he give his “editorial blessing” to Olsen, which he “couldn’t in good conscience do in view of Harriet also having a fine record.”⁴¹⁹

His refusal to change his stance angered Murry, who said he believed that Harry was going to write an editorial in support of Miller.⁴²⁰ Furious, he tried to break into the *Voice* through a window so that he could take the papers before they could be distributed.⁴²¹ When that didn’t work – “my ass was too big!” he laughingly recalled – he and his buddy considered other ways of keeping Harry from distributing an editorial endorsement they didn’t agree with. Murry decided the best option was simply to march

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Harry L. Billings, unpublished manuscript, 1988, p. 42.

⁴²⁰ Author interview with Jim Murry, Clancy, Mont., Feb. 22, 2006.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

into the office the next morning and demand to see the editorial.⁴²² If he didn't like what was written, he planned to take all the papers before they could be distributed.

The next morning, Murry recalled, he put his plan into action and went into the *Voice* office, demanding to see the paper. When he saw the editorial he felt awful, he said. Rather than endorsing any political candidate, the piece discussed the need for unity within the labor and union organizations.

Harry argued in that editorial that progressive efforts wouldn't be successful in the election unless people worked together. "There's an extremely big job to be done in November," he wrote. "It won't be successful unless there is a unity between labor, farmer and liberal similar to that which prevailed in the successful re-election effort on behalf of Lee Metcalf in 1966. We're willing. How about you?"⁴²³

Indeed, controversy was a staple of the *Voice*, and Harry and Gretchen usually welcomed it. "We were intentionally contentious," Gretchen explained. "Because unless there's controversy, people aren't thinking."⁴²⁴ Part of the media's job, they thought, was to challenge other ideas, but sometimes it threatened the paper's viability. "I'd point out that if they did not continue to support the publication, the time would come when it would be gone and they would have no voice in anything," Gretchen said.⁴²⁵

For years, the occasional disagreements between the *Voice*'s editors and their supporters may have been difficult, but the lack of support wasn't as devastating as it was

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ "Next Wednesday...join hands!" *The People's Voice*, May 31, 1968, p. 4.

⁴²⁴ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck, and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 149.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

during Vietnam. When supporters “yelled for Harry’s hide,” during the war and he still wouldn’t change his mind, Gretchen explained, “they just took away the money.”⁴²⁶ And whether they intended their lack of contributions to cause the paper long-term harm, it did. “You want to say, ‘Where was your check when we needed it?’” Harry added.⁴²⁷

The *People’s Voice* was years ahead of public opinion on Vietnam, and the anti-war movement reached critical mass in the early ‘70s. Reflecting the change in sentiment, Montana labor leader Jim Murry said years later that he regretted how the disagreement played out. Montana AFL-CIO leaders’ support of the Vietnam War wasn’t wholehearted, Murry said in a 2006 interview. He explained that the national AFL-CIO set policy on national issues, and people like Murry, who had “lackadaisically” supported the war, simply followed them. “Many people in Montana had mixed emotions” about Vietnam, Murry said. “The issue bothered me a great deal, but it really bothered me what it was doing to Harry and Gretchen.”⁴²⁸

While many labor leaders in Montana did seriously disagree with Harry’s stance, Murry thought that, in retrospect, Harry was right to oppose Vietnam. “Harry and Gretchen were right about the war,” Murry said. “They were absolutely right, and they had the courage to speak out about it.”⁴²⁹

Paper’s hand-to-mouth existence

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Author interview with Jim Murry, Clancy, Mont., Feb. 22, 2006.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

Labor's lack of support at the time took its toll, though, because lack of money was a continual problem at the *People's Voice*. The paper's restrictions on corporate and individual advertising made contributions from its supporters crucial.

Gretchen and Harry felt strongly that the policy against commercial advertising was essential to the paper's editorial integrity. "We didn't accept commercial advertising because the corporations – Anaconda, Montana Power – could control too many weekly papers in Montana by buying a \$25-a-month ad," Gretchen explained.⁴³⁰ "Twenty-five dollars a month would buy the soul of an editor."

In fact, Gretchen even wished the paper's policy would go a step further and prohibit political advertising, too. "You know, some politician would put a tiny ad in *The Voice* and assume that he had bought control of the editorial policy," she said. "Or worse still, some of the readers would conclude that we were supporting that politician."⁴³¹

Over the years, then, the *Voice* got by on subscription sales, printing jobs for union publications, a few advertisements, and donations from individuals and groups. To get contributions, Gretchen often traveled the state, soliciting donations, and union leaders often wrote to the members of their unions, asking that they consider sending money to the *Voice*. An undated letter from Ralph F. Cook, who served as an officer in the Montana Farmers Union, was an example of the urging union members often received. "The time has come again to rush to the aid of *The People's Voice*," Cook wrote. "Unless sufficient funds come in by early spring, *The Voice* will have to suspend

⁴³⁰ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck, and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 146.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

publication... This would be a grave loss to everyone interested in a free press and liberty and democracy in Montana.”⁴³²

Cook made several important points in the letter. The value of the *Voice* was that it was free of the interests of the Farmers Union or labor groups, he wrote, but because of that freedom, the *Voice* had to make up for a lack of funding.⁴³³ And whether everyone agreed with everything the *Voice* published wasn't important, he argued. What was important was that the *Voice* offered “vital information” that wasn't available elsewhere.⁴³⁴

“If you agree that we must keep The People's Voice alive in Montana, why don't you urge as many cash contributions as possible from your friends and neighbors?” Cook wrote. “It would be tragic to lose this valuable and vital newspaper.”⁴³⁵

Letters like Cook's helped for many years, but the impasse over Vietnam was too much. When many of the individual and group contributions dried up due to disagreements over the Vietnam War, it hit the paper hard.

Low salaries and late paychecks weren't uncommon to Harry and Gretchen, and so when funding tightened during the war they still fought to make it work. “We hung on quite awhile after the money started going,” Gretchen said. Eventually, though, it took its toll.

⁴³² Letter from Ralph F. Cook to Co-workers, “The People's Voice Needs Your Help!” undated, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 1, folder 21.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

Gretchen's retirement

In its January 19, 1968, issue, the *People's Voice* announced Gretchen's retirement from her position as co-editor, attributing her decision to "overwork and a multiplicity of pressures," that had resulted in three hospitalizations over several years.⁴³⁶ "Two rounds of major back surgery made it imperative that she greatly restrict her activities for at least the foreseeable future," the article concluded.⁴³⁷ Harry's accompanying editorial made it clear that staying at the job would jeopardize Gretchen's health. "Much as we both regret it, there is no other avenue open if Gretchen is to enjoy a modicum of good health in the years ahead," Harry wrote.⁴³⁸

But a lingering frustration over a lack of funding and support from the *Voice's* allies played a part, as well.

For Gretchen, the controversy and eventual falling out over Vietnam had been emotionally draining. "All the rapport I'd spent years building up just disappeared," she said. "I got terribly tired."⁴³⁹ She also had to have surgery for a crushed disk, which her doctor attributed to stress. Health problems eventually forced her to stop traveling around the state to raise funds, which also contributed to the paper's decline in revenue.

Years after the *Voice* folded, Harry and Gretchen said that several people in the AFL-CIO told them that, in retrospect, they would have taken a different stance on the

⁴³⁶ "Gretchen leaves the Voice," *The People's Voice*, Jan. 19, 1968, p. 1.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1, 4.

⁴³⁸ "Strictly personal," *The People's Voice*, Jan. 19, 1968, p. 4.

⁴³⁹ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck, and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 146.

Vietnam War.⁴⁴⁰ For Gretchen, such comments made her feel worse. “I got very bitter because I was so exhausted and my health had turned sour,” she said. “We would go to gatherings in the state once in a while, and I’d find that I just didn’t want to go back, because everybody would come around and tell us how dreadfully they missed the *Voice* and how the state needed another *Voice* and how people had tried to get other publications going and how right we were about the war. To me that’s no comfort.”⁴⁴¹

Exhaustion and bitterness took their toll. “When I finally quit, it was purely and simply because I had become so bitter,” Gretchen said in 1986. “I was suffering physically, and I couldn’t allow myself to become a permanently embittered woman.”⁴⁴²

While her health rebounded, the bitterness lingered. “It took me longer to get over the psychological problem – the sense of futility about it all – than to get over the physical damage.”⁴⁴³

Even though she had retired from the *Voice*, on occasion Gretchen continued to pen her popular “What Do You Think?” column for the paper. She also went on to become the secretary for a carpenter’s union and later served as executive director of the Montana Rural Electric Cooperatives Association until her retirement in 1974. She was diagnosed with lung cancer and died on Feb. 23, 1999, at the age of 84.

Harry’s retirement

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 147.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

Montana unions continued to support the war in Vietnam, and eventually the AFL-CIO passed a resolution demanding a say in the editorial policy of the *Voice*. The *Voice* reported on that resolution in August of 1968, writing that the AFL-CIO said that the *People's Voice* covered news in a way that was inconsistent with the Montana labor movement.⁴⁴⁴ The resolution stated that this apparent inconsistency was new; for a number of years, the *Voice* “did reflect the cause and purposes that were in the best interest of its subscribers.”⁴⁴⁵ To take action, the resolution called for a meeting of labor representatives, the editor of the *Voice* and its board of directors.

Harry immediately went on the offensive. In a lengthy editorial published in that same issue, he wrote that, first of all, the matter was being handled poorly. Having never been approached about the resolution, he wrote, the editor was being left in the dark. “Because these fearless individuals have not seen fit to speak to the Editor personally and have preferred to make a public issue of the matter we have no recourse except to speculate about it in the same manner, publicly,” he wrote.⁴⁴⁶

He also accused labor leadership of “seeking to publicly castigate the Editor in a brazen attempt to bring about some changes in the policy of the paper.”⁴⁴⁷ Harry speculated about several things that might have been “bugging” leaders of the AFL-CIO, including Harry’s Vietnam stance and the *Voice*’s coverage of a meeting several months earlier in which the state AFL-CIO leadership was accused of “bossism.”⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁴ “AFL-CIO is critical of labor news coverage by VOICE,” *The People's Voice*, Aug. 23, 1968, p. 1.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ “What’s ‘bugging’ labor’s leadership?” *The People's Voice*, Aug. 23, 1968, p. 2.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Harry defended the *Voice*'s positions as being, in fact, friendly to labor's interests. "Labor leadership and other supporters might like to check back issues of the VOICE before making a decision about the treatment the VOICE has given labor and its leadership – not necessarily on the long term (which has been significant) but the immediate past, to judge the validity of the more emotional charges being bandied around," he argued.⁴⁴⁹

Finally, if the labor community withdrew its support of the *Voice*, Harry warned, the consequences would be grave. "The VOICE has received a percentage of its support from the labor segment," he wrote. While the support was not enough to assure the paper's survival, its withdrawal would nevertheless assure the *Voice*'s demise.

With the paper in serious financial straits, Harry announced his retirement in the next issue. He had been considering resigning for several months, he wrote, and had reached a decision based on several factors.⁴⁵⁰ He wrote that the financial strain on himself and Gretchen, who were owed several thousand dollars in back salary and who had been forced to take out several loans, had reached a breaking point. Further, the "pressures and antagonisms" threatened to make an already dire financial situation at the *Voice* even more impossible. If more groups and individuals decided to withhold money, he wrote, there could be no hope of survival.⁴⁵¹

In his resignation letter to the Educational Co-op's Board of Directors, Harry wrote that the strains of the position had "resulted in wearing down my stamina to the

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ "It is official and irrevocable," *The People's Voice*, Aug. 30, 1968, p. 2.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

point where, if allowed to continue, I face the grave possibility of a physical breakdown.”⁴⁵²

Harry’s resignation involved more than just financial considerations and poor health, though. To Harry, who put a high value on the *Voice*’s editorial integrity, censorship was unacceptable. Unwilling to compromise his freedom as an editor – a freedom that he valued above all else – his decision must have been clear.

Disagreements with labor leadership had been taking a toll, too. Jerry Holloron, who covered the Montana legislature at the end of the ’60s and became friends with the Billingses, remembered that the *Voice*’s refusal to support labor’s favored candidate in the 1968 primary had been particularly rough on their relationship. “Although the Vietnam War was certainly a factor, the Arnold Olsen – Harriett Miller primary was a dividing point between the Billingses and organized labor,” Holloron said.⁴⁵³ The situation made Harry and Gretchen and labor leaders like Jim Murry uncomfortable, Holloron said. “It was a tough thing, because Arnold Olsen had been a great friend of labor, and then the Billingses, partly because of the war, were very much in favor of Harriett Miller.”⁴⁵⁴

In addition to these difficulties, Harry also had the *Voice*’s best interests in mind. Given labor’s current displeasure with his opinions, Harry accurately assessed that resigning might keep the publication alive longer than if he remained in the editor’s chair.

⁴⁵² Letter from Harry L. Billings to the Board of Directors of the Educational Co-operative Publishing Company, undated, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 2, folder 34.

⁴⁵³ Author telephone interview with Jerry Holloron, Nov. 11, 2006.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

“I would hope that my resignation will result in immediate steps to assure the Board the wherewithal to continue publication of THE VOICE,” he wrote.⁴⁵⁵ “I appeal to all those groups and individuals who believe there is a place and a need for a publication such as THE VOICE to offer their help immediately,” he concluded.⁴⁵⁶

Interestingly, after his announcement, Harry ended up writing many letters in which he again claimed that the decision to resign had been in the works before the AFL-CIO resolution had passed. In actuality, he asserted, the resolution had little influence on his decision.

“The Labor ‘uprising’ alluded to in yours and various other comments bore only very indirectly on my decision ... to some degree on the timing,” Harry wrote in a Sept. 2, 1968, letter. “I’ve been mulling [my resignation] for months ... too damned much work,” he wrote.⁴⁵⁷

In another note to the editor of Livingston’s *Park County News*, Fred Martin, Harry reiterated that the AFL-CIO resolution played only a small role. “Everyone is jumping to the conclusion that the feud with a few power-bent labor officials was a deciding factor of major import,” he wrote. “Only indirectly, as I told you on the phone ... [the] decision was in making for some months. Neither our physical or financial health is such to enable us to continue the losing battle against the bank balance.”⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ “It is official and irrevocable,” *The People’s Voice*, Aug. 30, 1968, p. 2.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Letter from Harry L. Billings to Mel (last name unknown), Sept. 2, 1968, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 2, folder 34.

⁴⁵⁸ Letter from Harry L. Billings to Fred Martin, September 2, 1968, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 2, folder 34.

Certainly, leaving the *Voice* must have crossed Harry's mind when financial support dwindled and caused more late paychecks, but the timing of his resignation with the AFL-CIO resolution make his assertion that it played only an indirect role hard to believe.

Even though Harry planned that his resignation would take effect on October 1, 1968, he stayed on at the *Voice* for several months until his replacement was found. By early December of 1968, that replacement had been hired, and Harry wrote his last editorial, turning the task of launching controversial ideas and promoting, criticizing and praising ideas over to Ben Hansen.⁴⁵⁹

Hansen, freshly graduated from the School of Journalism in Missoula, became the third editor of the *People's Voice*, but his tenure was much briefer than Harry's and Cap Bruce's. A statement from the Educational Co-op Publishing Company board of directors announced, in a note dated August 11, 1969, that Hansen resigned his position as editor of the *Voice*, citing a new professional opportunity.

Because of his resignation, the board suspended publication of the *People's Voice* "until a new editor with the right qualifications can be obtained." But they told the *Voice's* readers that the suspension would be short. "We believe the suspension will be of short duration," they wrote.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁹ "Volume 30 and '30'" *The People's Voice*, Dec. 6, 1968, p. 2.

⁴⁶⁰ "Voice suspends publication," *The People's Voice*, Aug. 22, 1969, p. 1.

The suspension turned permanent, though, and the last issue of the *People's Voice* ran on August 22, 1969, with articles about tax justice and mental health being published to the end.⁴⁶¹

Harry, meanwhile, had taken a state job working for the Liquor Control Board. He went on to successfully coordinate the opposition to the sales tax that appeared on the ballot in 1971, and voters rejected the tax by a margin of 70 percent to 30 percent. Apparently feeling no long-lasting anger over their disagreement over the Vietnam War, Harry also later worked for the state AFL-CIO for several years as a researcher and writer before retiring to Sanders County in 1974.

Harry died of a heart attack in April of 1990, at the age of 77.

Conclusion

When Gretchen left the *Voice* in 1967, she was given a silver platter that said “Tell the Truth and Run.”⁴⁶²

Though its intentions likely were lighthearted, the platter was, in part, a fitting tribute. Harry and Gretchen both told the truth as they saw it, but they didn't run when their stances created a backlash. In fact, Harry even liked the confrontations. “We had twenty-three years of almost steady hell-raising – and I guess maybe I got tired, but I sure enjoyed it,” he said in a 1986 interview.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶¹ *The People's Voice*, Aug. 22, 1969.

⁴⁶² See “Comforting the Afflicted,” by Gretchen G. Billings in the *Montana Journalism Review* 20 (1977): p. 5-6.

⁴⁶³ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck, and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 149.

Despite the disagreements over the years, supporters met the news of both Gretchen's and Harry's retirements with sadness. When the news of Harry's retirement came out, his mailbox was flooded with notes from *Voice* subscribers and others, who expressed their regret over his retirement.

Mike Mansfield, who was then the majority leader of the U.S. Senate, wrote that he had always admired the courage, candor and integrity of both Harry and Gretchen. "I know that many times you are like voices crying in the wilderness, but you have always stuck to your guns, following the dictates of your conscience and you represent, in my opinion, journalism at its best," Mansfield wrote. He continued: "I have not always agreed with you and you have not always agreed with me, but I do want you to know that you have always had my deep respect and admiration and I appreciate your friendship and understanding over the years."⁴⁶⁴

Several newspapers also printed editorials wishing Harry well and lamenting his resignation. An editorial in the *Helena Independent Record* declared that Harry's resignation marked the end of an era in Montana journalism. "If any man can end a career with the satisfaction of accomplishment it is Harry Billings," the editorial asserted.⁴⁶⁵ The People's Voice under Harry's direction was a "beacon" during many years when Montana's daily press refused to inflame controversy, the editorial continued. And while the *Helena Independent Record* often disagreed with Harry's stances, the paper never doubted his integrity. "We have never found cause to question his integrity,

⁴⁶⁴ Letter from Mike Mansfield to Mr. and Mrs. Harry Billings, September 7, 1968, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 13, folder 22.

⁴⁶⁵ "A friendly adversary," *Helena Independent Record*, Aug. 27, 1968.

his motives or his courage,” the editorial writer declared, adding that the paper wished Harry and Gretchen a happy retirement.

Fred Martin of Livingston’s *Park County News* wrote an editorial complimenting Harry and Gretchen’s scruples and hard work, too. “The People’s Voice was the foe of tyranny, chicanery and special privilege, as Harry Billings interpreted it. It was welcomed because it often put the other side on the coin of reality and made one think,” Martin wrote. “True, it fought for the viewpoint of the farmer, the labor and the underprivileged, but it did so under the most trying circumstances.”⁴⁶⁶

Martin accurately concluded that Montana journalism would not be the same without Harry and Gretchen. But how did the version of truth that the Billingses preached in the *People’s Voice* make a difference to the state?

⁴⁶⁶ “Retirement of Harry Billings as People’s Voice of Helena editor regretted by friends,” *The Park County News*, Livingston, Mont., August 29, 1968, MSU-Bozeman, Merrill G. Burlingame special collections, number 2095, box 6, folder 2.

CHAPTER EIGHT: HARRY AND GRETCHEN'S LEGACY

Harry and Gretchen Billings each devoted about 20 years of their lives to the *People's Voice*, and through their work, they influenced both the journalistic and political climate in the state. They brought to maturity a newspaper whose sole purpose was to provide an alternative to daily papers that suppressed and censored the news, and they helped expose the Anaconda Company as the owners of those major dailies. In the process, they helped create a hub that drew people of progressive thought together, many of whom were farmers and laborers.

As firm believers in open government and the journalist's watchdog role, they published voting records of state legislators at a time when those records weren't available publicly. Further, their hard-hitting articles drew attention to and created dialogue about issues. Everyone read the *Voice*, one conservative lobbyist recalled, whether or not they agreed with it.⁴⁶⁷

Harry and Gretchen's unwavering commitment to editorial independence characterized their years at the paper. That characteristic, as well as their honesty and integrity, helped persuade young people like future U.S. Congressman Pat Williams to participate in government. At a time when the handful of female journalists in Montana wrote mostly gossip columns and community news, Gretchen led the way for other women as a hard-hitting statehouse reporter.

⁴⁶⁷ Author telephone interview with Jerome Anderson, Nov. 10, 2006.

Despite intense battles with both their enemies and their allies, Harry and Gretchen remained committed to a number of challenging causes, including the protection and advancement of civil liberties, more rigorous environmental standards, public ownership of utilities, more money for education, a progressive tax system based on an individual's ability to pay, compensation for workers injured or made ill on the job, and better mental health care services.

Their work was not in vain. Over the years, Harry and Gretchen's sustained efforts for progressive causes contributed to a new atmosphere in the state, and one that was friendly to the passage of new constitution. The Constitution, written at the 1972 Constitutional Convention and passed just three years after the *Voice* folded, was recognized at the time as one of the most progressive state constitutions in the country. Further, several of the issues that Harry and Gretchen fought for are recognized in the new Constitution, an indication that the work they did helped change Montana.

Antithesis of ACM-owned newspapers

The *People's Voice* was born of outrage. The *Voice's* founders, who included U.S. Senator James Murray, future U.S. Senator Lee Metcalf, and representatives from farm and labor groups, thought that Montana's daily papers, most of which the Anaconda Copper Mining Company owned, did a dismal job of covering the news. As former Montana Gov. Ted Schwinden recalled in a 2006 interview, the *People's Voice* served as a counterpoint to those papers. "Harry and Gretchen filled a void that was created by a lack of meaningful news in the Anaconda papers," he said. While the *Great Falls*

Tribune was independent of the company press, Schwinden noted, “it wasn’t as aggressive as Harry and Gretchen were.”⁴⁶⁸

The importance of the *Voice*’s criticism of the Anaconda papers cannot be overstated. Twenty years after the *Voice*’s inception as a protest against the papers, Anaconda sold its interests to Lee Enterprises. Anaconda’s attempts to get into broadcasting -- an action that Harry and Gretchen vigorously protested – had already been denied, and while many factors played into the decline of Anaconda’s media, the *People’s Voice* was the most vocal opposition.

Gordon Bennett, a Montana district judge and friend of the Billingses, thought that Harry and Gretchen played an important role in Montana by keeping the public informed. “They did a marvelous job filling in the details of the important picture in Montana,” he said in a 2006 interview. “If you wanted to know what was going on in Montana, it was far more useful to read the *People’s Voice* than to read all of the Anaconda newspapers put together.”⁴⁶⁹

Charles S. Johnson, a journalist who has worked for the *Great Falls Tribune* and for Lee Enterprises, concurred. “They were there when other people weren’t,” he said, noting that even the independent *Great Falls Tribune* wasn’t tackling a lot of the issues. The *Voice* “had enormous impact, much beyond its circulation,” he said.⁴⁷⁰

When Anaconda sold its papers, many journalists had good reason to favor the sale. “I thought when Lee bought those papers it was the greatest thing to happen in

⁴⁶⁸ Author telephone interview with Ted Schwinden, March 24, 2006.

⁴⁶⁹ Author telephone interview with Gordon Bennett, Nov. 10, 2006.

⁴⁷⁰ Author telephone interview with Charles S. Johnson, Nov. 10, 2006.

Montana,” said George Remington, who is a retired *Billings Gazette* and *Helena Independent Record* publisher and who previously headed the Lee State Bureau. Jerry Holloron, who worked as a journalist in Helena and Missoula for Lee Enterprises and later taught at the University of Montana’s School of Journalism, recalled in an interview that after Anaconda sold its papers, journalists who had worked for them slowly learned how to be more aggressive. “In the early 60s, there was very little analysis done in reporting. The Anaconda mentality kind of carried over,” Holloron said. “In many ways, reporters...just passed information on, rather uncritically. That changed in the mid-60s. We became much more aggressive about challenging what we heard.”⁴⁷¹ But contrary to the norm, never did Harry and Gretchen just pass information on uncritically, Holloron said. Instead, they represented a point of view and made that viewpoint clear to their readers. “Harry and Gretchen were damn good journalists, and particularly during the years of the Anaconda papers, (good journalism) was really needed in that time.”⁴⁷²

The *Voice* as hub

Throughout its thirty-year existence, the *Voice* played an important role in unifying many progressive groups and individuals in Montana. As Harry and Gretchen’s son Leon said in a 2006 interview, the *Voice* “provided a political class of people with a centrifuge where they could get together and share ideas and share what was going

⁴⁷¹ Author telephone interview with Jerry Holloron, Nov. 11, 2006.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

on.”⁴⁷³ Harry himself identified the role of drawing farmers, laborers, educators and other progressives together as one of the *Voice*’s strengths. “The *Voice* brought a lot of these so-called extremists together and helped them understand each other,” he said in a 1986 interview.⁴⁷⁴

Members of the farmer-labor coalition in Montana wielded some political influence, and its members were people who seriously pondered ideas and philosophies. “They were capable of going into great informed detail,” Gordon Bennett said. “It was this sort of intellectual tradition on the left that Harry and Gretchen articulated and represented very, very well.”⁴⁷⁵

Labor groups also learned from the *People’s Voice*. Jim Murry, a long-time leader of Montana’s AFL-CIO, remembered the *Voice* as an important part of his upbringing. His family would often discuss news they read in the paper at dinner, he said, and he and his father worked to make the *Voice* available to other people in their community. They would collect money from the local Democratic club, he said, and then buy subscriptions of the *Voice* and distribute it to local businesses. “We would put it in barbershops, beauty shops, doctor’s offices – anywhere they would let us,” Murry recalled.⁴⁷⁶

When it wasn’t clear what issues should be supported or opposed, it was the *Voice* that often provided a focus for the progressive community, Murry continued. “The

⁴⁷³ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

⁴⁷⁴ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 149.

⁴⁷⁵ Author telephone interview with Gordon Bennett, Nov. 10, 2006.

⁴⁷⁶ Author interview with Jim Murry, Clancy, Mont., Feb. 22, 2006.

People's Voice helped us focus on fact,” he said. Harry and Gretchen reminded their readers about basic things, pointing out that kids shouldn't go hungry and mothers shouldn't have to raise their children in poverty, he said. “The *People's Voice* was very instrumental in helping us focus on those issues. When we lost the *People's Voice* we lost the organ that gave us a report on what was going on in the community,” he concluded.

In addition to helping focus attention, the work Harry and Gretchen did also helped create discussion about issues, which strengthened the political left in Montana. “They seeded the intellectual fires,” their son Mike Billings said. “People grew from reading and hearing someone speak out on issues. They fanned the flames.” Leon Billings agreed. “They added a piece to the intellectual and political climate in Montana that didn't exist, and, as a result, they changed the climate,” he said.⁴⁷⁷

Voting Bible

At a time when the Montana Legislature's voting records weren't generally made public, the *People's Voice* was committed to informing its readers how their senators and representatives voted. When votes were taken in the legislature before the 1972 Constitutional Convention, a board in the House and Senate floors lit up to indicate how each legislator voted. However, the board was only briefly illuminated, so that it would have been impossible for one person to see how everyone voted. During important votes, Harry, Gretchen, and people from the labor groups would divide the board and each

⁴⁷⁷ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

record a number of legislators' votes, so that together they would have a complete tally.⁴⁷⁸ The work was not only a practical way of getting information for the *Voice's* readers, but also a symbol of how the progressive movement became stronger when it worked together.

Many people referred to the *Voice's* booklet of legislators' voting records as a voting Bible. And Democrats and Republicans alike were aware when it came out. "They always caused a big flap ... the voting booklets were infamous," recalled John Kuglin, who had been a reporter for the *Great Falls Tribune* before he became head of the Associated Press in Montana. "People waited for them to come out."⁴⁷⁹

Similarly, Leon Billings remembered that his parents' commitment to publishing voting records would infuriate many legislators, particularly those who courted the farmer-labor votes but who might have voted in a way that would anger that coalition. Making that knowledge public was a fundamental shift in state politics, Leon argued. "Here was a time when political information was not available, and a paper whose goal was to make it available," he said. "Harry changed how Montana did business."

Pat Williams, a Democrat who represented Montana in the U.S. House from 1979 to 1997, agreed that the voting records were one way that the *Voice* impacted politics in Montana. Democratic legislators were sometimes even more infuriated by the voting booklets than Republicans were, he remembered. "It made (Democrats) madder than hell," Williams said. "My memories of Butte Democratic legislators who were

⁴⁷⁸ Author interview with Jim Murry, Clancy, Mont., Feb. 22, 2006.

⁴⁷⁹ Author telephone interview with John Kuglin, Nov. 11, 2006.

embarrassed by Harry's voting booklet is clear – they'd say, 'Goddamn Harry Billings!'"⁴⁸⁰

While it might have made people angry, the *Voice's* voting records played a crucial role in the democratic process. Holding politicians accountable was one of the checks on government, Williams said. "Nothing's better for political honesty than a committed watchdog," he said. "Harry put a magnifying glass on individual politicians and corporate executives. He exposed what they were doing in a way that changed Montana."

Conservatives read the *Voice*, too, but many thought it didn't have an impact

While Democrats were more likely to agree with the *People's Voice* than were Republicans, people from all along the political spectrum read the paper. Jerome Anderson, a conservative Republican who represented Billings in the state legislature and worked as a lobbyist, recalled that everyone read the *Voice*. Conservative legislators often used it as a tool to learn about their opponents' views, he explained. "You want to know what's going on on all sides of the fence and what the attitudes of people are," Anderson said.⁴⁸¹ Gordon Bennett agreed. "Everyone paid attention to the *People's Voice*, but in different ways," he said. "The Republicans that were involved in

⁴⁸⁰ Author interview with Pat Williams, Missoula, Mont., March 13, 2006.

⁴⁸¹ Author telephone interview with Jerome Anderson, Nov. 10, 2006.

government any way, or politics, paid attention to the *People's Voice* because it was the other side.”⁴⁸²

But even though some conservatives said they read it, they insisted it didn't influence the positions they took. Former Montana Governor Tim Babcock, who said he occasionally read the *Voice* but didn't respond to accusations that were directed at him, dismissed Harry and Gretchen's work as having only a minimal effect, and one that was limited to Democrats. “I don't think they had any stature, really, beyond their base,” he said, calling Harry and Gretchen “wild” and citing the *Voice's* small circulation numbers.⁴⁸³

Lloyd Crippen, a lobbyist for the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, characterized the *People's Voice* as a newspaper that lobbyists and company executives read mostly for its entertainment value. “Yeah, we used to read it, but it didn't make us angry,” he said. “We got a big kick out of it.” But the company occasionally resented articles in the paper that were “very slanted,” Crippen said.

On the whole, though, Crippen said that being named in the paper meant that you were probably doing a good job for the company. “When you made (Harry and Gretchen's) paper, when you were recognized in their paper, you kind of reached your goal,” he said.⁴⁸⁴ And just as Republican legislators read the *Voice* to keep informed about their opponents, Crippen used it to learn how to protect the company's interests. Further, while the *People's Voice* had a following, he said, the paper didn't make it

⁴⁸² Author telephone interview with Gordon Bennett, Nov. 10, 2006.

⁴⁸³ Author telephone interview with Tim Babcock, March 13, 2006.

⁴⁸⁴ Author telephone interview with Lloyd Crippen, Nov. 10, 2006.

harder for him to protect the ACM's interests. Rather, individual legislators were the only people who could make the job challenging. "Sometimes we'd have a legislature that was friendly to the company, and at other times, we'd have a legislature that was basically anti-company," he explained. The *Voice* was mostly just an amusing thing to read, he reiterated. "When the *People's Voice* came out, they'd come to the capitol and spread the paper around all the desks, and people would just sit back and read the paper and laugh," Crippen said.

Gretchen as a trailblazer for women

While Harry frequently worked in the office, Gretchen was the face of the *People's Voice*, crisscrossing the state as its principal fundraiser and putting in long hours as a statehouse reporter and columnist. Her duties sometimes brought her face to face with the paper's harshest critics. "Gretchen took a lot of the flak out on the street and in the legislature," said her son John Billings.⁴⁸⁵

But she took it in stride, and continued her frequent articles about the need for better mental health care, increased funding for health care and education, and fair treatment of the Native Americans and other minorities. Gretchen's work is remarkable not only for the positions she advocated, which indicated that she was a step ahead of the times, but also for the very fact that she was doing so, which broke new ground for women. At the time, female journalists were rare in Montana. "Her era was the era of women being school teachers, nurses, and running their local churches," said George

⁴⁸⁵ Author telephone interview with John Billings, March 6, 2006.

Wood, who knew Gretchen through his work lobbying at the statehouse. “People nowadays will not be able to understand because we have so many good women in the occupations, but there weren’t any women in opinion-making occupations then.”⁴⁸⁶ Further, the few women in Montana then who worked as journalists were almost always relegated to the society pages.

Hers wasn’t an easy job, particularly as a woman. By all accounts, Gretchen was attractive, and her son Mike remembers stories of Gretchen choosing to sit in the gallery, rather than near the legislators, because they would stare at her.⁴⁸⁷ “The gentleman quality prevented most sexual harassment,” Mike added, “but there was condescension.”⁴⁸⁸

Even though she was a visible minority at the statehouse, Gretchen was comfortable mingling with lobbyists and legislators. Jerome Anderson remembered that she would frequently visit the area where lobbyists gathered. “Gretchen could come down to the legislature and walk down the lobbyists’ hall and chat with everyone, and everyone enjoyed her,” he said.⁴⁸⁹ Moreover, she commanded respect from both Republicans and Democrats. “Everyone respected her,” said former lobbyist George Wood.⁴⁹⁰

As a diplomatic and tactful person, Gretchen was also an effective reporter. “I think she could get her way with people,” Charles S. Johnson said. “Because she wasn’t

⁴⁸⁶ Author telephone interview with George Wood, April 25, 2006.

⁴⁸⁷ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ Author telephone interview with Jerome Anderson, Nov. 10, 2006.

⁴⁹⁰ Author telephone interview with George Wood, April 25, 2006.

outwardly as cantankerous as Harry could be, she could get people to say things.” When people were unhappy with what she wrote, she was also skilled at defusing their anger. “I was tough and I stuck with what I believed in, but I tried to make it difficult for people to hate me,” Gretchen said. “There’s a basic lesson to be learned: never lose your sense of humor. If you ever find yourself in a position where you think somebody’s going to knock your damn head off, find something to laugh at – even if it’s only hysterical laughter.”⁴⁹¹

But Gretchen was no pushover, either, and was known to fight back on occasion. Her son Mike Billings remembered a leader in the labor movement lecturing Gretchen. He put his finger right up in Gretchen’s face, so she bit it. “He howled,” Mike recalled. “And then he said, ‘That would not be a good thing to do again.’”⁴⁹²

Pat Haffey, who works in state government and who knew Gretchen for several years late in her life, admired her as a good role model. “I could tell we had a lot of the same interests in terms of women being treated equally,” Haffey said.⁴⁹³ Indeed, Gretchen supported measures like the Equal Rights Amendment to help narrow the divide. “I’m a great believer in the Equal Rights Amendment because I was victim of the female syndrome: I worked cheap,” Gretchen said in 1986.

Rather than detracting from Gretchen’s dedication to her work, her firsthand knowledge of challenges women faced in the work force spurred her to work harder. “I had to use everything that I could bring to bear to try to get acceptance,” she said. “I was

⁴⁹¹ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 145.

⁴⁹² Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

⁴⁹³ Author interview with Pat Haffey, Helena, Mont., April 17, 2006.

very conscious of how I looked. I believed you could be an independent woman and still be feminine.”⁴⁹⁴

Influencing people

Just as Gretchen was a trailblazer for future women reporters, the work she and Harry did helped convince future labor leaders and politicians that their careers would be worthwhile. “I wanted to be just like them,” said Jim Murry, the retired head of the AFL-CIO in Montana.⁴⁹⁵ “I looked at Harry and Gretchen like a kid looked at their parents almost. They were giants in my mind. I thought they were so tough they could take anything.”⁴⁹⁶

Harry’s zeal for information and forward-thinking ideas also made an impression on Pat Williams, who would later represent Montana in the U.S. House. “Harry’s passion was one of both squint-eyed inquisitiveness as well as full-fledged anger,” Williams said. “When you talked to Harry, he’d make you think something new was possible.”⁴⁹⁷ Williams frequently would drive from Butte to Helena to talk to Harry, and the two would discuss everything from taxes to workers’ rights.

Those conversations changed the way Williams thought about things, he said. “Harry had a rage about him, and always at its center was ‘we can fix these things,’” Williams said, who admired the way Harry exposed the “unfair and secret and diabolical” times. “Probably more than any other single Montanan, Harry’s thoughts encouraged me

⁴⁹⁴ Bethell, Thomas N., Deborah E. Tuck, and Michael S. Clark, eds. *The Native Home of Hope: People and the Northern Rockies*, Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1986, p. 145.

⁴⁹⁵ Author interview with Jim Murry, Clancy, Mont., Feb. 22, 2006.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Author interview with Pat Williams, Missoula, Mont., March 13, 2006.

to run for the legislature,” Williams said. “Harry’s influence was greater than any other person in getting me into politics.”⁴⁹⁸

Similarly, the *People’s Voice* helped some U.S. Senators and Representatives remain in office once they were elected. James Murray and Lee Metcalf, both co-founders of the *Voice*, faced tough re-election races at various points in their careers, and the *Voice*’s support helped them win the support they needed to retain their seats.

Personal qualities

Gretchen and Harry exhibited many admirable personal qualities of which others took note, too. They were known for their editorial independence, and many people admired them for sticking to their guns, even when it meant losing money. When Harry supported candidate Harriett Miller in a primary race for the U.S. House over Arnold Olsen, whom labor favored, it illustrated that he refused to compromise his opinion when his principal backers pressured him to do so. “That says something about the Billingses,” said Jerry Holloron. “They weren’t just paid mouthpieces for the AFL-CIO.”⁴⁹⁹

Harry’s fierce independence was linked to another quality that he and Gretchen exhibited: integrity. For the Billingses, it would have been dishonest to sacrifice their editorial opinions for money. Their son Leon, who worked in politics himself as a lobbyist and staffer in Washington, D.C., said that his parents’ integrity made a lasting impression on him. “Father and Mother believed what you had was personal integrity,

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Author telephone interview with Jerry Holloron, Nov. 11, 2006.

and if you gave it up you couldn't get it back," he explained. They also taught him to tell the truth - even if was painful – and other basic principles such as not to lie, cheat, or steal. Those lessons stuck with him through the years, he said. "When I was chief of staff for the Secretary of State, we got in a fight with (President) Carter," he said in a telephone interview. "I said, '(Secretary of State Edmund) Muskie had integrity when we walked in the door and he's going to leave with it intact.' Integrity is all you had."⁵⁰⁰

Harry and Gretchen made a similar impression on their son Mike, who remembered his parents as believing in honesty and truth. "Harry and Gretchen were guided, if not blinded, by principle," Mike said. "They were fundamentalist in that sense, in ethics and principles."⁵⁰¹

Though they took ethics seriously and were uncompromising about their stances on certain issues, they didn't take themselves too seriously, Jerry Holloron said.⁵⁰² Gordon Bennett put it another way. "They were ideologists, but they weren't crazy ideologists," he said, adding that they also were probably the hardest-working people he knew, often putting in 18-hour days.⁵⁰³

Numerous people cited Harry and Gretchen's courage as another quality they admired. "They showed a lot of courage at the time," said their granddaughter Erin Billings, who herself chose journalism as a profession.⁵⁰⁴ Pat Haffey agreed, noting that the trait certainly didn't make them rich or famous. "Harry and Gretchen had the courage

⁵⁰⁰ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

⁵⁰¹ Author interview with Mike Billings, Helena, Mont., April 17, 2006.

⁵⁰² Author telephone interview with Jerry Holloron, Nov. 11, 2006.

⁵⁰³ Author telephone interview with Gordon Bennett, Nov. 10, 2006.

⁵⁰⁴ Author telephone interview with Erin Billings, March 9, 2006.

to get way out there. We're all so cautious nowadays."⁵⁰⁵ The trait especially made an impression on their sons, Mike Billings said. "None of us have been afraid of anything, because they weren't afraid of anything," he said. "They probably were, but we didn't know it at the time. They didn't let it stop them."⁵⁰⁶

Work and family

Harry and Gretchen had a relationship both as spouses and as co-editors at the *Voice*, an arrangement that not every couple could survive. But family members remember them as being in love and in sync with one another. "They were the type of couple that finished each other's sentences," said their granddaughter Erin Billings, who was also aware of Harry's fondness for Gretchen. "He was really very much in love with her until the day he died."⁵⁰⁷

Mike Billings agreed with Erin, noting that although his parents could fight like a dog and a cat, he and his brothers didn't frequently witness their arguments and never had any doubt of the strength of their relationship.⁵⁰⁸ John Billings noted that they complemented each other well, and his brother Leon thought that Harry and Gretchen were most effective as a team.⁵⁰⁹ "Montana has some of the best environmental laws and occupational safety laws because of my father, and mother worked for health care, education," Leon said. The breakdown of duties was similarly complementary. While Harry ran the business end and seldom traveled, Gretchen was always out in public as the

⁵⁰⁵ Author interview with Pat Haffey, Helena, Mont., April 17, 2006.

⁵⁰⁶ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

⁵⁰⁷ Author telephone interview with Erin Billings, March 9, 2006.

⁵⁰⁸ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

⁵⁰⁹ Author telephone interview with John Billings, March 6, 2006.

face of the Voice. “They were a team, a very well-balanced team,” Leon said.⁵¹⁰ Mike put it another way. “Individually they were people, together they were strong,” he said.⁵¹¹

As parents, Gretchen and Harry encouraged their sons to debate ideas. “We had an intellectual life,” Mike said, noting that Gretchen would salt the debate while Harry offered opinions. “Ours was a family of ideas and words and argumentation and controversy.”⁵¹² Further, they taught their sons that ideas needed to be challenged and controversies should be discussed. “We would be required to defend the positions we took,” Leon said. “Father would challenge us and challenge us.”

His parents’ work at the *Voice* essentially equaled a hand-to-mouth existence, but though they were poor, as sons they were not deprived, Leon said. “We were never hungry though I have a hunch my parents sometimes went to bed hungry,” he said.⁵¹³ And while there were added challenges for the boys during periods like the McCarthy years, the experiences aren’t ones they would trade, Mike said. “I think all of us feel blessed in a way to have been part of it.”⁵¹⁴

1972 Constitutional Convention

Out of all the contributions Harry and Gretchen made to Montana politics and journalism, as well as all the people they influenced along the way, their greatest legacy

⁵¹⁰ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

⁵¹¹ Author interview with Mike Billings, Helena, Mont., April 17, 2006.

⁵¹² Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

⁵¹³ Author telephone interview with Leon Billings, March 1, 2006.

⁵¹⁴ Author interview with Mike Billings, Missoula, Mont., March 15, 2006.

is found in a document they didn't write. Gretchen and Harry didn't report on Montana's 1972 Constitutional Convention, nor did they participate in it as delegates, but their ideas are reflected in the Constitution that was created there. "A lot of the causes (Harry and Gretchen) fought for over the years are embedded in that document," journalist Charles S. Johnson said.⁵¹⁵

The Constitution that Montanans passed after the 1972 convention reflected Harry's belief in the importance of clean air and clean water by giving Montanans the right to a clean and healthful environment. As Gretchen often wrote about Native American rights, so the Constitution also recognized the distinct heritage of Native Americans and stipulated that public education must include Indian education. As Gretchen and Harry had fought for open government, the new Constitution improved citizens' access to the government. Opening meetings to the public and recording votes for the public became a requirement, which meant that it was easier to hold lawmakers accountable. The Constitution reflected the values of populism, too. For the first time, the public was given the ability to amend the constitution; prior to the adoption of the '72 Constitution, an amendment could be passed at the legislature only. It also made it easier to put initiatives and referendums on the ballot.

After the three-month convention, Montana's citizens voted on the document. It passed by just 2,532 votes out of the 230,298 ballots that were cast. Of course, Harry and Gretchen's contributions were only some of many that affected the political climate in Montana; many factors helped create an atmosphere that was friendly to passage of the

⁵¹⁵ Author telephone interview with Charles S. Johnson, Nov. 10, 2006.

Constitution. Reapportionment and other political and journalistic factors, such as Lee's purchase of the Anaconda papers, played a role.

While it's impossible to quantify the influence Harry and Gretchen's work had on the document, people like Jim Murry and Pat Williams believe the Billingses are a large reason the Constitution is as progressive as it is. "We have one of the most progressive state constitutions in the country," Murry said. "The *People's Voice* and Harry and Gretchen had a lot to do with that."⁵¹⁶ And Pat Williams described the end of the '60s and the '70s as a golden age in the state, which came about, in part, because of Harry. "He helped usher in an era of genuine progressive politics in Montana," Williams said.⁵¹⁷

Interestingly, Jerry Holloron remembered a conversation he had with Harry and Gretchen that indicated they were hesitant about Montana trying to rewrite the constitution. They were worried that the document would be controlled by the corporate interests, and that it would be worse for Montana than the constitution adopted in 1889, he said. "Early on in the process ... they were really skeptical about whether this was something Montana should try," he said.⁵¹⁸ Though they would have agreed with many of the ideas the constitution reflected when it passed, it was hard for Harry and Gretchen to believe that the corporate interests wouldn't try to control it, he explained. "They had spent so many years seeing the corrosive influence of Anaconda & Montana Power in the state, it was hard for them to understand that (Montana) could break away from it," he

⁵¹⁶ Author interview with Jim Murry, Clancy, Mont., Feb. 22, 2006.

⁵¹⁷ Author interview with Pat Williams, Missoula, Mont., March 13, 2006.

⁵¹⁸ Author telephone interview with Jerry Holloron, Nov. 11, 2006.

said. In retrospect, they were probably right about the risk. “Looking back on it, it was a big chance,” Holloron said.⁵¹⁹

Conclusion

Perhaps it was fitting that inherent in Harry and Gretchen’s legacy was a large risk, because they were used to taking chances at the *Voice*. From its inception, the paper fought to survive financially and its editors refused to shy away from controversial positions. Harry and Gretchen gave their lives to the paper, but it came with a personal cost; long hours, tough battles and low pay were a frequent reality. Had they not met the challenges head-on, though, Harry and Gretchen’s legacy wouldn’t have been as great.

As Gretchen was dying, Pat Haffey remembered sitting on the foot of her bed, discussing silicosis benefit policies for men and their wives in Butte. Gretchen had lobbied for the program, and as an employee of the state’s division of labor and industry, Haffey helped administer the benefits. As the two discussed the benefits program, Gretchen, who was on oxygen and literally near her last breath, looked at the bigger picture. “She leaned back and took a breath of oxygen, and said ‘There will always be issues.’ She said it with such resolve,” Haffey recalled. “Like, ‘My work is done but there will always be issues.’ She was kind of commissioning us.”⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Author interview with Pat Haffey, Helena, Mont., April 17, 2006.

Or, as Jim Murry bluntly put it, “there is so much to raise hell about in America today, and where are the people to speak out about that?”⁵²¹

⁵²¹ Author interview with Jim Murry, Helena, Mont., Feb. 22, 2006.

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