

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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: 465-019

Interviewee: Jeff Gibson

Interviewer: John Newhouse

Date of Interview: 1975

Project: Lee Newspapers in Montana Oral History Project

Note: Jeff Gibson was the long-time editorial page editor of the Montana Standard.

Jeff Gibson: [Tape starts in mid-conversation]. Shabby practices in general that state examiners criticized, poor records-keeping and a lot of politicking and we have hit them pretty hard in the past. A couple of them were defeated in elections probably partly because of our work. We campaigned heavily recently for Montana Tech which—the school itself—the State Commission or Governor's Commission recently recommend that it be demoted to a community college instead of a four-year college. We fought that like hell, which the local newspaper would be expected to.

John Newhouse: Well, it apparently had some effect.

JG: Or the politicians did. One or the other or both of us. I don't go to work in the mornings with the idea that I'm going to do this or that. I wait until I get there, and see what's in the paper, and just kind of follow my nose, pretty much.

JN: This county politician thing is probably about as much value to the community as anything you have done, I would gather.

JG: I would think so.

JN: Was this, the shabby practices, would this be on the part of whom?

JG: County Commissioners. There were a couple who were selling plots of land that should have gone at tax auctions, they were selling out of auction. There is a county park up the road here that is in a very nice area here in Butte, trees and everything, and one of the former commissioners who has since left office, her son suddenly showed up owning a lovely piece of property right in the middle of it. If the county department head doesn't want to hire somebody the commissioners want him to hire, he gets his funds cut or leaned on. It is just old-fashioned power politics of the worst sort. We hope that one more will leave, then we may have a pretty good commission. It seems that whenever we get to that point, the successor is just as bad as the one that went.

JN: How many are on the commission?

JG: Three. Two-to-one and you've got it. It doesn't pay very much; I think it's \$500 a month or something like that. It just doesn't attract qualified people.

JN: It's an elective post?

JG: Yeah. You find better people running for city council or even the school board than you do for the county commission, which is quite important.

JN: This land sales they could do they just do by a vote of the commission then?

JG: Yes, or just kind of ignoring the niceties of the law. The state auditor came in and he said that they could very well be violating the law but he couldn't prosecute. The county attorney was kind of his buddy. It's kind of like Chicago in a way.

JN: How often do they come up for election?

JG: Every six years.

JN: Oh, god. How long do you have to wait before you get another crack at it?

JG: Well, the one has been here since I've been here, but he is up next time, and I don't think he'll make it. Then two years ago, we replaced one. We got rid of one who is probably corrupt in favor of one who is dumb. So, it doesn't—

JN: In a couple of years if you keep at it this way you may get the two you need.

JG: I suppose by that time somebody will have gotten to the one good one we have now. Well, it gives me a lot to write about. If we didn't have anything like that, I wouldn't have a job, I suppose.

JN: Let's see, that's Jeff Gibson. Do you ever go for a clean-up campaign around town?

JG: Oh yes, every spring. You're talking about a physical clean-up. You could call that one of our crusades. It's kind of like a safe driving crusade, it's a bit corny but you have to do it once in a while. We have had some good effects.

JN: I notice that you're currently in a brawl over this civil rights thing.

JG: I wouldn't be upset or surprised over the thing if it was just any old government agency. That's the way so many of them operate. It makes you wonder if the Civil Rights Commission is doing this sort of thing all over the country, pushing businesses, you know—

JN: I gather that—is it Denver that's the regional office?

JG: Well, it's—Denver is the regional office.

JN: And the trouble was in the regional office rather than the Montana office.

JG: Yes, I would say so, although I saw on the *Great Falls Trib* today an AP story that we didn't carry that said in the light of the new freedom of information [laws], we may not keep these books confidential anymore. He said the reason they were confidential is that they are afraid unproven statements could have gotten into them and that just raises more questions, like whether they're conducting their inquiries on the basis of rumors or untrue statements. It doesn't look very good to me, though, for an agency that exists to protect civil rights.

JN: It's a little unusual.

Did you print Mike Mansfield's letter when he came to the defense of Montana Tech?

JG: Yeah, we did. It had quite an effect too. It kind of put the governor [Tom Judge] on the spot but, as usual, he managed not to commit himself on it. He campaigned on a strong moderately liberal program, strong on conservation and the environment. Now he is in office. The biggest industrial development ever proposed for Montana, one of these new generating plants, Colstrip, he hasn't taken a position on it at all. He said, "Well, I can't do that." He said, "That is the department of health's decision, and I may prejudice their case."

Horseshit. Here he is running on an environmental platform, he should comment on it or take a stand on it. Montana Tech was controversial, and he wouldn't take a stand on that because he said, "Well, I appointed a committee that made the recommendations, and I don't want to undercut them or anything."

He is always once removed from the doers of the dirty deeds. The trouble is, in Montana, the Democratic Party, they have some good people and some bad people, and the Republican party just doesn't have any strong candidates at all, so you're kind of in a bind at general election time because so often you're voting against the so-so candidate on one side, the lousy candidate on the other side.

JN: Was that the situation before Watergate or did that...?

JG: Yes. The Montana Republican Party, in general, has been a little slow in getting away from the old corporate image, kind of inflexibly business conservative and that sort of thing. They aren't even very good at public relations. They had a few good men run lately. We had a pretty fair congressman [Richard Shoup] in this district, but Watergate did him in. Some young man from Missoula [Max Baucus] got elected. Nice guy, but I think he is a lightweight.

JN: Watergate was a tragedy.

JG: Surprised me how far it could affect people. I think one of the big things about this congressman was he defended Nixon a little past the point where people thought he would, and so they immediately figured well, he's no better, and so out he went. I always figured, well, a Republican is expected to defend a Republican president up to a point. You've got to forgive him that.

JN: Well, we sure as hell paid for it.

[End of Interview]