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Interviewee: Ron Rickman

Interviewer: John Newhouse

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Note: Ron Rickman began working in newspapers in the circulation collections department of the Montana Standard in 1959. He later worked in Lee Enterprises' commercial print division, becoming general manager of Montana Graphic Arts. He moved to Iowa, working at the Quad-City Times, where he became general manager in 1973 and publisher in 1979. He was promoted to president of Lee Newspaper Publishing Group in 1997 and retired in 1999.

Ron Rickman: I went to work for the Anaconda Company about three months prior to Lee's actual taking over. At the time I didn't know anything about it. There was two papers in Butte at the time, *The Daily Post*, the afternoon paper and then the morning paper was *The Montana Standard*. I went to work for the *Post* in the circulation department in the afternoon. As a route supervisor and then later to be an assistant circulation manager on the afternoon paper, which was doomed after Lee took over, which proved to be a wise move.

Most of the papers in Montana had afternoons or a similar sheet and then combined them and got rid of them. But I guess to best describe the papers prior to Lee's taking over, it was a dual operation, as I said, large shifts both in editorial and press production. It didn't take Lee Enterprises too long to see, well not only in economy, that could be achieved with manpower, but also in technological changes such as—I don't recall what they called it. I'm thinking of data speed on tape machines, that was all new, later on. Then, of course, along came cold type. For me it was a very rewarding experience because of progressive type of management. It was always a continuing improvement after that time.

John Newhouse: When Lee came in, you were in circulation?

RR: Right.

JN: How'd you get from there to [speaking at the same time] circ?

RR: Well, I went from circulation to a salesman in the Commercial Printing Department. I was named general manager of the Commercial Printing Divisions of the Butte shop, and later the general manager of Montana in the Commercial Printing. Then we sold those plants in '71 and that's when I came back here.

JN: Your title here is?

RR: I'm the general manager here.

JN: I see. Of the—?

RR: Of the *Times*, *The Quad-City Times*. So, you can kind of see it's been a fast career. I went to work at the Anaconda company in '59, and of course Lee took over in '60. I'm working on my 15th year.

JN: Good for you. Quite a few changes when Lee took over outside of technological?

RR: Yeah, mostly of course, manpower, streamlining production methods. I think the attitude, it was surprising that they got away with so many changes in Montana as rapidly as they did because it affected so many people and they were able to maintain a good rapport even with the people that left because they treated them very fairly. I would say there's always people that were upset, but not bitter, because [of] settlements and such. Mostly in the unionized sections they were very generous.

JN: How in the world could they do it? Were they that wealthy?

RR: Well, in the long run it comes back to—well I saw in the paper today IBM, 2,000 people, by if they take early retirement by June 30th where they're offering them two year's salary as a severance plus all their other benefits; same theory. People are very expensive, especially if they're not fully productive people. I think that's really the story in Montana.

JN: You certainly went ahead faster in Montana than most anybody else has in the other places I know of. Gee! We thought we were far ahead in Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, then our people would go out to Montana and come back and say, "Good god!" [Laughs].

RR: Well, you know this is a real pleasure for me because when Lee bought us out, we were the poor kids from the West and boy, those saviors from the Midwest gonna teach you guys something, and really, they did. But we don't tell them that now, you know, we tell them we had to move all the good people from Montana back here to get things done or send their managers out there to train them. We always kid Lloyd [Schermer] and Jim Burgess about that. But I remember Mr. [Don] Anderson coming out there, I don't recall just when it was. We were in the midst of a big strike in Butte, a big copper strike when they made their first inspection trip. My advertising lineage was way off. I know circulation was down a couple thousand. Very dismal and cold dreary day, and I think they thought, what the hell did we get ahold of? I think Dave Gottlieb was with them and Mr. Anderson.

JN: That would be dismal, wouldn't it, to put about six million bucks into a clunker?

RR: Yeah, and that strike lasted as I recall, darn near a year.

JN: And that picture was that bad all the time?

RR: Right, it went from about every three years we had the same type of thing. We took an awful beating because the town itself was geared to that type of thing in that they felt that we, the paper, or the kids, I was concerned with the kids at that time, owed them that newspaper and they didn't realize that, or didn't care, that the paper was being delivered by a little merchant that was paying for it out of his own pocket and probably from a family of a striker, and they wouldn't pay these kids. We had a hell of a time. They would just say, well we're on strike, we don't pay our bills, and you know we lost a lot of circulation. At that time, there were about six or eight thousand guys on the hill, at that time, miners, so when they went out that didn't include the office help, just miners.

JN: That was in Butte, wasn't it?

RR: Right.

JN: And is that one of the bigger papers at that time?

RR: Oh no, Billings was the big paper at that time.

JN: But you still were important; hell, they were all important.

RR: Yeah, I would say at that time Butte and Billings were one of the larger. Now that's switched around a little bit. Billings, of course, continues to be the larger paper around, but Missoula is fast approaching and is well taking over Butte easily. Helena has come a long ways. It was an interesting transition. I had the good fortune of having some political contacts in Helena through some commercial printing contracts when I later moved on to the commercial departments. And Lee had a very, very good reputation with politicians.

JN: In Montana?

RR: In Montana.

JN: At that time?

RR: Right.

JN: You mean right from the beginning?

RR: Seemed to always maintain a good rapport. We had our battles, but it was never down to where anybody got irritated and could prove that we were just out to cause trouble for trouble's sake or sell papers. We always generally had the state in mind, or the cause in mind when we took off on something and that was always nice to never have to fight those kind political battles in order to get contracts. You see, prior to that, the Anaconda Company controlled those contracts, and they controlled the papers and they also controlled all the

commercial printing, so when you went into a bidding, they told you what you got. They just passed it out to everybody.

JN: This was the state [unintelligible]?

RR: Right. When Lee took it over, we dropped that and we went in and said it is going to be on a bid basis; we don't want any favors, everybody bid competitively. It didn't take long to get that back, restored going the way it should be. The state wondered where all the good deals came from all of a sudden.

JN: [Laughs]. All of a sudden printing got cheap. But prior to that time, Anaconda said who gets this and who gets that, and the politician went along with it.

RR: I can recall something that was refreshing to me as a young fellow too. Like I said, I only worked a short time under Anaconda, but I knew of Mr. [James] Dickey, who was instrumental and worked in the purchase of the paper for the Anaconda Company to Lee. But I can remember when we had a death in the mines when I worked for Anaconda, and we'd bury that [in the paper], sometimes wouldn't even put it in. The most we had were six or eight lines, and on the obit under the funeral home it just read 'deceased.' It didn't say accidental death or anything. I'll never forget the first day in Butte, Montana, when they ran the first obit on the front page. It was an Anaconda death in the mines. [They thought] that whole place was coming down.

JN: [Laughs]. What was the reaction in the plant?

RR: Well, we had everybody almost from the president come on down from the Anaconda Company over that, raising hell about it.

JN: What happened?

RR: We continued to run them on the front page. That was refreshing because nobody believed that Lee Enterprises, who is really unheard of out there or in most newspaper circles, larger circles where you could put your hands on, believed that it was a real sale, that all it was was another diversification by Anaconda and that we were really—that took many years, I'd say that took three or four years, or five years even to break that.

JN: Well that first death though must have helped.

RR: Well, somewhat, but people are very skeptical. It proved it in my mind, but people in the towns still—I can remember calling around town that it was a ploy we were still an Anaconda paper, controlled by Anaconda.

JN: Whose decision was it to run it there?

RR: Editors.

JN: Who's the editor?

RR: Well, I think, [pauses] boy, I'll think of it in a minute. [Unintelligible] I can see him plain as day, but I can't think of his name right now. [Thomas Mooney was managing editor and in charge of editorial decisions.] But that, it was great for him. We used to talk a lot of theory all the time and Lee's policy because he was an old Anaconda editor. He was used to being told what to write, and how to write it, especially during the legislature. State laws, new industry, and to be completely left alone then, it made a heck of a difference. It took a long time to convince him.

JN: That paper was the *Butte*—

RR: *Standard*.

JN: Still there?

RR: Still there, oh yeah.

JN: And that would have been about 1961 something like that?

RR: Right.

JN: [Unintelligible] Is he still there?

RR: No, he retired before I left at that time. He retired not too long after that, he had a couple heart attacks, slight heart attacks. I think as far as I know he's—no he might have died now, but he did some freelance writing. Quite a gentleman. But I can't think of his name [laughs]...Walter was his first name. Walter, I want to say Parker. [Walter Nelson was the city editor of the *Montana Standard-Post* from 1959-61, then was editor of the *Montana Standard* until 1966.]

JN: Well, you've got the Walter, that's the hard part. Where were the head offices of Anaconda? Where they in Butte?

RR: They were in Butte at the time, along with all the legal offices. That made it tough because all their planning, of course, was in Butte, and the strategy of the legislature, all the parties, all the politicians, all the ones that were being worked on, we'll say, would show up and be around. We pretty well had a pretty good idea what was going on just in Butte or what would take place in Helena. Of course, in Helena, the Anaconda Company ran a full room 24 hours; a bar and refreshments and the whole bit, and they had a string of lobbyists they worked on continuously. So, they controlled the state. Good or bad at the time. The town, when I was

there, was anti-company but yet there was never, or since, been a company that has done more for a city. Misunderstood, big company, big employer, big effects, lousy attitude among the workers in recent years, in the last six years, when the new regime took over in the Anaconda company. They reaped the benefits for back in the '50s and the '60s the way they worked and the kind of labor contracts they negotiated. And that affects Lee's paper in Butte now because of those contracts. It's a one-company town and that's tough. They don't tell you what they're doing, they don't tell you about their planning, right or wrong, that's up to them. But they control you so deeply that the town feels they should tell more than they do tell.

JN: What kind of a town is Butte?

RR: Well, when I first started circulating for them, they were, we had a circulation—I think the afternoon paper was about 18,000 and the morning paper was about 28,000. At times I think we distributed Sunday in the 30s, high 30s, but I bet it's a lot different now. I don't know exactly what their circulation is now.

JN: Well, Helena's the state capitol, and Butte is where the Anaconda [has its] headquarters. I don't know anything about Montana, I kind of know it's off to the West and that's about all I know about it. Who's the publisher in Butte now?

RR: [Duncan] "Scotty" Campbell. Scotty came up through the ranks. He was in advertising, went to a salesman, and then the advertising manager, on to publisher.

JN: Who was it, [Richard] Morrison? Morrison was in there too?

RR: Right, Dick Morrison was the one that hired me.

JN: Did he let go of the reins without too much of a—?

RR: That was a big pleasure too. Anaconda Company, being a big company, didn't really pay their executives much and didn't really have good techniques at that time, handling people. It was a lack of big corporation, lack of communications, afraid for their jobs, everybody appeared to be scared. Of course, I was a young punk at that time. I suppose I'd look at it a little differently now, but at that time it appeared to me everybody was running scared to death, lot of back-cutting going on. So, when Lee took over, these guys just seemed that, I don't know, they changed a hell of a lot. Personality-wise—Christ, I can remember Dick Morrison sitting in the office there yet, and called me in one day and told me that Lee had just purchased the papers. I didn't know either, I didn't know what Lee was, something you eat I guess, I don't know. Yeah, it was a great change and of course, they made a big change. They got rid of some pretty strong people. They cut deep, at first, in management and let Morrison take over and [Ward] Fanning in Butte at that time, Ward Fanning was a publisher. So, they weren't afraid to make their cuts when they had to, and they took control. People said, "Hey, these guys mean business," and they got our attention real rapidly.

JN: Well, Morrison survived that cut business though, didn't he?

RR: Oh, yes. That's what I mean, you see, Morrison took over and then Fanning was the publisher in Butte. That's where I was concerned with and I really can't tell you the rest of the change because I was new at that time. But there was a lot of flip flopping and there was...I know we had a guy by the name of Bowman upstairs, Cliff Bowman, who had a great rapport with the men and one day he was there, and the next day he was gone and that sent a shock wave through this highly unionized plant. But they came through that fine. We spit out a few production managers at Butte for a while. They'd come and last about 30 days until Mr. [Tom] Williams got there, and he'll have to tell you about that. I'm sure he's got some stories. I could remember when Williams first came, that was in Butte, they had a poll up on the wall and they were betting just how long he'd stay.

JN: Where did he come from?

RR: He came from Ellensburg, Washington, previously, and Seattle and Los Angeles papers. He's now the publisher here [Davenport, Iowa].

JN: Oh, I see. He came as the production—

RR: He came as a production manager and as I said, they had three or four that they spit out in less than two years.

JN: They just brought them in cold?

RR: So, they brought this guy in, but he managed to stay around a while and get things done.

JN: I kind of have the idea that they didn't really make too many changes there, but apparently, they did make a few.

RR: Numbers wise, probably not as many that appeared. But they were, to me, they were significant. I can think of two that they made in Butte that were very significant. The people that had control, you know, and it worked well for them, that they were going their way and it had to be that way.

The next thing that happened of significance to me was I could see the unions at that time, on the afternoon press side that I was concerned with, were the pressmen itself were making over \$10,000 a year. That was in 1960 or so, right around there, '61, which was a darn good salary at that time for that type of work. I thought, "Ahhh," because I had access to some of the books of keeping some of the ABC [Audit Bureau of Circulation] reports and I waited for the next move on that and sure enough all of a sudden they just said, "Well, we're going to cut out the afternoon paper."

They did it without a heck of a lot of problems. That, too, got the attention of people. That they were going to run efficiently, and they negotiated well on their contracts, plus they were negotiating with the unions. A new type of negotiations that the unions hadn't seen before, tough negotiations.

JN: Hadn't Anaconda been tough?

RR: No. No.

JN: What they do, just pay them what they wanted and then walk away?

RR: Pretty much got what they wanted. Manning, they had manning on all their crews, crews were, well they spent most of the time either drinking beer or playing cards. They were heavily staffed papers. Now, like I say, I was a young kid at that time, and they said, "Well, Anaconda only had it as a tax write off."

I guess so. I don't know. Because they weren't going to make any money the way they were doing it. Even to me at that time it was apparent there was something wrong.

JN: What's the attitude of the people left on the paper after that?

RR: Well, the thing of it was, we only got raises when the unions got raises under Anaconda. We were told that when they hired you. You didn't get anything on your own merits, so once a year you knew you were going to get a raise too, so performances were mediocre. You didn't have anybody that—a lot of long-term people there that just stayed there because everything was automatic. There was never too much going on and nobody got upset, just kind of plugged away.

So yeah, it caused some upsetting of some people. I have to say though, that in direct proportion to age at that time of course. But then you're back to the people that they did let go, the settlements were fair and of course we didn't have the benefits that Lee has now, or early retirement specifications, but they made some good settlements. I hear very little rifling about that; it was a fact of life. They're going to be run efficiently and they pulled it off.

JN: Might be kind of nice to see it happen because you know you have a chance.

RR: That's right, well, it's good for me being I was young and when I went into that paper in the first place, I thought it was pretty, you know, everything was manned by—everybody was 55, 60 years old and everything was done one certain way. It wasn't a crushing, rapid thing for me. I don't know, maybe you could accept change a little faster at that time, I don't know. [Speaking at the same time]. And I didn't have all those responsibilities, you know, if I didn't like it, I could quit, I guess. But they always kept me challenged and we always moved ahead. And a lot of

people that started with them are still there now. Other than in the organized—that has gone through a significant change, but that's technological change has caused a lot of—

JN: You're certainly doing a lot more with manpower out there than you ever did before.

RR: Oh, yeah.

JN: And I suppose that's [unintelligible]. I know it's going through the whole reorganization.

RR: Well this paper here, take a look at this paper here. Just in the last—since 1968 they've gone from 78 people in their composing room here to 11. Complete utilization of electronics. Somebody had some thought about this and some planning. Maybe it wasn't as broad, but I could see as the company got a little stronger and a little better that they communicated; I never felt that I wasn't communicated with. Things moved ahead ever so slow at times, because in Montana things were a little sheltered. We're operating out on the floor here now. Up until about a year ago Montana was—they knew it was around, but they didn't really know the full effects. Before, in the cold type conversions, that wasn't the case, but electronics has happened to them that they are the second ones to get it now.

JN: You mean here in Davenport you're the second?

RR: No, we were the first. Montana's second on the electronics. They were first in conversions, a lot of the offset to cold type. But, of course, this paper has always been a standard bearer in changes in doing things first. There were cold type ads here in 1954.

JN: Was that Gottlieb's baby not long ago?

RR: Yeah, he was the business manager I think in '54, and he took a strike here at that time.

JN: He made quite a contribution.

RR: Yes, he did. A lot of this that we're into now is that preplanning, some good labor people that saw where we had to be.

JN: I'm not sure he was that much of a newsman, which kind of bothered me a little, but he sure as heck knew electronics and production.

RR: The wonderful thing about this, being a newsman, I'm not a newsman, but the thrill and all of having complete control of your own product, complete destiny, it has the sophistication in it that they don't have to worry or blame or, you know, no middle man now. Whatever he does on that tube is exactly the way it's going to appear in the paper.

JN: Can't blame the composing room.

RR: Nope, and I'll bet on the computer three-fourths of the time. They're great for telling me the error must have been a computer. But a computer doesn't make that many mistakes. Really, it hasn't hurt the creativeness of the editor. Some of our people that were most apprehensive about it have come to the forefront on it. We've got an associate editor up there, he's in his 60s, he's very apprehensive, tells them they're crazy and he's one of the demonstrators on the system now.

He shows and lectures the people that come in and we are proud of it, but it is an editorial tool. This part of the technology was editorial. No question about it. For an editor that has the foresight and will allow the change to come in and get the feel of it, it'll, he'll find nothing better. It's just that first initial change and how he approaches it.

JN: Well, I'd hate the thought of trying it, but—

RR: You will now, believe me. You'll like it. It's exciting.

[End of interview]