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Oral History Number: 465-007
Interviewee: Sam Reynolds
Interviewer: John Newhouse
Date of Interview: 1975
Project: Lee Newspapers Oral History Project

Note: Sam Reynolds was the editorial page editor of The Missoulian from 1964 to 1988.

John Newhouse: I see.

Sam Reynolds: He was here during transition, I'm pretty sure. Nathan Blumberg was here. He, too, saw the transition. Then there are brothers. K. Ross Toole is professor of history, and has written a book which includes a chapter about Montana press. You should probably get your hands on it.

And then John Toole is his brother, is an insurance man, an old, uh, oh he's an old history buff. He writes a column for us on Montana and Western Montana history. John would be a good source in terms of the transition from one to the other. A person who has been steadily hostile to the transition is Dr. [Forrest H.] Shorty is his name, Kessler. He is from Intermountain Mountain Lumber Company. Let me look that up. And he has been hostile to us mainly because he liked the old Anaconda press which sort of protected you from the bad news, especially locally and it also was not activist at all when you try to do anything and he kind of liked that. Dr. Forrest. Forrest H. But he would give you a different side.

JN: Well, Don [Anderson] wants that and I think it's imperative that I get it.

SR: He might be out at Intermountain Company, which is the company he founded.

JN: Are these people who either you or Don could call, or John [Talbot] could call them. It would mean an entre that I probably couldn't get myself.

SR: Yes, with the exception of Kessler. I don't want to call him.

JN: How about John?

SR: He might be the one to call Kessler.

JN: Ok, I'll ask him and if he doesn't—

SR: It might be more useful if you do it yourself. I could certainly call all these other guys. If I could arrange it, would you like to have lunch with [School of Journalism former dean Nathaniel] Blumberg and [Journalism Dean Warren] Brier?

JN: Yeah, I would.

SR: You could get them both at one time.

[Discussion on buying batteries for the tape recorder.]

JN: So you came here, Sam, in 1964?

SR: 1964.

JN: You replaced who, Mooney?

SR: Guy Mooney, he was the editor.

JN: But, yet in effect when [Lloyd] Schermer came here why he was production manager, as I recall, or general manager, or what was he when he came here?

SR: The title when he first arrived was—you mentioning those two titles throws me off a little. It wasn't production manager and when he came in he was in charge. He had the publisher's job but not that title quite.

JN: That's close enough.

SR: He was publisher by the time I got here, had the title.

JN: But he came in and took over.

SR: Business Manager was the title, but I'm not sure. You will have to check.

JN: That I can check with Don. But he took charge, I mean he was the top honcho in the place.

SR: That is correct.

JN: Hi John, how are you? [Addressing John Talbot, the publisher.]

SR: Prompt and early. We walked in almost together.

JN: Sam has been telling me—

SR: What was Schermer's title when he first arrived? Business Manager? He didn't have the title of publisher at first, but he had the responsibilities.

JN: And at that time, he was in conflict with [Richard] Morrison, I gather, for quite a few years.

SR: Yes, and no. They had a high regard for each other. As I recall, Morrison went from here to be publisher both of Helena and Butte, in charge of the whole operation, but he left this operation here. And I remember seeing— Lloyd showed me one time— an endorsement was made for the Public Service Commission—

JN: I got that letter.

SR: —that Morrison disliked intensely. He wrote a letter to Schermer and Schermer wrote—he was doing his own typing at that time so there was lots of x's and capital letters, and so forth—but he wrote back saying he God damn well was going to do what he wanted to do here in Missoula, and he ended up by calling him “Mr. Dickey,” which was the Anaconda man from Butte who ran the papers before the takeover.

And it was quite an indignant letter, but Lloyd didn't give me a copy. He showed it to me and then took it away. It was his kind of declaration of independence that we were going to operate, the Missoulian was going to be operated independently of outside direction when it comes to editorial policy.

John Talbot: I think that Morrison got a little over-resentful, maybe, of people coming in from the Midwest.

SR: I think so.

JT: This included Anderson. It was not all smooth there. And Schermer. And he had some very nice things to say about me from time to time. I never heard it to my face but I heard them. He was just [unintelligible]. I'm sorry to see people leave.

SR: No one disliked him. He was a very excellent labor negotiator among other things. He really—you know, he sat down and he didn't give an inch. He knew exactly what was in the contract and how you negotiated it and when Dick was still in charge of the Montana operation before Schermer went to that job and Morrison retired, why every time there were labor negotiations of any of the papers, Morrison would come over and look right over the shoulder and be the principal negotiator for Lee Enterprises and certainly Lloyd found that very helpful. I don't recall any great hostility toward Morrison. Kind of a generation gap, which created incidents of strife but by and large they seemed to get along fine.

JT: Maybe I could best serve you by setting up a few appointments.

SR: I'm trying to get an appointment for lunch with Blumberg and Brier.

JT: I will work on the Tooles but I will avoid the luncheon.

SR: Yeah, please do.

JT: It is now 9:25, by 10:30 you could be free for one, I would think.

JN: I would think so.

JT: I will see if I can find one of the two Tooles.

JN: If I haven't worn Sam out or Sam me out.

JT: I will try one for 10:30 and one for after lunch, maybe after 2.

SR: Let me make sure I can get Brier right now.

JN: How was the dentist, John?

JT: We use it for a new substance, a polymer filling material that he hardens with an ultraviolet zap gun.

JN: Never heard of that thing. Wow. When high speed drills came in I just, praise the lord.

SR: [Calling Warren Brier on the phone.] This is Sam calling, is your lunch hour occupied today?

[Newhouse talks about batteries for dictation machine while Reynolds explains on the phone to Brier that Newhouse is a retired Wisconsin Journal reporter who is doing interviews about the changes in the newspapers since the Lee purchase from Anaconda.]

SR: Yeah, we will be out; it's usually easier if we could meet at your place about a quarter to 12 to get early in line. Why don't I see if we can get there by 11:45. All right.

JN: If I didn't do anything else I brought you weather.

SR: All right. We've got Brier for lunch. He doesn't eat lunch but he will be there.

JT: He is he going to shoot for getting Blumberg?

SR: I am going to. I've got a note in for Nathan to call me. So, 11:45 we will be out there so at about 20 to, you want to come here? We'll go together.

JN: All right.

JT: I'll see if I can set up something for about 10:15 to 10:30 for you and then you will be free to get out by that in time for lunch.

JN: OK, and sometime along there I have to pick up these batteries.

JT: Yeah, when you are through with Sam, come on over and we will walk down and get that check cashed.

SR: Good. Ok, fine thanks, John.

JN: Sam, what do you see from where you sit here on what Lee has done or have you been around enough so you can really tell?

SR: It's been 11 years. It's extremely hard to measure, as you know. How much, for example, does an editorial endorsement of a candidate really weigh in an election? There is no device to measure it. If the candidate think wins by, say, 90 or 50 or 100 votes in a large election then you think maybe you did. If not, it's awfully hard to tell. One of the things I noticed when I first arrived was that the rumor mill in this community was extremely highly developed. It still is, but the back yard fence rumor was something that we had to contend with all the time. Rumors would start in this town and go through like wildfire and even if there is no grounding in fact whatever. This seems to have been dampened down.

I attribute it partly to being small town and now we are just 10,000, 12,00 bigger than we were then, but also partly to the fact that I think that people know that if there is something really newsworthy, why it will probably appear in the paper and it won't be suppressed as it was before. In part, this highly sophisticated rumor mill I blame on the Anaconda Company because people simply didn't believe that it would publish bad stuff about its own town. We have almost entirely gotten away from boosterish journalism here. We are proud of Missoula and so forth, but we have a hell of a pollution problem, so we write about it. We editorialize. It has to stop and it was Missoula, the Missoula delegation, and so forth that got very superb air and water control laws passed in the state, because the problem was there. But, it was partly due to the paper pushing it too. Look, this makes the place stink, you know and it makes our river run red. We got to clean it up, that's all.

Exactly how though you measure that direct, exact degree of the impact of the paper, I don't know. But it's there. Rumors still will begin in this town but they can be easily doused now because people trust the paper to tell what's important.

JN: Eleven years ago they weren't at that point.

SR: They weren't at that point. Not quite. We had a rumor, in fact, 11 years ago that—it was a rumor that was common all through the West, oddly enough, in lots of places—that a group of big guys had assaulted a smaller boy in a restroom in a theater and castrated him.

And, why weren't the police doing anything, and why was the newspaper covering it up? It was a great cover-up of this awful thing, and the police were going out of their minds because they were getting phone calls and phone calls, and we, too, were kind of going wild, and finally one night Coyle, Ed Coyle, picked up the phone and a young girl, a little girl's voice said, "Did you know that, well I think there's something I think you should know, she said. There was a boy in the theater and he was 'castricized.'"

And Coyle, at that point, said, "We've got to stop it."

So a front page story ran that this rumor had been all over the West and there was no foundation for it and so forth, and that really killed it. But that was the kind of thing symptomatic of this nonsense.

JN: What do you find in talking with the other reporters, the older reporters on the other papers when they start comparing yesterday with today?

SR: I don't talk too much with older reporters of other papers. I can't think of one off hand. In talking to Erlandson—Erlandson is the man you should talk to about this and try to sit down and really get him to start rapping. One of the things he said is that Mr. Dickey of Anaconda did not, day by day, send down directives to do this and do that. It was very similar to what I have read in the Communist press. You know, in the way it operates. That almost instinctively everyone knew the party line.

JN: You follow Pravda.

SR: Yeah, right. Well, no, but instinctively, you knew the party line. If a guy who is controversial, or the kind who would be rocking the boat came to Missoula to talk, you just didn't cover it. Mr. Dickey didn't have to tell you not to cover it, you just knew better than to do that. A story would break in Helena that you knew was kind of, reflected something you knew the company wouldn't like, you just didn't print it. That's all, and you knew that without being told on a daily basis of what to do and not to do. It was very interesting; the similarity of the two was striking.

JN: Capitalist's communist and poor people communist—

SR: —pursue that line though.

JN: The sixth floor Hennessey building, that was in Butte, wasn't it? So that was in Butte, the Butte Standard, or the Montana Standard?

SR: The Montana Standard.

JN: The Montana Standard and so when that come over here in the morning—that was an afternoon paper? And when that showed up in the morning why you knew at least what their line was over there. That would give you a—

SR: Well, no all the papers out here are pretty much the same. I don't think Mr. Dickey even dictated to that paper all that much. I am not sure. You could talk to Bert Gaskill and Ed Coyle about the Butte operation was under the Anaconda Company. Coyle went to work for the newspapers way back in the early '30s as well. He spent almost his entire career in Butte until he was named editor of the Missoulian.

JN: There is still quite a competition between the papers, I take it.

SR: Between the individual papers? Yes, and no. We have routed the Butte out of several towns where it formerly run. Other than that, I don't even know where we butt heads particularly.

JN: Politically?

SR: Oh, yes,

JN: Well, you see, you're a University town here. Is this the University of Montana?

SR: This is the University of Montana. Montana has two universities. It's one of those states. [The University of] Montana, and Montana State University is at Bozeman. It's a little confusing, too. Be careful, because when you go into documents this was Montana State University and that was Montana State College until 1966 or '67. Then, the name for this institution was transferred to Bozeman, because they wanted the University name. So, they went from Montana State College to Montana State University. This one went from Montana State University to the University of Montana.

JN: Where am I? Missoula, it's the University of Montana at Missoula. Bozeman I don't care about. Is there something in Helena too? Or is it Billings?

SR: It's private, well, there is Eastern Montana College at Billings.

JN: That's right, then I got the two names.

SR: There is three more.

JN: Oh, God. I think I will stay away from those. It gets a little bit too much. Well, the Great Falls Tribune is quite a bit of your competition here, isn't it?

SR: Yes, and no; they're really the only competition as far as newspapers go. The Great Falls Tribune, under an independent publisher owned it—by the name of Worden—was the only non-Anaconda major paper in the state and it, under the old man, was a brave, reasonably brave and bold paper. Then, in about '65 or '66, they sold out to the Minneapolis Tribune and the sons who had run it for several years ran a very timid operation, and they were like the old man. One was publisher and he is now state advertising director and the other was the editor and I don't know what's happened to him. The publisher was competent, the editor was not. They finally sold out to the Minneapolis Tribune and a fellow named [William] Cordingly came out and took over as publisher and really created quite a stir. When I first arrived in Montana, the editorial page of the Tribune had advertising on it, it had things like Dear Abby and Doctor Thosteson or Doctor Mollner, or whatever he was at the time. It was a miserable editorial page and Cordingly immediately cleaned all that out and created a clean editorial page, which I've always had. It had been in effect before I arrived for some years. But Cordingly as he gets older, gets more timid too, so that in terms of aggressiveness, in terms of editorial page, there is no competition whatever. They have a very mild, bland, they fill it up column and their editorials speak about problems but they don't really hit them hard. We keep it up.

JN: Well, your philosophy has been to get tough, I gather.

SR: Yes, we have been tough. They have, though, a very good state bureau, which provides direct competition with our state bureau.

JN: That's in Helena, isn't it?

SR: Yes.

JN: Well, is this one thing which Don says may win you a Pulitzer out here that was dug up all this business of the Workmen's Comp, isn't it?

SR: Yeah, possibly. I doubt that.

JN: That was dug up by the bureau of Helena, wasn't it? But then all the rest of you papers, well what do you do there is you simply take what the bureau hands out or do you go to—

SR: No, we didn't follow through; there is no point in here in following through that. It's all happening in Helena and it's a state bureau story of statewide implications. We might have some victimized workers here but all investigations etc., is all occurring in Helena. That's where the Workmen's Compensation Division is headquartered so that's where they—

JN: That started with Jerry Holloron, as I recall.

SR: No, Dan Foley.

JN: Dan Foley. Is he still there?

SR: He is now working for Congressman Max Baucus, who is our congressman from this district.

JN: Is there anybody in the bureau there who is, who has been on top of it for some time who has been the number one crusader?

SR: No, they are just handling it as a news story. The guy in the bureau to talk to who is doing most of the reporting on it is Art Hutchinson. He's not crusading though.

JN: He isn't doing a hell of a lot of digging. He's just simply following the events as they unfold.

SR: Actually, the dig point is beyond, the dig point is beyond. Foley created a stir because he insisted on getting into the Workmen's Comp records, and he was refused, and so a lawsuit followed and this was part and parcel of the case itself. You should read the [James] Carden affidavit. We have published it.

JN: Yeah, I've got it, but it's formidable.

SR: Yeah, it's good reading.

JN: For politicians, it's great reading.

SR: From there, it went to a legislative audit. There was enough there that Foley had got things pretty well stirred up. The legislative auditor conducted an audit and found that things were really very amiss. So, a year ago the attorney general was given a budget and told "you investigate it" and the deeper he got into it, the worse it was, too. And, last spring a man was convicted, or pleaded innocent, to stealing a whole pile of the workers' money, a state senator, spent three or four months in the Idaho State Penitentiary. He is now out of course. And there are cases pending but it's in the courts now and there is no real point in our digging beyond what the courts themselves are doing.

There is a full-fledged investigation going on, directed by the attorney general's office, with about four people who are hired especially full time just to do this.

JN: Yeah, the one's who signed the affidavit. How about, I gather you went up to Great Falls to look for a house of ill fame at one time.

SR: Yes, I've got the file on that if you would like to look at it.

JN: It would be kind of fun. Not now, but a little later. That started when Great Falls came down, was it to Missoula or to Butte?

SR: It was to Butte. I'll give you a [unintelligible] of that story. Oddly enough, I don't have much of a memory for dates, but I remember the date that on August 25, 1968, a young law school student came in, named Laurence Eck, now a lawyer here in Missoula.

JN: Eck.

SR: Eck. He came in, in the company of a minister I know named Bill Kliber, who was a Methodist minister in town, and Laurie had done a thorough investigation of gambling in Missoula. We had a lot of gambling in Missoula, almost everywhere. We did not have much prostitution. Since I have been here an attempt has been made to open a whorehouse; the cops slammed it shut. There is some free-lance prostitution that goes on but there is no organized whorehouses that exist. There never has been; the cops are pretty good about prostitution. Well, Eck came in with this long report, and I took it home and read it, and was startled because it was a complete study of gambling in Missoula, it really was. He had gone to all the places and played the games and he had it pretty well down. And he knew the law, too. He was a law student. He simply stated flat out again and again that what they are doing is illegal in Montana. The machines they use in the bars, the poker games that go on and all this. I gave it to Coyle, and he read it, and Schermer read it, and they all decided—[interruption, briefly, when someone comes in the office]. We all decided, ok, we'll run this. You know, do a series on gambling in Missoula.

Laurence had been doing all our leg work for us, and he really had it down. We had no reason to distrust him at all, but Schermer was facing two things. It was 1968 election for one thing, which is always a time of turmoil and tension, and two, it was on the brink of what he expected would be some strenuous labor negotiations that would last that fall and winter and he just didn't want to tackle the gambling in Missoula, which is a big thing, and kind of scary, too. It was a big business—before an election, at that time. So the general agreement was, and this was made, we decided this in September, was that we would wait until the New Year and then we would go at it hammer and tongs. A private investigator in Butte had gotten sworn affidavits and all sorts of material from a woman named Beverly Snodgrass, who for years down there had run a whorehouse. It is a fact that in a community you can't run a whorehouse without everybody knowing about it. The cops have to know, the newspaper has to know. You just can't do that in a community without everybody knowing it. It ran, but everybody looked the other way. They had their little whorehouse.

This guy took his sworn affidavits, and all that material, first to the Butte Standard, and said, "Do you want to use this story?" and they said no.

He then took it to the Helena Independent Record and asked, "Do you want to use this story?" And they said no.

So then he went to the Great Falls Tribune, and they said yes, and they assigned a young reporter named John Kuglin, who had formerly worked for the Missoulian, to come down and

go to Butte and to take the sworn affidavits, and interview the people, and take photographs and so forth. And I think it was in October they came out, began coming out with a long series of stories, including a story about a judge down there who used the whorehouse a great deal and was called "Dimple Knees" and everybody was wondering who Dimple Knees was, you know, 'cause that was what the Madame, Mrs. Snodgrass, called him. She called him Dimple Knees.

This story went on and that story had the effect of shutting everything down. It shut just that, even though it dealt with prostitution and nothing to do with gambling, nevertheless, it shut down gambling. The gamblers themselves just got spooked and shut everything down. It shut down everything in Great Falls [he means Butte]. Now, we were kind of irritated at that, and we received information that Great Falls, pointing the finger at prostitution in Butte, had two whorehouses there that they were utterly ignoring. So, the idea was, the decision was made first, the Eck series on gambling in Missoula would start to run right away because we were going to send Holloron, Jerry Holloron, and Sam Reynolds up to Great Falls to expose that story.

Now, if Great Falls is pointing the finger at Butte, it is unseemly for Missoula to point the finger at Great Falls for its sin when we have gambling here. So, in other words, simultaneously to an exposure of Great Falls' sin, we would expose our own, which is what they should have done when they went to the Butte thing. They should have told John Kuglin not only do the story down there, but we'll get the story up and run it simultaneously about our own whorehouses right in our own backyard. Right?

JN: Right.

SR: Ok, so that determination was made and Laurie Eck came in and worked for the better part of a week with one of our reporters, redoing his things, you know, in journalist breakdown, breaking the chapters up and grouping it together and so forth. A great big long series began to appear in the Missoulian. Holloron and I went up. Holloron was at the state bureau at the time, and we went up to Great Falls and everything was shut down but we got plenty of admissions that it had been operating. There had been two whorehouses and lots of gambling, you know, and so forth. So we came back, and we wrote a story about that, and that's the story. It created a great big stir.

JN: This could have been done under Anaconda, could it? Or was this something that—

SR: No, I can't believe that it would. One of the things, John, that I've had to contend with since I've been here, and I'll pay a great deal of credit to Coyle and Erlandson, is the fact that they have gotten braver and there is less and less of the boosterish kind of thing and more and more of the idea that you should tell about your community warts and all.

In fact, the first few months, I arrived in January and took over the editorial page on March 22 of '64, and during that interim, I covered stories and worked as a reporter and one of the things

I did was go to a Democratic meeting, a fundraiser down here in, I think, the Moose Hall over there. One of the things, everybody was playing bingo, which is illegal so it's not to be played. And I wrote that in the story, and they took it out, and I asked them why. And they said, "Well, a few years back, a postmaster here told us that if you ever report on on gambling here I'm going to confiscate the issue with the story, the issue of the paper. And they rolled over and played dead for that and I was outraged.

I said, "God damn it, it happened you know, it happened. You weren't advertising it in advance, it was part of the story."

It should have gone in. I didn't play it up. I just mentioned the various activities, including bingo. But they had been spooked, you see. Just any minor bureaucrat could tell them what to do.

JN: Well, does he have any authority for that?

SR: None whatever. None whatever.

JN: He just said it because he was a buddy of the—

SR: —of whatever it was, and also everybody knew they could spook the newspaper. Schermer told me that when he first arrived there was no good libel law in Montana, for example, and the Anaconda Company, every time anybody would threaten to sue, would roll over and play dead. So everybody knew they could push the paper around. So after he got here, he was always getting calls from some guy or another who wanted his drunken driving citation or whatever it was, left out of the paper and he began to say no. Threats of lawsuits blossomed and so forth. He got a pretty good libel law, protective law through.

JN: With newspaper help?

SR: Oh, yes, the newspapers pushed this through and they started saying no to everybody who called asking for special treatment. And very quickly, oddly enough, the calls stopped. Instead of people getting mad and suing, they never did, of course, it was all bluff.

JN: And that was his—

[End of Interview]