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Oral History Number: 465-008

Interviewee: John Toole

Interviewer: John Newhouse

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Project: Lee Newspapers in Montana Oral History Project

Note: John Toole was a Missoula businessman who was also active in civic and political life. He was elected to the Montana House in 1953, was first vice president of the Montana Constitutional Convention, served on the Missoula City Council and was appointed mayor of Missoula in 1983, serving until 1986. He was also the author of "Red Ribbons: The Story of Missoula and Its Newspaper."

John Newhouse: Don wrote the story on Lee Enterprises coming out here and I think it was based on about 1972 letters he wrote to people.

John Toole: Who did?

JN: Don Anderson.

JT: Oh, Don.

JN: Then he wanted me to bring it up to date and he kind of waved his arms around. Sort of sketchy and just leaving me pretty much to my own devices, I guess. But one of the things he was concerned about was what changes does an outfit like Lee coming into a town make in the town and in the state and I don't know whether you have seen any changes or not.

JT: Oh, well, the taking over of the Lee papers was like a breath of fresh air. It was so vastly different. Those of us who were raised under the dead hand of the Anaconda press, you know, we had tough trouble adjusting to this. We got virtually no local news of any consequence. We got no controversial news. The Anaconda Company took positions on things until about 1930, then the public saw through it and they automatically supported everything that the paper was against and vice versa. And so in 1930 they adopted a policy of complete neutrality, which meant that they took sides on practically no local issues.

They wrote—I think they had capable people—but they wrote innocuous editorials which were not read widely and, of course, to those of us who were interested in building the community it was just terribly frustrating because we didn't have any support in the press. I was chairman of the committee to put in the city manager plan here, which we did in 1954, and they wrote one editorial on the subject and it went about as follows: Tomorrow we vote on whether or not we shall change to the city manager form of government. Some people favor city manager form of government and some people are opposed to city manager form of government; let each man vote his conscience.

That was the sum total of what was an extremely vital issue to the community, that was the sum total of editorial support that we had. They covered the national news. If you would bring down a story to them, if it were not controversial, they would run it. They were noted for keeping prominent people's names out of the columns when they got into trouble with the law, that is for speeding or reckless driving or drunken driving. You could always get them to squelch that.

I remember the sheriff one time went out in a yellow convertible Cadillac, this was maybe 20 years ago, had a strange girl with him and had a head-on collision out here and killed a man when he was drinking and driving. The paper just had a little squib down at the bottom on that and they used a different name in order to take it off the sheriff, they called him by his middle name. This sort of thing. So then, the way you found out about those things it was just by word of mouth, and it was just a fact of life that we have to live with. Of course, this aggressive new management, new regime with the Lee papers was, as I say, a breath of fresh air.

Now, there are a lot of people mad at the *Missoulian* because of the editorial stand they have taken but that's part of the game and I don't always agree with them myself.

JN: John [Talbot] said that you were instrumental in getting a change in the State Constitution.

JT: Well, I was first vice president of the Constitutional Convention and we did write and get it ratified, a new constitution; we're one of the few states that has been able to do that.

JN: And that was done with newspaper help, was it?

JT: Oh, yes, oh, yes, no question about it. The paper was, all of the papers in the Lee chain were active in it, as well as the *Great Falls Tribune*. They all supported it and ran just tremendous amounts of material. It amazes me, the amount of material that the *Missoulian*, which was a relatively small paper, with a small circulation, gets in. It's just astounding how much they put in.

JN: With the Anaconda regime you couldn't have got that support which you needed?

JT: No, no. They wouldn't take an editorial stand on any local issue. They wouldn't consider endorsing any referendum or initiative, nor would they consider endorsing a candidate. If they endorsed a candidate, that would be a sure way to defeat him. But, in the earlier days, of course, they were very active in politics, before 1930, and if you want to go further back than that there is a very colorful history for the time of Joe Dixon. Senator Joe Dixon owned the paper.

JN: He owned it? I didn't know. He was a national senator?

JT: Senator Joe Dixon was Teddy Roosevelt's campaign manager. He was a Progressive Republican from Montana and ran the Bull Moose campaign in 1912. That cost him his seat in the Senate. Then he came out here and ran this newspaper, which was not very profitable for him, but at least he got it run. In 1917 and 1918 he decided to sell the paper and he, of course, had a running battle with the Anaconda all the time he had the paper. He was very—his editorial policy was very pronounced. He wouldn't sell out. They owned other papers and he was determined not to sell out to them and a group of people from Chicago allegedly came out to buy the paper but they were fronts for the Anaconda. They brought over a check for the paper drawn on the Metals Bank in Butte and Mr. [Edward] Donlan, who was one of the hatchet men for Anaconda, said, "You don't dare give a check on the Metals Bank in Butte to Joe Dixon, he will not accept it. Take that check and go to Spokane and get it drawn on the People's Bank at Spokane and then bring it back to Joe Dixon, and he'll take it. But he will smell a rat if it is drawn on a Butte Bank, which he did. And that fellow is still alive, in his late 80s. So I got it from him firsthand.

JN: Joe Dixon is still alive?

JT: No, not Joe Dixon, the fellow who made the deal. The fellow who made the deal. He's still alive. He doesn't care. He says he's got a copper collar and that doesn't bother him a bit.

JN: How do you spell Dixon?

JT: D-I-X-O-N.

JN: And was he a native of Missoula?

JT: No, he was not a native of Missoula, he was a native of North Carolina, but he came here in the 1890s.

JN: So that when he went to manage Roosevelt's campaign, he was a Montanan. He was a Montanan, and he had been here since 1890, and in Congress elected to the U.S. Senate. The Bull Moose campaign was the disaster for him because it completely destroyed his political career for a while and then he became elected governor in 1920. That's another story about the press. This, of course, is going back long before the days of the Lee papers.

Joe Dixon was a great statesman. Most people think he was the greatest man Montana ever produced. He was still a Republican, a progressive Republican. He was elected in the Harding landslide in 1920 and he wanted, he instituted a number of changes in state government, and one thing he wanted was to impose a severance tax on metal mines, which would mean a tax on proceeds of the mines in Butte. He worked hard for this. It required a—the legislature would not pass it. So, he worked hard on it, and he got an initiative on the ballot to provide for this in the election of 1924. The Anaconda Company just took out after him unmercifully in the press between 1920 and 1924. Took out after him unmercifully.

But the upshot of it all was that Joe Dixon was defeated by an Anaconda Company stooge who was Democrat in 1924. But the initiative for the metals mines tax passed, so it was a great personal tragedy. He got his bill through, he got his initiative for the severance tax passed, but in the process defeated himself. And this was almost certainly due to the Anaconda Press. They just rode him unmercifully.

Then, as I say, they were active until about 1930 in taking positions on attacking politicians or defending them and then realized the error of their ways. So, between 1930 and 1959, when you people took over, we didn't have a press really.

JN: Gee, almost 30 years.

JT: Yeah, they carried national news, of course, but they were a terribly dead hand on the community.

JN: And you were here all those years, were you?

JT: I was born here so I remember the way it was but I didn't know anything else. I hadn't traveled widely. I didn't know what a press was supposed to be. In fact, I never learned what a press was supposed to be until the Lee people came along.

JN: How did it get impressed on you then? I mean, how did the transition come?
How did your education develop?

JT: Well, first of all, the thing that amazed people and pleased people was the letters to the editor columns. Anaconda never permitted that, and so the people just started writing letters like mad to the editor, and then, of course, the editorial policy was taking sides on issues was something brand new to everybody, so the editorials were read. I don't think the old *Missoulian* editorials were ever read much.

JN: When did you first come down here and want something for the town? There must have been a time when you came in the office and said, look, we ought to do something. Can we have your help?

JT: Well I did that on a few occasions and then [Guy] Mooney, I forget his first name, he said we don't want to mess in these local squabbles. He said all we do is just stir the pot and make things worse. We make a policy to stay out of local squabbles. That was what he said.

JN: This was after Lee took over?

JT: No, no, this was before. Mooney was the editor.

JN: Before [Lloyd] Schermer got here.

JT: I think Mooney had a hard time adjusting to the Lee method of operation. Mooney was a good man and he would have been good newspaper man, but it was the dead hand of the Anaconda just squelched everybody.

JN: But now, if you got a proposition, why, if it was something you want, you feel free to come in and—?

JT: Oh, yeah, and they haven't always done what I wanted them to do but that's part of the game and I've disagreed with them on many things.

JN: What are some of the things you wanted them to do?

JT: Well, I wanted, they were printing a bunch of articles by Barbara Evans [who was a member of the Local Government Study Commission, created by the new state constitution, to determine every 10 years whether the form of government should be changed] who wants to maintain the status quo of local government. We have a local government review process going on now, and I am chairman of the County Commission and I wanted—I didn't think Sam [Reynolds] should put her, give her the space he was giving her, because she wants the status quo. But he wouldn't agree not to give her space. That type of thing, you know.

JN: Did he give you space, too, though?

JT: Well, I haven't asked for it yet; I thought it was premature to be asking for it. We don't vote on it until next year, but I felt that he was getting the, we want some sort of unification between the city and the county, at least I do. I felt that she does not want that, and I felt that she—that this was a tendency to solidify opposition to unification. She had too much exposure in the press. So, perfectly friendly but, he didn't agree not to give her more space. That's just an example off the top of my head.

We've had a wonderful experience here with Lloyd Schermer. Lloyd was an aggressive—he was fearless, and he was vitally interested in the development of the community, and Lloyd went far beyond what you would expect from the ordinary businessman to go in promoting things that were good for the town. Not only did he do it through the newspaper columns, but through his personal efforts. He was very energetic, and Lloyd and I hit it off great from the start, and we—Lloyd accomplished more than any man in Missoula in the last 30 years, and I was extremely irritated when he elected to go back to Davenport and leave us without any basic leadership at the time.

He provided the leadership and so it's been a great thing and a lot of people were mad at the paper but if you are going to have a free newspaper, that's what's going to happen.

JN: This Constitution that the State adopted, was—there must have been a reason for it, were there good things flowing from that?

JT: We had an old Constitution, which was written in 1889 and it was a 19th century document reflecting political attitudes of the time. It was badly hog-tying state government and local government, and it had a lot of ancient restrictions on taxation in it and at that time it was written there was a lot of mining industry influenced the writing of it. It was a typical 19th Century Constitution which was hog-tying the state thoroughly. We had a terrific battle over the new one. We were into court about six times, and we only won by 2,500 votes. But I think it's a fine [document], simple, has great clarity, and maximum flexibility.

JN: It's making a difference to the people in the state, is it?

JT: Oh, there is no question about it. No question about it. It is making a tremendous difference in the legislature, what the legislature can do. Its effects will be felt more and more as time goes on.

JN: So that really is a plus not only for the *Missoulian*, but for all the newspapers.

JT: All the papers, by all means, really great. We could not have put over the Constitution without it, the cooperation of the press. There just was no way. In fact, the convention could never have been called. Anaconda would have stopped it in the legislature. The legislature had to call the convention. Anaconda would have stopped it in the legislature, but they couldn't do it. Anaconda's influence in the state is waning a great deal now. They have decided to get out of politics and act like a normal company does. Montana Power is now, of course, considered the bad boys. They are being attacked vigorously all over the state. Sometimes I think unjustifiably, but they had made their mistakes in public relations, and they are suffering from it in the legislature.

JN: That's the electric power plant.

JT: The Montana Power or the utility which has the bulk of the electricity and gas distribution in the state.

JN: And that's headquartered in Butte.

JT: They're headquartered in Butte.

JN: Let's see, your business in town, Mr. Toole, is—

JT: I've been in the insurance business for about 30 years and I'm less active in it now than I was. The employees are operating the business because I've wanted to give my time and attention to public service matters. But I am still in the insurance business.

JN: Your one pet project right now is this one unification of the city, and—

JT: We have a local review, a County Study Commission, of which I am chairman, and we're going to attempt to modernize our county and city government. What form it will take, we don't know yet. I personally hope it will be some sort of unification.

JN: I think that is what forward-looking places are doing, that same thing, because they have that same horrible problem. Duplication of services or people in the city paying for county services and not getting any enjoyment.

JT: We have 25,000 people urbanized living outside the city limits. That's a terrible problem.

JN: How many people are there within the city limits of Missoula?

JT: Within the city limits are only 30,000 but in the urbanized area there are over 50,000.

JN: You do have a problem.

JT: The total county is a little over 60,000. The name of the county is Missoula County.

JN: 60,000? Good grief. You don't need a county board. Do you have a county board?

JT: We have a Board of County Commissioners but they are having to deal with urban problems. The rural people are very well treated by the county commissioners

JN: Does the county come into the city at all, in its jurisdiction?

JT: No.

JN: I mean your sheriff, your deputies.

JT: Well, the sheriff can come into the county and make arrests.

JN: Into the city, yeah.

JT: No, no, the two are separated, but the county is trying to cope with an urbanized area of 25,000 people.

JN: Oh, lord. That's right, that is their problem, everything outside the boundaries. It's a city and they are in the county.

JT: The reason we have been unable to annex is because we do not own our water system. We have a privately owned water system. And they will connect anyone up who can pay for it. If we had our water system, we could force them to annex or they wouldn't have any water.

JN: Club you with a gun.

JT: We don't have that and that's the reason we are in this situation.

JN: How many commissioners are there?

JT: There are three county commissioners and there are the City Council of 12 members and a mayor.

JN: But the county commissioners are elected by city people, as well as county?

JT: Yeah.

JN: It would seem to me that the city could force the election then.

JT: Well, there are 25,000 people living in urbanized just outside the city though [who] do not want unification because it means that their taxes will be increased, probably. We don't think that will be increased any more than for the services that they enjoy. It is very complex, it is one of the most difficult things I have ever gotten into.

JN: Sounds like it is. Well, we have this problem back where I come from, and I know it went down the road, a series of stories which showed what services the city people paid for out in the county that they didn't get. You pay half share and it does you absolutely nothing and all that sort of thing.

JT: Sheriff and the clerk and you go right down the line. The road system, et cetera.

JN: See, your brother is, ah—there is two Tooles and you're John. And is your brother K. Ross? Does he have pretty much the same interests you have or—?

JT: He is a professor at the University. He is a professor of Western history, and we share an interest in history. He has done a lot of writing and has written several books on Montana and other subjects, and he does write well. He's now writing a book on problems coal mining is causing in the eastern part of the state. That is a very hot issue now. There are huge deposits of coal.

JN: He's the one who wrote one chapter, I think Sam Reynolds said, on the history of Anaconda or the Anaconda Company.

JT: He wrote a master's thesis on the Anaconda Company, and I haven't seen it for a long time. It is on file at the university. His book, called *The Uncommon Land*, [Montana: An Uncommon Land] deals extensively with the Anaconda, but he made a bad boo-boo in that, because he said—this was written in the 1950s—he said the Anaconda will never turn loose of their newspapers. Two years later they did.

JN: Well, probably just to spite him some good did come out of it.

JT: I think sometimes they wish they hadn't turned loose the newspapers but they really—they really had to, because they were a millstone around their neck, politically. People distrusted the press. The Lee papers were a breath of fresh air when they came in.

JN: How long did it take the people to get around to the point where they trusted the papers they got?

JT: Well, a certain group in town don't trust the paper now because they think the paper is too liberal politically. I have heard some of those people say they wished they had the old Anaconda papers back where they weren't stirring the pot all the time. But those are mostly politically conservative people. I think that the more liberal element in town is very strong for the paper.

JN: Does the paper show its liberalism in the news columns or obviously they would on the editorial page, but do the people criticize the treatment of the news or just the editorial page?

JT: Well, they criticize the news on the grounds that they print stories about things they favor and neglect about things they do not favor. There is that criticism. Then there are a lot of people mad at Sam Reynolds because Sam takes some positions they don't like, but I would say that the paper enjoys much more support than lack of support from the average person. It's the extreme conservatives who are irritated with the paper at the present time.

JN: Well, Lloyd took on the Anaconda Company on this dumping of wastes in the river out here, whatever the river is.

JT: The Clark Fork. Well, actually, the Anaconda has cleaned that up pretty well. When I was young, the river was so badly polluted by mining wastes that the fish couldn't live in it. Anaconda has installed a number of settling pumps way up, about 100 miles east of here, so that the river now is much cleaner than it was when I was a kid.

JN: And this stems at least in part from Schermer's—?

JT: No, this was really done before. Anaconda really purified the river before the Lee people came in.

JN: It was just this one, after the strike, when they had all this material—

JT: The strike; that was bad.

JN: How about air pollution? Didn't the Lee Group get into that too?

JT: Oh, very much so. We've had the problem with the paper mills here and they pushed that very strong and they also helped us get rid of the teepee burners, which were producing so much smoke.

JN: What are they? That's charcoal is it? What's a teepee burner?

JT: A teepee burner is a teepee-shaped steel furnace, which burns wood waste and pours an awful lot of smoke into the skies around here. Those have all been eliminated. The technology was developed so that they could burn all of that stuff with a smokeless fire, and those have all been eliminated.

JN: Again, is this part of the newspaper?

JT: The paper, I think, was instrumental in that to a great degree, and the paper has caused a progressive attitude in the town. For instance, this community carried the new constitution by a plurality of 6,500 votes, whereas it just barely made it in many communities. In many communities it lost heavily, but Missoula has been responsible, I think, partially due to the *Missoulian*, for a very progressive attitude. It's changed the town. It's changed the town, there is no question about it. And to my feeling, much better. There is a lot more we could be doing, should be doing.

JN: But you spent 30 years being frustrated. If you spend 30 years being frustrated, it must be kind of nice to have a—

JT: Yeah, we at least have a letters to the editor column and which people take advantage of.

JN: I never even thought of that, I just thought every paper had a letters to the editor column.

JT: No, we never had that. They didn't believe in it, they just thought it stirred stuff up. So, actually it may be that the advent of the papers here hurt the Anaconda, I don't know, but they certainly weren't doing it very well with their own papers. So the paper came out for the Republican candidate for governor, Sam did, on the basis of his proven integrity and some doubts about the integrity of the man who was elected. The people really got furious with Sam about that—the liberal bit—because they didn't want Ed Smith to be governor.

JN: Sounds like Sam has a bunch of conservatives and some liberals mad at him. He doesn't sound like he has many friends.

JT: Perhaps the liberal attitude in this town is also caused by the increase in the size of the university which is a liberal, has liberal tendencies. I don't like to use the word like liberal—

[Break in audio]

JT: —it has more material in it. I think I—the Sunday paper is just full of it. Of course, on the environment, I don't think there is any question of where the paper stands. They have this fellow Burk, Dale Burk, who a strong environmentalist. Sometimes I think they go overboard with it, but nonetheless, it's a—

JN: How do you spell his last name?

JT: B-U-R-K.

JN: This crazy thing can't spell so I have to help it out now and then.

JT: Well, he does exhaustive work on the environment. I think personally Dale's articles are a little too long. I think people are getting bored with them. He doesn't have the readership he once had. I think you've got to keep your articles short. I'm writing an historical column now. Keep them short. Frequent paragraphs. Dale, I think, is every ponderous. They are too long. They're very scholarly; he does a wonderful job of research. But I don't think he's getting readership he should be getting because people won't read fine print in a newspaper if it's a whole page in length, or a half page.

JN: Schermer's influence went beyond Missoula. I gather he stirred things up in the other papers and got them to feeling they were standing on their own two feet and could take stands.

JT: Burk?

JN: No, Schermer.

JT: Oh, yeah. There's no question about it. I think one of the problems they had, and I don't know this to be true, but I think in Butte the adjustment was difficult for them because they had the old staff and in Butte, the *Standard* was in such a rut because the Anaconda just kept their thumb on them all the time that it was harder for them to adjust to the new ownership than it was in the . The Billings paper was always more independent than the *Standard*. The *Standard* was the one that was really under the thumb of the Anaconda. A lot of those old employees stayed on. So, the *Standard* didn't change too much, at least from my observations.

Of course, we have a very rare fellow here, this editorialist. He's got an acid pen. And none of the papers have anything like that. Everybody reads Sam Reynolds. They get mad at him or else they applaud him. When I say an acid pen, I don't mean that in an uncomplimentary way at all. It's pungent; a way of writing that. He's a hard worker and does a tremendous amount of research. But he gets his facts right all the time.

JN: That can be devastating.

JT: If he doesn't get his facts right, he retracts them. We had a bad situation here. I've been trying to do something about the downtown. I don't know if John told you about this or not. We had the downtown. Well this young gal, I think her name was Sharon [Barrett], she's gone away somewhere now on a fellowship and I can't remember her name. I'll think of it in a minute. She thought she perceived in this downtown effort, to rebuild downtown, some conflicts of interest. And she kind of weaved this conspiracy, a web of conspiracy. Sharon Barrett is her name. A web of conspiracy in an editorial that she wrote, in an article that she wrote, of conflicts of interest. And it was bad. It was very bad. Because she was completely haywire. There was no conspiracy. There were conflicts of interest but there have to be conflicts of interest in a small town like this. Because you're bound to have lawyers representing shopping centers on the one hand and another lawyer in the same firm representing downtown interests. Those things are inevitable in a small town like Missoula.

She wrote this conspiracy, and it definitely made everybody furious. One of the people involved was the bank's firm of attorneys, and the attorney called up and said he was no longer representing the paper. They had already gone through one firm of attorneys, which was mad at them. Well John Talbot himself had to write an apology for that particular article. She was way off base in her innuendo. She's a competent girl, but she was way off base there. But John never did get his attorneys back. I don't know who their attorneys are now, but they've gone through two firms.

JN: There can't be too many in town, at least qualified ones.

JT: There are a lot of attorneys but there aren't too many who are qualified. So that was a serious matter. If you do get too far out, you can get bad repercussions.

JN: The nice thing is when you can come in and scream about it and they have to backtrack. It keeps the paper on its toes. If you don't have some opposition sometime, you get to thinking you're god and sometimes you ain't always god.

Well, gee, Mr. Toole this sure helps me. I can listen to the people at the paper all day and they've got a little bit of an ax to grind. It's nice to listen to some people on the outside. I've got to go talk to Mr. Morrison. I don't know if you've talked to Morrison—

JT: Dick Morrison?

JN: Yeah.

JT: Well Dick was one of the old Anaconda men. Have you talked with Dick yet?

JN: No, I haven't. I know a little of his history.

JT: Dick is an interesting guy. Of course, he's a newspaper man. He was business manager for Anaconda. I always thought Dick was kind of a typical Anaconda newspaper man. I think Dick welcomed the change because he knew they weren't really running newspapers, they were just running whatever it is they were running. But I think it was hard for Dick to adjust to the newspaper's editorial policy. But you'll like him; he's got a good sense of humor and he has a good memory.

JN: He isn't so awfully old, is he? 70?

JT: He would be 70, 75, along in there someplace.

JN: But he's still sharp.

JT: Oh, very much so. But he'll give you a great many details that I couldn't because I was an outsider looking in on it.

JN: Well, it's real nice to get your viewpoint. I enjoyed talking to you.

JT: Thank you. It's an interesting job you're undertaking. And I hope you'll give Don my regards when you go back there.

JN: I will. He was most insistent that I talk to you and he'll be glad to know that I have.

JT: He's a wonderful fellow.

[End of Interview]