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**Interviewee: Robert McGiffert**  
**Interviewer: David Brooks**  
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David Brooks: All right, so I'm David Brooks and I'm the interviewer for The University of Montana's Oral History Project. Today is May 31, 2006, and I'm talking with Robert McGiffert, who was a journalism professor here at the University. Mr. McGiffert, I was hoping you could start by talking a little bit about your personal and educational background and what brought you to The University of Montana.

Robert McGiffert: Sure. I was a newspaperman in Pennsylvania. I served in the army in World War II. When I came home from that I went to work for a daily newspaper in Pennsylvania and was city editor of that paper for 10 of my 16 years there. Went from there to—got into teaching when I was about 40. I went to Ohio State, joined the journalism faculty there, taught there for four years, and came out here after being invited to fill in for a year when they had some people on leave at the Journalism School, mainly the dean at that time, Nathaniel Blumberg. I was at a point where I was going to have to change jobs because I had gotten in a big tangle with the president of Ohio State [laughs] and wound up as the leader of a group of dissidents who opposed the appointment of a new director of the School of Journalism.

I learned rather quickly in that new academic career that it's not like losing an election for sheriff and going back four years later and trying again. When you lose to the president of the U, you go someplace else. So that's what brought me here to Montana. Nate Blumberg knew that I was going to be changing jobs and they had this spot that they wanted filled, so I came here and 40 years later I'm still here. It was supposed to be for one year, but—

DB: What year was that, when you came here?

RM: Came here in 1966.

DB: And under what capacity, what was your job?

RM: I was a visiting lecturer in the School of Journalism. I had been an assistant professor of journalism at Ohio State and so I came here to teach newspaper courses, actually. Editing, reporting, I also taught media law for most of the time that I was here. And I stayed on the full-time faculty until 1990. My last year I was acting dean [because] the then-Dean Charlie Hood had gone to Japan for a year or so. I was the acting dean and then I retired from full-time and taught for about five years after that. Very important to what I was doing here was what I did every summer for many years. I went back East and worked full-time for the *Washington Post* for many summers. Also, for several summers I worked for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, and for a

couple of summers I went to France and worked for the *International Herald Tribune* in Paris. I felt that was important, if I was going to teach journalism, that I keep doing journalism.

DB: And what was the journalism school like when you first got here?

RM: Well, it was a lot smaller, and of course the technology has made a big change in how they do things. I think it's a better school now, probably, than it was during the years when I taught here. It's always been a good school, emphasizing the fundamentals. It's been a professional school. It's resisted over the years the trend to journalism schools becoming communications research operations. We never did that. We have essentially tried to prepare students for entry-level jobs in journalism and for careers as journalists.

So it was smaller, more intimate. [chuckles] The year I came here to fill in for a year I taught seven different courses. So I really got to know the students well. I remember students from that first year I was here, 40 years ago, much better than a lot of student groups later when I didn't teach so many courses and had bigger classes. But essentially, basically, it really hasn't changed. The faculty are people who have done it, they're professionals, and we have few if any theoreticians. They're people who know how to do what they're teaching and have had experience doing it.

DB: So having not been in journalism, tell me about the difference in technology and what you said is things being far different in '66 than they came to be here, and just being simpler.

RM: Well, the whole process, the manufacturing process of newspapers has changed. There were still, when I came here in the mid-1960s, there was still a lot of newspapers published on the old letterpress manufacturing system. The tendency was to— a strong tendency to [adopt] photo offset but there still were a lot of newspapers put out by the same process that had been used since the 1890s. Then came the computer, and that just changed the mechanics of how you did things in the newsroom and how you produced the newspaper. And of course, with the Internet and the research capability that you have at your fingertips now, [versus] the typewriter that you used to have to use, the journalist [had to go to] the newspaper's library and dig into musty clip files and stuff like that. It was just a real change in the business, which of course is reflected in how it's taught. But they're still emphasizing the basics of research, writing and editing, reporting and interviewing.

DB: So, of course one thing that this school and most universities have is a newspaper, a student newspaper, or a University newspaper. Were you involved with the *Kaimin* at all?

RM: Not very much. The *Kaimin* is an independent newspaper. What got me in trouble at Ohio State, by the way, was the student newspaper because there the Ohio State *Lantern*, made famous by James Thurber and some others, was the laboratory newspaper for the School of Journalism. So when the newspaper offended the president of the University—it was a very super-sensitive president of course—that made him hostile to the Journalism School and some

of the budget of the newspaper came from the University. We were fairly constantly under threat to have our budget cut if the president didn't like what was going on. So some of the faculty, and I was one of them, spent a lot of our time defending and protecting the newspaper, and protecting its freedom.

Here it's different. The *Kaimin* gets advice from the J-School of course, the newsroom is in the Journalism School, but it is independent, gets no funding from the school's budget, has an advisor who really is an advisor and does not tell them what to do. So I was involved to the extent that I let them know what I thought of the paper, good and bad, and was always available for advice, posted stuff on the bulletin board outside my office, and there were some years when we had a regular rotation on faculty critiquing the *Kaimin*, because almost the entire staff are students. So there's a very close relationship but the *Kaimin* was independent and I had no formal connection with it.

DB: So as a newsman, you'll no doubt be familiar with, when I mention that in '66 when you would have come here, probably that's at the tail end, but many people would still argue that there was some influence of the Company on newspapers in Montana, and the Anaconda Company's legacy in journalism here.

RM: Oh yeah. They were about seven years into the Lee [Enterprises] era when I came. I think it was 1958 [when Anaconda sold its newspapers] and Lee came in at the end of the '50s. So the Company was out so far as the Missoulian and the other company papers were concerned.

DB: And are you familiar with how rapidly or in what ways journalism changed in this state at that time?

RM: Oh it changed, really changed totally. The Company control of the political and the business and all the reporting, it was just removed and they became real newspapers.

DB: And the *Kaimin*, having never been an Anaconda-owned or affiliated paper, would have certainly been somewhat unique in the state before '58.

RM: Oh, I suppose in a way. [The Great Falls Tribune was the only major paper in Montana not owned by the Anaconda Company.] But being a University...it created a lot of waves, it was well-known. There's a guy named David Rorvik, who you may have heard of, who was a very outspoken, profane, rabble-raising editor of the *Kaimin*, and got a lot of people in the Legislature upset. This is before I came. I do know Rorvik but he had left the year before I came here. But it was very controversial, and they had trouble with their own print shop. There's a printer who refused to set the word "fuck" [chuckles] in type and it was a big issue as to whether he should be fired or praised. I think the Legislature passed a resolution praising his stand. [laughs] But that's outside my experience. It's just stuff that I heard about after I came here.

But Rorvik, the student editor, was a famous figure. He went on to an interesting career by the way, ghost writing medical books or writing books “as told to David Rorvik.” Eventually just blew himself out of the water by writing a story [a book], purporting to be true and holding to that position, called “The Cloning of a Man” and this was way back around in the mid-’70s, before Dolly the sheep had been cloned. He insisted it was true, but of course it wasn’t, and so far as I know he’s never written anything under his own name since then. He was a regular columnist for *Esquire* for awhile, quite a well-known graduate of our school.

DB: How about since you got here, in terms of the *Kaimin* and the sort of reporting that—that are stories you remember that would have caused a tension or—

RM: You know, the *Kaimin* has caused a lot of irritation in Main Hall constantly, as any student newspaper ought to. But there haven’t been any real crises over stories it’s carried. The president or a provost, and sometimes a dean of students, there’s been a lot of aggravation in Main Hall and they have leaned on the *Kaimin* and tried to lean on the advisor, but there hasn’t been any real crisis. It’s been a pretty honest newspaper. And it goes up and down depending on the staff, the quality of the staff undulates, let’s say. Some years it’s a much better publication than it is in other times. I think they’ve been pretty good in the last few years, since I’ve left, I’ve been impressed by the students.

DB: Definitely I’ve seen a number of the student bylines move on to Montana’s major papers anyway.

RM: Oh yeah. Our students have generally done pretty well. They get good internships; they get a lot of awards. But I’m kind of out of touch with it now. I haven’t—I don’t even read it [the *Kaimin*] regularly. My reading is limited by my poor vision so unless something’s called to my attention in the *Kaimin* I don’t waste what vision I have on the computer screen.

DB: You know, plenty of people have made the sort of lay observation that education and students are going downhill over time. And you said that the quality of the paper undulates, so you seem to not think that we’re falling in a downward spiral in terms of education and students in the Journalism School anyway.

RM: Oh, I don’t think so. ‘Course I’m not reading their stuff regularly and when I taught I was a daily critic of tons of papers all the time, so I had a better sense of what was going on. But to judge from what our kids are doing when they leave here, from the awards they’re winning and what I hear from faculty it’s—the quality is pretty high. The quality of preparation in English grammar and vocabulary, sentence structure and so on has always been shitty. And I suppose that’s probably even more so now that people are doing less reading than they used to, but...

DB: You know you mentioned your, the importance of your trips back East to work at the *Washington Post* or *Baltimore Evening Sun*, the *Herald Tribune* in Paris, what sort of effect did

those experiences of keeping your hand in the reporting world, being a newspaperman, have on the classroom?

RM: Oh, it just gave me a lot more confidence that I knew what the hell I was talking about. And I think that the students sensed that. I didn't constantly talk about what had happened last summer, but it's there and you're talking about people who are currently writing, they're reading stories that are currently being covered and it has to have an effect on your command in the classroom. I wouldn't have had any confidence at all if I'd stayed away from it, particularly seeing the technology changing and the other changes in the business, the ownership, and the problems of independence, group ownership and so on. I had to experience that first-hand to really feel comfortable talking about it. And, you know, in other fields like law, I did my course in media law was essentially a First Amendment course, but a lot of it was libel. Because I was working in the business I was aware of problem stories, that I might not have been aware of otherwise. You know, a doctor couldn't teach taking out an appendix unless he did it once in awhile I think. [chuckles]

DB: That's a good analogy. [chuckles] So in the time, in the 40 years you were teaching as well as keeping your hand in the reporting world, what, if anything, changed in terms of student concerns or interests in news, and I suppose along with that your curriculum. What did you change in terms of courses you taught, material you taught?

RM: Well, I tried to stay current with the...just what's going on in the world, as far as that kind of change. Lots of changes. I had to stay current in legal matters and follow court decisions closely, because there are a lot of changes in the law governing mass communications at the time I taught there. Big sea change in libel law that the most important controlling case, that the U.S. Supreme Court decided, was in 1964 and so much of, and interpretations of that decision, a case called *New York Times* against Sullivan, constantly changing interpretations in the Courts of Appeals and in the Supreme Court as to what that case meant. So you just had, as in the society generally, there were just lots of changes you had to keep up with.

DB: And did students bring varied interests or new interests to the...?

RM: Oh, yeah, you were asking about students. I think the most interesting times as far as relations with students are concerned were the '60s and '70s, during the Vietnam protest era. Kids, students, were much more engaged, I think, with what was going on in the world. You could sense that, over the years. When I left around 1990, there was Desert Storm to think about, but the student concern with what was going on in the broader society seemed really tamped down. This was a really energetic place during the Vietnam protest period.

DB: Can you recollect some examples here on campus of that engagement?

RM: Oh, big examples. I can picture a huge rally on the Oval. Thousands of students out there, I think we counted 5-, 6,000 people...or that's the best estimate. And of course we were

watching very closely what the administration did, and on other campuses there was violence. Terrible killings at Kent State, bombs in Madison and ROTC offices set fire other places and you had the sense that this was a tinderbox here, and thanks to a wonderful president named Robert Pantzer, there was no violence on this campus. Plenty of protests, plenty of feeling, but he just very adeptly handled that and let the protests go on without aggravating them. And they never got out of hand. Biggest thing that happened was some students occupying the ROTC offices one morning. [laughs] There was some fear that somebody might set fire to the place over in the Schreiber Gym, but nothing happened. Just a lot of talk. But there were interesting faculty members then too, who were very vocal in opposition to the Vietnam War. Caused a lot of hostility in the community and in the Legislature.

DB: I was going to ask you to talk about your fellow faculty members through the years when you were here. People you remember, of significance. Particularly in the Journalism School.

RM: Well, I've been very lucky in every job I've had I've worked with people that I liked very much and respected a lot. The journalism faculty was professional people that I had high regard for and I also liked them. I like newspeople. I like iconoclasts and you find a lot of them in the business. There are people who worked hard. The Journalism School may not be unique on the campus, but I suspect it may be in that faculty don't have office hours, their doors are always open. One of the problems, well, in my life and I think in other peoples' too, is that when you do that, there's a lot of things that don't get done during the day that you have to do after you go home at night. But the faculty has always been available and close to students, concerned with students. Nathan Blumberg was a—he's still living up at Flathead Lake—he was the dean when I came here and he was an outspoken anti-war guy, pro-civil-rights guy. Famous as a teacher as a very hard taskmaster so far as students were concerned, but a very sharp guy.

DB: How so? What was it like being in his class that makes you say he was a taskmaster?

RM: His students were kind of afraid of him. He was very challenging, demanded a lot. Demanded people support their opinions. Most of us did that, but we did it in different ways. He was kind of an explosive guy. I like him a lot, he's a great guy. But I was never in his class. I just know students were kind of afraid of him. He was an Oxford University Ph.D. We haven't had many Ph.D.s go through the Journalism School. The current dean is a Ph.D., and Blumberg was, and another dean, who was my best friend in Missoula, actually, a guy named Warren Brier, was a Ph.D. in history. And so was Blumberg, [a Ph.D.] in history and Jerry Brown, the current dean, is a Ph.D. in English, because there's no legitimate Ph.D. in journalism. Some universities offer it but I think it's a bullshit degree.

DB: Why's that?

RM: Oh, you know, it's a practical, professional thing that we're teaching. We're not researchers, except in the sense that you research events, like Clemens Work, speaking of, I don't know whether you know anything about him...

DB: I've read his recent book. [*Darkest Before Dawn: Sedition and Free Speech in the American West.*]

RM: Have you? Well that's a beautifully researched book, but it's not experimental research. It's not a Ph.D.-type of undertaking. So, I think a master's ought to be the terminal degree. Yeah, it's a great thing that's happened to Clem's book to have attracted the attention that it has.

DB: Yeah, you know I don't know how well the book is selling, but he certainly, you know him getting Governor Schweitzer to pardon—the posthumous pardons of the people convicted under the Alien and Sedition Act from World War I—is quite an accomplishment.

RM: Yeah. He had a really good break on that. This guy named Maurice Possley, who was a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, who's got a lot of people out of prison who were improperly convicted, that's his main thing, but he came here a couple years ago as a visiting professor, [T. Anthony Pollner Distinguished Professor] it was the Foundation's—we have an endowed chair, actually, for a visitor for one semester a year. Possley came here, loved Missoula, loved the Journalism School, knew about Clem's book and wrote a story about it for the *Chicago Tribune*, and it was played on page one of the *Chicago Tribune*. [It took up the entire front page.] And that was the beginning of all the attention that it's gotten.

DB: That helps.

RM: And the law students got interested in doing the research on the people who'd been convicted. So I think the book is selling really well for a university press. It's the University of New Mexico Press that published it. But anyway, that's the kind of research that we do and I don't think it's doctorate, philosophy type of research. Other faculty members? Well they've just been really really good people. The current chairman of the print division is a brilliant woman named Carol Van Valkenburg. You know Carol?

DB: I know of her.

RM: Yeah, yeah she's—

DB: I haven't been fortunate enough to take a class with her.

RM: Well, she's a wonderful teacher and a very perceptive person. She has been the advisor to the *Kaimin* for quite a few years now and she is really protective of the *Kaimin* and she has taken a lot of shit from Main Hall. Just knows how to deal with it. Her husband is the county attorney, Fred Van Valkenburg.

And we've had visitors come through. Let's see, Possley. There's just an excellent newsman, a guy named Tom Cheatham who was with NBC for a long time, has held that visiting Pollner visiting professor chair.

DB: So that's the first you've really mentioned of non-print journalism there. And of course the J-School has radio and TV programs as well. Why don't you talk a little bit about those programs? Or what you know of them?

RM: Well, you know, my interest is on the print side. I haven't really had much to do with the broadcast side. I've had the students. I taught reporting and editing courses that I had students from radio and TV. The founder of KUFM, a fellow named Phil Hess, who was here when I came here in the mid-'60s, was a good friend of mine so I've observed with interest what they're doing.

DB: What are they doing? What have the changes been in KUFM and radio news on campus?

RM: Well they've tried to stay current. They do good documentary work. They have a good relationship, apparently, with the local broadcasters. They have two tracks really. One is the production track, where they're teaching them the mechanics of how you put together news stories, how you cover things. The other is the journalism, where they actually do it with the writing and the editing and so on.

DB: So [as] someone highly attuned to news in the 40 years you've been in Missoula, and a lot of those at the University, what have been the newsworthy events about the University? We've sort of talked about the Vietnam War and the small repercussions here on campus...

RM: The big thing overall, the biggest change has been physical. The building—this place doesn't look *anything* like it did when I came here. I came here in '66. I think there was 6,000 students. It was kind of an intimate place, small liberal arts college with a professional school satellites circling around the College of Arts and Sciences. There was not a big division between faculty and administration. I think the faculty had a lot more influence over what the university was doing then than it does now. They used to talk about "shared governance." I hate that term. [chuckles] You know, it's kind of jargon-y. But the President's office felt the weight of faculty opinion, what the faculty said and did. I think that's pretty much gone by the boards. There's a more, if not adversarial relationship, at least a sense of separation. I think the faculty union had quite a bit to do with that. The '70s here was a period of almost constant retrenchment and cutting back, cutting back, cutting back. And of course that put pressure on salaries and—

But, getting back, I began by saying big changes — physical. I got into something non-physical, but so much that you see on this campus now was not here when I came here. Including this building [the Mansfield Library], including the University Center, Dornblaser Field [and] wooden football stands for the football games was where we are now. The men's room and the

women's room for football fans was in Main Hall, for God's sake. So these two buildings weren't here; the Performing Arts building was not here; the Science Center over by Journalism was not here; that big prison-like addition to the Chem-Pharm building was not here. We've got these things going up at Chem-Pharm—a huge Chem-Pharm addition. The Journalism building is going up now. The football—Washington-Grizzly Stadium was not here. Holy smoke, it's just one thing after another. That's a big change.

The growth in this student body, the growth in the faculty, the change in financing. I mean the Legislature was being pretty parsimonious when I came here, but it put up a much, much bigger percentage of the University budget than it does now. The grants, the research emphasis has been a big change. Oh, and the events. While the protest era really does stand out, particularly what Bob Pantzer did and how he dealt with that. These are the K. Ross Toole Archives. Toole was something of a loudmouth. You know anything about Ross Toole?

DB: I've read some of his books, I don't know anything about the man.

RM: He was, I knew him only slightly. I didn't know him well. A wonderful teacher, apparently, he had a great reputation, but I really, I really got off him during the protest period. It was probably right after Kent State, when they had the occupation of the ROTC. Ross Toole was on the—what the heck do they call that key committee of the Faculty Senate? [Executive Committee of the Senate.] Anyway, there are five faculty senators who are on the key agenda committee there and they came over and talked to the students, helped keep the lid on at the ROTC, but I didn't have to do much. I was there, I was observing some of this.

He wrote a letter, ostensibly, he was writing it for publication I'm sure, but he said it was a letter to his brother called, "An Angry Man Speaks Up to Youth," and it was essentially an attack on students who were protesting the war, who were doing boycotts and so on. And it was very well-received by conservative circles, and he became nationally pretty well-known. He was even on a national TV program, kind of a talk, variety thing. A guy named Art Linkletter put it on. And Toole went on that program and he painted a completely false picture, in my view, of what was going on on this campus, and essentially took credit for keeping the ROTC building from being burned down. [laughs] [So I thought,] God damn it. This is not what happened here, this is a disservice to the University and it's, so I'm not a Ross Toole fan. [laughs] Glad to be in his Archives though. That's probably a minority report on Ross Toole.

DB: [laughs] It's not a story I've heard.

RM: Yeah. God, I couldn't believe what I was hearing when he— [laughs]

DB: I've certainly heard the former story that Pantzer was the person out there communicating with students during the time and smoothing things over. Keeping a level head.

RM: Yeah, yeah. I don't really know just—looking back I just don't know how I would describe the orchestration of that but I know I was very admiring. And whatever it was he was doing, it worked. It worked.

DB: Other events on campus you remember?

RM: Oh gosh. [I've] been interested in a lot of the troubles that George Dennison has been in over the...first the Fort Missoula flap back in the '80s I guess.

DB: Tell me about that.

RM: You know, I don't remember enough of the details to really talk about it. It was about the University disposing of its property at Fort Missoula and who it was going to go to and I just don't have the memory of that. But it was very controversial. Lot of opposition in the community to the U unloading the property. And [the fact that he] was getting rid of the Fort property for a lot of money, rather than keeping it for future educational use was the basic issue there. The U was forced out of that position by community opposition. Then there's, of course the athletic budget thing, recently, and the senior citizen housing idea. [laughs]

DB: [Housing] on the golf course. I assume that's what you're talking about.

RM: On the golf course. You know I can't think of anything much worse than living out my remaining years among nothing but old folks, but among nothing but old folks who had an interest in The University of Montana! [laughs] That would be having a pretty narrow focus to your life.

DB: [laughs] Well, that said, you have stayed in Missoula since you retired...

RM: Oh, I love Missoula.

DB: ...and I wonder what keeps you here?

RM: Oh, I just like Missoula. I like Missoula a lot.

DB: What about it?

RM: I like it's laid back living. It's informal. It's a friendly place. I love the open space around it, to be able to go in any direction and in 10 minutes you're out in beautiful country. So why would I go anyplace else?

DB: I ask myself the same thing.

RM: No, I just like it here. I've been here a long time. I have friends here. I have no family around, but I'm not gonna move to California or to Texas just to be near a son or a daughter and put the burden on them of knowing that their old man moved nearby [chuckles] just so they look after him. I don't want that.

DB: [chuckles] So you were recounting one of the biggest changes on this campus being buildings and physical changes, and of course you briefly mentioned one of the largest changes you can see right now on campus is a new Journalism School.

RM: Yeah, yeah, I thought I mentioned that.

DB: Yeah you mentioned that it was one of them. What do you know about the story behind that being developed, the money for it, the interest in it, what it means for the J-School?

RM: The prime mover behind that, God, one of the—I should have mentioned this guy before in connection with the faculty—is John Talbot, who you've heard of I'm sure. He's the former publisher of the *Missoulian* and then left here to be—well, he didn't leave here, he continued to live here and became a vice president of Lee Enterprises. His wife is the daughter of Don Anderson, who was the founder and first CEO of Lee Enterprises. John and his wife Sue are very wealthy and they have done wonderful philanthropic things for Missoula in a very quiet way. John has, when he came here as publisher of the *Missoulian* in the late '60s, I think it probably was when I first met him, became very interested in the Journalism School and has been very friendly to it and has become a good personal friend of journalism faculty members. And then he taught a course in business; we needed somebody who knew something about the business end; all of us were editorial-type people.

So he taught, and he's had a very close connection with the school, and he got interested in the physical problems of an outdated building, the broadcast part of the program being moved to the other end of the campus down on Eddy, and he's been the big push behind the fund campaign, which has raised about \$ 12 million. [He's] given personal money, gotten money from Lee, has persuaded other wealthy people that he knows to contribute money, and stands in the background always. He doesn't take any credit. He's a wonderful man. It just kind of came together, thanks to his push. He did a lot of traveling for it, went with Jerry Brown, the dean, to visit people with deep pockets. It's been amazing, really, to some of us who've been connected with the school, that this has happened. I didn't think it would ever happen. I didn't think it would attract that much interest.

DB: And what does it mean for the school, do you suspect, besides just a nice new building?

RM: It's gonna make the coordination between the various programs, broadcast and print and whatever's going on on the Internet, much easier to manage, I think. Have everybody in the same place. I think it's gonna be probably easier to attract faculty and visiting people coming in. It'll attract students, too. I mean you don't really need a nice up-to-date building to teach what

we teach, but it does make a very good impression when you've [got a nice building.] Our building really is old and outdated and that made any kind of physical change for computers and that lab stuff, photo stuff, very hard to do in that building. This will just make everything much better.

DB: Now earlier you were talking about when you first got here, the intimacy of the department and your relationship with students as well as with other faculty. That's something you really appreciated. Is that in jeopardy?

RM: Oh I don't think so. No. No when I spoke of intimacy I meant—that hasn't changed. It's still a small school with not many faculty and with a close relationship among faculty and students. The University [overall] had a sense of greater intimacy, I think, is what I meant when I used that term. I think I knew more people across campus when I first got to know them fairly quickly. But I don't think—there's not going to be any change in the J School I'm sure.

DB: To end here, how about any just good memories that you have of the School or lasting impressions of your time here?

RM: You know, I've been thinking, I really don't have a hell of a lot of stories. It's been a neat place to work. I've loved teaching here. I worked my ass off. I'm a workaholic. I worked almost every night when I was here because, well, I don't know any way to teach what I was teaching without reading stuff constantly that students are doing. But, there haven't been many spectacular things that have happened. I [can] think [of] a student named Jack Paskvan, who offered to beat the shit out of me one day and things like that. [chuckles]

DB: [laughs] How did that come to pass?

RM: He didn't like some criticism that I had leveled at him in the classroom. [laughs] Oh, gosh. Some odd things happened during the protest period, but generally speaking I've had pretty smooth sailing here. Got in a big—was involved publicly in the dispute over the tenure of Frank Allen, the dean a few years ago, which I imagine you have heard about.

DB: How were you involved in that?

RM: Well, I was teaching part-time and when Allen had been here for a few months the faculty asked me if I would have a talk with him about some of the problems that they were having. And I did that. I said I didn't want to do it alone but I would do it with Charlie Hood, who was a retired dean. We had a talk with Frank, so I was involved there. But I observed what was going on in his administration and got involved rather publicly with a letter to the editor after the dispute became public. I was critical of Dennison and [Provost Robert] Kendrick. Allen kicked me out of my office after a faculty meeting where I suggested that he'd been lying. I got a little note the next day that he needed my office for an adjunct who was doing some teaching, which he didn't.

DB: So what was this dispute all over?

RM: What was it over? The arrogance and self-serving behavior of a guy who came in, didn't give a shit about anything except his own agenda, wouldn't listen to anybody, wouldn't seek advice from anybody, treated faculty unfairly, treated staff unfairly, drove out two longtime staff members. It was a bad scene.

DB: And what was the outcome?

RM: He is a liar too. God this better not be published; I'll be in court for slander here. [laughs]

DB: [laughs] Not if it's true.

RM: You know, I said everything had been smooth. It's kind of interesting. I left Ohio State in the midst of a controversy with my betters, and then I kind of wound up my career here in a big fight with Frank [Allen].

DB: So that didn't lead to your retirement did it?

RM: No, I had retired before that. I was teaching a law course and teaching a course called Elements of Writing and still had an office there even though I was a retiree, as they call it.

DB: Other than you losing your office, what was the outcome of this?

RM: Well, eventually they removed him, but only after he'd created chaos for three years. I ran across the letter I'd written in the *Missoulian* just the other day, ran across a clipping, and I can see why Main Hall wasn't very happy with me. I got in a tangle with Dennison last spring too, as a matter of fact. I don't know whether you've heard anything about that.

DB: No.

RM: Well he—this is really not oral history stuff, it's so recent—but last May or June, just about a year ago, Jerry Brown, the journalism dean, got into some hot water with Main Hall because the Journalism School and the [UM] Foundation had been trying to get some money out of a foundation called the Cox Foundation, which is a newspaper outfit. Cox people are headquartered in Atlanta and they've got a bunch of newspapers around the country. The president of the Cox Foundation, the spin-off from the journalism group, is a guy who owns some property on the Ruby River in southern Montana. He was in a quarrel with the state about stream access. He didn't like having ordinary people being able to walk through the water around his property. Anyway, they went after him for some money for the Journalism Building, and the Foundation [it was James Cox Kennedy, the chairman of Cox and owner of the Ruby River property] replied, "No, sorry." They would give nothing to Montana, anything in

Montana, as long as we had these oppressive, unfair to out-of-staters, laws on stream access and other things.

Jerry thought this was newsworthy, that they [through Kennedy] linked the contribution to trying to leverage a change in state policy. So he had a copy of a letter [from Kennedy] and he showed it to the AP, and they did a story. That really made Dennison mad because he figured the Cox people would be mad and they're his wealthy pals, he didn't want them offended. So he made Jerry apologize, publicly, and I thought Jesus, this is really humiliating. And so when I [decided I] would get into this and defend Jerry, but I couldn't find a handle for it to say being treated badly. That doesn't cut much with the public. But then, there's an AP story about this controversy and it says that Dennison had sent a copy of this letter [from Kennedy] to [Brian] Schweitzer, the governor. I thought, ah ha, here's the hook I'll hang this on that makes it public. So I wrote a letter to the *Missoulian* defending Jerry and saying if the Cox letter wasn't public to begin with, which I think it was under Montana law. I think it was a public document when dealing with a public agency, even though the [Cox] Foundation was theoretically private. And I said, look, if it wasn't public to begin with, sending it to Schweitzer made it public. So what's Dennison doing climbing all over Jerry Brown for making it public?

Well, that didn't please Dennison. [chuckles] And the *Missoulian* also was critical of Dennison for this, for getting after Jerry. So, Dennison writes a column complaining about the editorial, and also attacking me. I had just signed my letter "Bob McGiffert," but he refers to me as "Robert McGiffert, professor emeritus of Journalism, stated in error that I had sent the letter to the governor." He said, "I saw a copy of the letter, but I shared it with no one, believing it to be private." And I thought, oh shit, I got this wrong; that's terrible. So I call the AP reporter in Helena who had reported about this letter going to Schweitzer and I said, "Where'd you get this information? He said he didn't do it." And she said, "Well, I've got a copy of his covering letter, and we got this from the governor, he did send it." She said, "I'll fax it to you," and I said, "I don't have a fax machine." So she said, "Well, I'll send you a photocopy." And I said, "Oh, much better!"

So I got hold of a hand-written copy of Dennison's letter to Schweitzer, sending the letter [from Kennedy]. Of course, I talked to the *Missoulian* and said I probably don't want to keep this fight going but this is a reply to an attack on me. So they ran my letter saying that Dennison said he didn't send it, but this is not true, I have a hand-written copy. Here's what Dennison said, and dated thus and such. So George had to back down and he did publicly. Said [laughs] he had to apologize to me, which he did. It caused a brief sensation last year because this had never happened to Dennison publicly before, that he'd been forced to back down. So I never figured out why he lied about it.

DB: So you definitely keep your hands in the University and in journalism around here.

RM: Well, yeah, yeah. It was my life for a long time.

DB: You're retiring hard!

RM: My friends are over here and. Nah, I've retired pretty easy. I don't do much of anything anymore. So what the heck else has happened here? [long pause] I should have stories for you because it's been an interesting place to work. I really like the place.

DB: Clearly it's kept your interest and kept you here. Well if you don't have any more stories for us at the moment, I appreciate your time.

RM: Okay. Not at all. I've enjoyed being pushed back down memory lane.

DB: Good. [both laugh]

[End of Interview]