

Maureen and Mike

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This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

**Oral History Number: 465-012**

**Interviewee: Edward Coyle**

**Interviewer: John Newhouse**

**Date of Interview: 1975**

**Project: Lee Newspapers in Montana Oral History Project**

*Note: Edward Coyle worked in public relations for Montana Power Co. until joining the Montana Standard as a reporter in 1947, where he worked for 18 years, ultimately becoming news editor. In 1960 he was named editor of the Missoulian, a post he held until 1977, when he became executive editor. He retired in 1982.*

John Newhouse: Were you in Butte when the takeover was—when Lee took over in '59?

Edward Coyle: Yeah.

JN: Well, I guess what I probably need to know more than anything else was, well, Erlandson was here, wasn't he, during that time?

EC: Yeah, Ed started here about—when he got out of J-School I think he went to Helena and he worked for a short time on the Helena Independent. Then he came back to Missoula about '39 and has been here ever since.

JN: You've gotta let me know if I'm taking time that you should be doing—

EC: No, no. This is just as good as any time. I've just got a lot of paperwork to be catching up on.

JN: Kick me out when you think it's indicated. You were at Butte when Lee took over, what was your reaction there?

EC: I think it appeared to people that were working that we were going to have more opportunity to do a more professional job on the newspaper because, you know, we were getting into a group who were good newspaper managers and had that expertise. And they opened up a lot of vistas to us of attending seminars and things that we had never done under the Anaconda papers.

JN: What was your position there, Ed?

EC: Well, I was the news editor the last couple of years.

JN: You were right in there where the action was. Did you start in to well, relax, and did you start in to cover stories that you otherwise might not cover under Anaconda, right away quick? What kind of a transition was there then?

EC: Well, yes, we had more flexibility to cover mine accidents and labor problems, that type of thing. There were restrictions on prior—the human-interest type stories I liked to do a lot of, that didn't make much difference to us. The political arena was not a great deal of change there; the last few years of the Anaconda managing the papers, they weren't too interested anymore. The emphasis was more on their foreign operations rather than the domestic at that time. There wasn't a great deal of concern about the national political picture or the state and local. They seemed not too much concerned with how things went.

JN: You could write pretty much what you wanted?

EC: Yeah. There weren't any restrictions.

JN: Did you endorse candidates for office at that time—?

EC: No. No we didn't.

JN: Did people in Butte much care at that time whether you ran a good paper or not? I gather in Missoula under Anaconda that there were people who thought there was a blanket on the news. But did the people in Butte, did they care particularly or were concerned about having a good paper?

EC: Well, some people did. You've heard reference to the copper collar and people in government, police, sheriff, they would always refer to that, [implying] you had to read the *Great Falls Tribune* to get the news or something like this. And this was true in some limited areas but ah, oh, I think as far as a lot of coverage that we were giving sports and everything, I thought we were doing a pretty good job.

JN: Who is over in Butte now that was there when Lee took over?

EC: Well, there's not many left. Gaskill, the editor, he was there.

JN: Gassley?

EC: Bert Gaskill. He's still there. And of course [Duncan] "Scotty" Campbell was there; he was advertising manager.

JN: Well if I talked with Gaskill he would know.

EC: Yeah, Bert's been there since '47, I think. Now, Joe Clark is still there, but he is retiring in June, I think. As far as the newsroom goes, they are the last two, it's a whole new crew.

JN: Gaskill would know pretty much what has been done to improve the plant and ah, the manpower—

EC: Oh, yeah. Bert started reporting, I'm pretty sure it was in '47. He had about a quarter to go at the university here in journalism, and, as I recall, he came over and was hired for the summer and then he decided to stay on.

JN: Kind of a long stay.

EC: Yeah, I'm pretty sure he was hired for the summer, as I remember. Then they needed, oh, somebody left or something and the job was open so he stayed on. He's been the editor now for a few years now. I don't know exactly how many.

JN: He isn't on vacation now or something.

EC: No, I just talked to him on the phone. About 2 o'clock.

JN: Fine so he's still around. Gee, I talked to so damn many people I can't really think of anything new to ask. I imagine you have noticed some changes since Lee took over. Quite a few I would gather.

EC: Oh, yes. Salaries have been upgraded, and we got into a new atmosphere of professional journalism really. We had very little direction as far as innovations in display and this type of thing. When I took over as the news editor, that was just about the time—after a few months, it was 1959 [phone rings, interview interrupted]. The editor at that time was retiring, Law Risken, we sat down and he said, "Well, I think you'll have the capacity of doing a little more on display with this new organization, they go in for visual impact," and this is what we started right away in Butte.

We used bigger pictures, we went to a horizontal makeup, and we used some visual attractions to lay out a more attractive newspaper. We started that right away. Of course, we did a lot of than when I came over here in '60, and we got new typefaces, and we just started a different type of makeup. Bolder headlines. When I came here, they had a restriction that the biggest head you could have on an inside page was a two-column, unless it was a streamer. You know, this type of thing. The publisher here then was Lloyd [Schermer]. He said we want to change the appearance of the *Missoulian*, and so we worked on new typefaces and put a little more color in, darker or blacker headlines, and used some [unintelligible] and boxes.

I still think you can get more people to read a story if it's packaged attractively than if you have a very small headline. We tried to anchor our pages with an impact to the left side, and we learned these things by attending these seminars and things that they sent us to. Before, we didn't even go to the Press Association convention when it was in Butte. It was a very routine operation, and the emphasis was more on getting the paper out, and there wasn't too much emphasis on typography or those types of things.

We had a good crew in Butte in the '50s there, one of the fellows is now the information director for Montana Power, Owen Grinde. He was on the staff. The financial vice president of Montana Power, Colin Raff, he was on our staff. John [Kamps?] who retired just a couple of years ago as regional AP correspondent in Washington, D.C., he was one our staff; we had a pretty good bunch of newsmen. And we did a lot of things in the area where we could operate freely, oh, features and human interest stories. We accomplished quite a few things in that area.

JN: After the Lee Group came in, then you spread out in areas where you had not been so free to operate in.

EC: One of the first things we did when we came over here was to get this sewage plant built for Missoula. That was one of our biggest. When I first came here they had had a bond issue that had been defeated in two previous elections to clean up the Clark Fork River and get a sewer system built. All the sewage was dumped into the Clark Fork River, so for 30 days prior to the election we ran a kind of a cartoon on the cover with a little box around it called a "Gerry Germ," and one of the artists from the forest service drew a germ, kind of a personalized germ with a kind of a frightening appearance, and then we wrote little captions about the milk, the water, and all the different aspects of what was happening, and what could result if this bond issue went over. So, it went over. The next election. The river's been cleaned up pretty well. We're fishing in it now, and that's something they weren't doing. We have a whole area of environment, investigative-type of things.

[End of Interview]