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Oral History Number: 465-010

Interviewee: K. Ross Toole

Interviewer: John Newhouse

Date of Interview: 1975

Project: Lee Newspapers in Montana Oral History Project

Note: K. Ross Toole was a historian specializing in the history of the West, particularly Montana. He was director of the Montana Historical Society, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Museum of New Mexico. He taught history at the University of Montana from 1965 until his death in 1981. Toole was the author of "Montana, An Uncommon Land."

K. Ross Toole: I've written a couple of articles, which I will be happy to give to you, on the captive press, which is not strictly a history of the captive press, although there is another very fine article, it was very rare, by John M. Schiltz, who is a legislator saying what it meant to him, the difference between the old press and the new. That's in a very obscure publication, which went out of business. It was a certain underground magazine actually, called Montana Opinion. Now, the library has copies in the lockup case; I could Xerox that and I will send it to you. I will send you several articles that I have written on—not a history of the press exactly, although John comes pretty close—Schiltz—and those would be helpful to you.

John Newhouse: Those would cover the time period from—

KT: He would cover the time period—he got into the FCC Files in Washington. The Anaconda Company applied to purchase a radio station in Great Falls, KBBB, [KFBB] which meant that, for the first time, because of the Federal Communications Commission, they had to open certain of their files, which were never opened before. Those records were in Washington, and parochial people like myself don't get to Washington very often. What John did, and went through the FCC Files, were there were some pretty positive statistics about profit and loss and why you owned these newspapers. They had always said it was a business venture. It gives the profit and loss figures. Of course, they lost [money]. They were not in the newspaper business to make money at all. That's the hardest evidence that you have that their long explanation of profit was essentially balderdash. So that's in the Schiltz article which I will send.

I don't think John's and my perspective would be different, save that my view of it is the longer run than his is because I am a historian. My field is Montana. To use the company papers was impossible for a historian because there was nothing in them of moment. The legislature would be in session, a very critical series of bills may be there, there is no evidence as you look through the company papers that the thing is even in session, let alone what bills of significance are being introduced.

JN: This is a company newspaper?

KT: This is a company newspaper. There is a strange phenomenon; when they first got those newspapers, they got them during the war of the Copper Kings, all of which I won't repeat for you because I've written it and I will send you the articles. They were howlingly, extraordinarily polemic; they were a tremendous amount of fun. The *Butte Miner* would call the *Montana Standard*—whatever you call the headlines that day—“It is a bald-faced lie.” That would be the headline, then they would take off on each other because there was a feud between the copper kings— and that's Marcus Daly who owned the *Anaconda Standard*, which was a superb newspaper—and William Andrews Clark owned the *Butte Miner*. And the war between the two papers was just fascinating because there is no such thing as libel, it's a double-edged sword. They were calling each other everything under the sun, and editorials were dripping with venom and invective. It was just wonderful. The truth isn't at issue, but they're wonderful, but beyond that, once you got away from the war of the Copper Kings, the *Anaconda Standard* was just a remarkable newspaper because the money was unlimited. John Durston, the editor, and the story is true, was a philologist from Syracuse and he didn't want to come to Montana, the outpost of journalism, the outpost of everything. Daly said, “What are you getting paid?” at the *Syracuse Journal [Standard]*—or whatever it was—so Durston told him, and Daly said, “Well, multiply that by seven, and that's your salary.”

After all, this man has so much money it was coming out his ears.

JN: What happened?

KT: Why, Durston came. So that the news coverage, aside from the feud, is again, remarkable. Because, god, they had a correspondent, a permanent correspondent in Washington, D.C., which for a country newspaper was quite something. More than that, they had not stringers, but permanent correspondents, [in] Anaconda, of course, Butte. The *Anaconda Standard* was published only 12 miles away. [But also in] Missoula, Hamilton, Billings. These were permanent people. They had the first colored comics in the U.S., which fascinates me. Two guys by the name of Thorndike and Trowbridge had invented this process and Durston mentioned it to Daly and Daly said, “Get them!” And Durston said, you know, it's experimental. “I don't care, get them!” So, you know, they got the first colored comics. It was a remarkable newspaper.

JN: This was Anaconda, now?

KT: This was the *Anaconda Standard*, but so was the *Butte Miner*. This was owned by W.A. Clark, equal money, equal talent, equal excellence in terms, once you get away from the local scene. In the 1930s, perhaps a little earlier, a new policy was evolved, God only knows the precise date, or why, exactly, the War of the Copper Kings is over. The policy changed, that break is very, very clear. My date is a little off on this but, again, that will be in the article. From about, let's assume 1930 to 1957, the date of the sale. Is that '57 or '59?

JN: '59.

KT: The policy was, drop a blanket on everything. Just stop it, everything. Roy Glover [chairman of the board of Anaconda Co.] was queried by the FCC, how do you define it? New York Times says All the News That's Fit to Print. What is your definition of how you run the newspapers? Again, that is in the article.

"We don't engage in yellow journalism; we embarrass in our papers, no one."

Which really was quite a statement of policy for a newspaper, good god.

JN: Probably the first time.

KT: I would think so. In any event, the papers then become just deadly. Utterly dead. For instance, Lee Metcalf could be running for United States Senate. It's not that they—I'd been very relieved. I'd been supporting Metcalf and [unintelligible] blast him. On the contrary, you don't know that he is running for the United States Senate. People from outside Montana find it extraordinarily hard to believe that the captive press was precisely that, that these were not newspapers and if you don't have a free press, where do you go with reform? How do you start the ball rolling towards the ending of a scandal? Since, at the same time, the Anaconda Company controlled the legislature—and I'm not a howling liberal—they simply did, and I could prove it so demonstrably that you don't have to worry about it.

Montana goes into a weird period of not somnolence. Well, guess somnolence is as good a word. Nothing happens here. We used to get some lovely editorials on robins in spring and handsome first-rate editorials on the affairs in Afghanistan, but you never got any news about Montana at all.

There was, of course, widespread discontent in the state. People also subscribed to the New York Times, the Denver Post, and, although it was a lousy paper, the Spokesman Review. There was always anger about it, but what are you going to do? They own the newspapers and that's it. We all grew accustomed, in a way. Of all the pernicious things about it is that you almost come to accept this as normal. This is the newspaper, it's on your front porch. You have to keep reminding yourself, no, it's not a newspaper, it's a nothing. It's robins in spring, it's Afghanistan.

The shock when the Lee people took over fascinates me because the first thing that everyone suspected was the sale was rigged. Under no circumstances would the company sell these presses to any outfit that wasn't going to do essentially, that wasn't at least going to make a promise that it would lay off the company. And that was the minimum we suspected. We really expected that there were other strings attached. The people in Wisconsin said no, there are no strings attached here, none, but we didn't believe that. We had every cause not to believe it. As you know, it happens to be the truth and very quickly, it became apparent that it was the truth, that there were no strings. Because very quickly controversial issues of all kinds began to show up in the newspapers.

It was a palpable shock to those of us who lived through both periods, the captive press and the Lee press, that this could be occurring. Then, of course, as you know, the papers vary from paper to paper, the *Billings Gazette* is not like the *Missoulian*. The *Missoulian* began to get into very dangerous territory. Extremely dangerous territory, in our view. They began to attack the company, they began to say this is unconscionable. They began an environmental series, which were devastating. I read this in growing disbelief. It can't be happening. Hoerner-Waldorf is right here in this town, very important to our economy and also stinks up our air pretty badly and causes a great deal of pollution. They began to attack Horner- Waldorf.

They went to public hearings and reported what was going on at these public hearings. People who didn't go through the captive press period—some—were very critical. This isn't really a very good newspaper: look what it didn't cover here, look what it didn't cover there. I am totally without perspective on [unintelligible] because I lived all my life almost with the older press. I'd argue, and do to this day, man, you just don't know what you are talking about.

These papers are covering all the essential news of Montana. They are the [unintelligible], they are— there is no question that they have no fear of controversy. There is no question that anybody is telling them what to write. The letter page has opened up, the local comment page has opened up. You can say any god-damn thing you want in there. For the captive press guy, this is confounding. The result, for instance, of newspaper coverage—I'll just stick to one subject, because it is very important to us in Montana—the environment, is that the environmental movement in Montana is very, very strong. I know the people in other states say theirs is. I would argue.

I've just finished a book published by Little Brown that precisely [unintelligible]. That it is probably stronger in Montana for various reasons I won't go into than it is almost anywhere. This could never have gotten off the ground or continued or obtained support without that press. No way. No way. Radical legislation, genuinely radical legislation, on land use of all kinds has passed this legislature in the last two sessions. Couldn't even have introduced such legislation without the background of a public grown angry by abuses of which they were aware only by the newspaper.

JN: This was pretty much industrial land use?

KT: Yes, industrial and bad timber cutting practices. The *Missoulian*, of course, has been on timber cutting practices, especially with respect to Flathead Valley and Bitterroot Valley, with a vengeance. With such a vengeance, as a matter of fact, by Dale Burk and by [editorial page editor Sam] Reynolds, that the Forest Service literally had to change its policies, which is incredible.

JN: This is on clear-cutting, is it?

KT: Clear-cutting, plus another practice, waste, overcutting and damaging the watershed, siltation of the water, beyond clearcutting. We suddenly got the United States Forest Service out here. Last week, the EPA came into the picture, because of an irate public, essentially. You don't get an irate public unless they get to reading the newspaper [unintelligible]. And they say, we've got a terrible problem here and we best stop this thing. Otherwise what happens, nothing? So, critical though these people may be, if you haven't covered this or that, the favorite thing of mine, the difference between the old press and the new press is the difference between self-government in Montana, and the lack of it.

That is such a statement that it needs proof. The proof lies in the legislature. The proof lies in the unbelievable sharp change in the acts introduced in the past by the legislature of this state. We have only had 10 years of experience in self-government and that's an incredible statement also. Yet it is true. It's true, we have not had a legislature which represented a constituency, except one, except one. And that was a power complex. I am essentially a conservative person. I'm not sitting here popping off all things liberal are good and all things conservative are bad. I am simply saying we did not have self-government because you can't get people stirred up about anything if they don't know about it, and you only know about it if you read about it, and if you don't read about it in the newspapers where the hell else are you going to read about it?

Muckraking—Joseph Kinsey Howard came out with a book, *Montana High, Wide, and Handsome*, in which he raised holy hell about some awfully bad situations. Circulation of that book was rather large, but it is a one-shot deal. Newspaper is day after day, after day, after day, hitting on the same issues. Scandals that would have gone totally unnoticed and indeed did go totally unnoticed—we know them now via the archives and prowling around in governors' papers, etc., we didn't know at the time at all.

JN: Then you could take action.

KT: It was all over by the time historians get to it. We've got one going now. We've got several going now. They are little Watergates. There are going solely because of the pressure [unintelligible]. This forces government, simply forces the people, they don't really want to do anything about this. It's embarrassing, it's embarrassing to the party, in this case the Democratic party, which is overwhelmingly in now. But what position are they in? Can't cover it up. Day after day, it's hit.

Workmen's Compensation. This is what this is what's happening. This is what it says. Judge so-and-so said this. Every day. Workmen's Compensation. The Democrats have no choice, they have got to get into it. Because it happened. So there. My view, and a lot of other peoples'. You will find most of them in their 50s or 40s, comparing before and after. We think we have fine newspapers; we are not totally parochial. We are aware of the fact that the *Denver Post* gives more in-depth coverage to subjects than do our papers. We are also aware of that fact that they have more money, more pages, more print, more everything in which to do so. We think that the in-depth coverage, for instance, which our papers have engaged in, is remarkable. We

have space limitations, staff limitations, but some of the series have been, we think, truly in-depth.

The word is not inept [unintelligible]. When Dale Burk turns loose on forest practices, day after day, in a series, that's exactly what it is. It is in-depth reporting. We're just not used to that. We would, I think feel that Burk would be a tremendous asset on any newspaper. There have been, as you know, a whole series of in-depth things on the Indians. On education. This was inconceivable just a very few years ago. It is enormously effective because it gives, for instance, rural people—almost all of them whom subscribe to the papers—it's a simply different point of view. Which they never had before. Totally isolated before, now they are really not. They know that that legislature is over here. They know the critical—

[Break in audio]

JN: He's in British Columbia at the moment.

KT: Well, you can go see his second in command. His name is Ken—

[Break in audio]

KT: In any event, the person you ought to talk to if Shorty [Horace Kessler] is gone is a man with a very sharp wit, delightful fellow and reads your newspapers. Lee newspapers, with a passion. What is his name? Henry Pennypacker. And, actually, Henry would be better than his boss because he is more articulate. He's very sharp and the papers have so infuriated Shorty and Henry because of their attack on clearcutting, timber cutting, sustained yield etc. They grow very impassioned, but Henry would be a great help to you because he is a very articulate fellow. [Koessler and Pennypacker were principals in Intermountain Lumber in Missoula.]

JN: Are they in that business?

KT: Oh yes, they are in the lumber business.

JN: Come on in, Pete.

Bob "Pete" Peterson: I've got a 3 o'clock meeting.

RT: What is your last name?

JN: Newhouse.

KT: John Newhouse, Bob Peterson.

JN: Glad to know you, Pete.

KT: John, are you—I forget your hierarchy back to Wisconsin, but are you the head of the Lee people press or—?

JN: Oh, God, no.

KT: You're one of the family?

JN: No, I've been a reporter on the *State Journal* for about 30-some years, and when Don Anderson had picked me write the story of the Lee Syndicate, he fell back on me because he knew me. So when [Stuart] Adler retired, I wrote a book about Adler, and when [Lee] Loomis retired, why I—

KT: That's why the name is so familiar.

JN: So, hell, I'm not anybody.

KT: It was a nice thing to say, because if you were the big chief back there, you would be working like a dog with ulcers. I will send you what I have written, and others, on the press. Where do I get—

BP: I'm not trying to push—

KT: I've got to go because—

JN: I retired last fall, last spring, so I'm moving into a new home now that's 4341 Bagley Parkway, Madison, Wisconsin 53705. If you lose that, which God knows you could, why, just give it to John Talbot and ask him to make sure I get it.

KT: I won't lose it.

[Break in audio]

Which may interest you, I will think of it and I will simply send them to you, doctor visitations, which, I think parts of which might interest you. [unintelligible] is horrible but there is information is in there, doctor information.

JN: There is just one other thing I wanted to ask you, and that is: obviously the press is helping the people today, but as a historian, you look not only backward, and today, but you look ahead, and I imagine you, in looking ahead, you can see a better state, a better whatever?

KT: We have a problem in the state of tremendous proportions. It is strip-mining. Of course, this is true of all the Northern Great Plains. We're involved now in, and again, the critical things are

happening in Montana, not Wyoming, not Colorado not British Columbia, about which you could do nothing, not North Dakota, they are happening in Montana. Again, the press has been deeply involved in the strip-mining issue. It's very difficult for the Peabody Coal Company to pull certain deals at which they're old hands. They have a very bad reputation out here. One of the consequences of is that the Northern Cheyenne Indians are now suing the Peabody Coal Company. All leases issued on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation were cancelled by the U.S. government, and it all began with the press.

JN: Is this Doc [Duane] Bowler [editor of the *Billings Gazette*]?

KT: It's Doc Bowler. Once you open that can of worms, now, now people begin to get excited to get the investigation. Northern Cheyenne are out of a terrible problem that they were having.

JN: Well now, this winds up with you get into national policies because if you haven't got coal then you got to go to solar or [unintelligible] or—

KT: Right, it gets into national, it's terribly complicated for that reason. Montana is not saying, you may not mine our coal, at least the knowledgeable environmentalists, [versus] the lockup people we call freaks. We say, you will only strip where we say you can strip because of the complexities of ground water and alluvial soil.

Only 15 percent of the total coal in Montana, which is 50 billion tons, is in alluvial valleys. We want you to leave that alone. That's where the agriculture is now. Under certain conditions, yes, we'll let you strip here because it will be restored, reclaimed. Of course, that's much more expensive. If you want to strip down to the bottom, we've only got 50 feet to go for that coal. The object is not to stop stripping. It's to control stripping, and reclamation. It's very, very tight. The press has been of inestimable value in explaining to the Montanan, no, no, no, we're not locking up, we're not losing that tax money because you are only dealing with 15 percent. There are billions of tons. We're really saying move the hell out of where the damage is, move the hell out of where you are going to pollute the rivers, the coal is there.

Right, we just stuck a 30 percent tax on it, which is the highest in the United States. There has been a great hug and cry. Sam Reynolds wrote an editorial about it the other day. They'll go mine in Wyoming, no they won't, or yes, they will, let them go. Sooner or later, they must come back to our coal.

JN: It won't be a ruined country.

KT: It will not be a ruined country. Sam's editorial was right on the nose. We're not saying, no we're not going to help the United States of America, we're not going to secede from the Union. We're simply saying, it's our state, yes, you can strip, but we're going to tell you where, how, and under what circumstances.

JN: You're in the history department? You're a professor?

KT: Yes.

JN: Department head?

KT: No, thank god.

JN: You're free.

KT: I'm a free man.

JN: Good. I'm just a member of the department. My field is western history, but my real interest is Montana.

JN: Good. Thanks a lot; it's been a real pleasure.

[End of Interview]