

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: 465-021
Interviewee: George O'Connor
Interviewer: John Newhouse
Date of Interview: 1975
Project: Lee Newspapers in Montana Oral History Project

Note: George O'Connor was president of the Montana Power Company.

John Newhouse: —well, I remember [unintelligible] editorial columns you had received fair treatment. The *Billings Gazette*, I think, you were a little concerned about their editorial stance.

George O'Connor: I think there is one other thing in connection with editorials. I believe we are the subject of editorials maybe a lot more than our presence in the state justifies. This has the tendency to make news out of the Montana Power Company, I think, because it keeps us in the forefront of the public. There are a lot of people, particularly politicians who think this is the way to stay in the news themselves and that's to keep on some company or some issue that is in the news. I think we probably get a great deal more attention than our conduct, our responsibility, or our position in the state justifies. But I am not in a position to judge that. We don't have any argument ever with the editorial prerogatives of a paper; we know what they are, they have a perfect right to take these positions. In the news columns, I told you, maybe the fact that the adversary's position gets a lot more publicity, as we do, may be some of our own fault.

We may not make as much news available, have news releases available. I have heard among some of our own people criticism of the fact that in many instances news stories that they do give, and they are stories that they have necessarily needed to prepare because there wasn't a reporter there, that these stories sometimes are very badly chopped up or cut or don't convey the sense of the original story. Now I would expect that this is not a frequent thing.

JN: You were in the legislature for a number of years, weren't you?

GO: Yes, I served in the legislature for 18 years.

JN: You were in the legislature during the Anaconda days as well as the post-Anaconda days?

GO: I was not in the legislature in the post-Anaconda ownership of the newspapers. I did some lobbying at the legislature after Anaconda no longer owned the newspapers.

JN: Did you see any difference?

GO: I think I saw a difference in the reporting as far as the legislature is concerned.

JN: How about the influence after Lee took over? Was there more influence in the legislature would you guess?

GO: Well, I think the newspapers always have a substantial influence on public opinion. That's the nature of our society. I think they did when Anaconda owned them. I think they do have yet. How much they influenced legislators then and now I'm not sure. I suspect that there would be a little bit less of a reluctance on the part of a legislator to be highly critical of Anaconda now than there was then because of the kind of reporting you might get. Although there was very, very substantial criticism of Anaconda back in those days. It probably doesn't get as much publicity as it does now, but there was lots of criticism.

I think that we've got to crank into this consideration though, one other thing. That is the credibility of business, the credibility of the establishment, the credibility of the media, newspapers, and everything else, occupies a little different posture now than it did then too.

JN: I was looking over your pamphlet on Colstrip and noticed that you have a Montana 1973 Utility Siting Act and also a Mine Land Reclamation law. Those, of course, have gone through the legislature and I was wondering if the newspapers had had an impact in bringing about their passage.

GO: I suppose they did have some impact. I don't think they were totally responsible for either of these, and particularly not the siting act. As a matter of fact, the utility siting act was passed in 1973; the first one that was ever introduced was in 1971. At that time, it found very little favor. And it didn't go very far. We have always supported the concept of a one-stop siting act if we could get that thing. This lacks that substantially. The final permit is granted by one board but there are so many other agencies involved that it's far short of the one-stop siting act.

JN: By one-stop you mean—

GO: You go to one agency and you make your application and your findings and your proofs there. Theoretically this is the story behind the siting act. It didn't pass in '71 and in '73 a siting act was adopted without any great amount of resistance. There was resistance to specific provisions of it but I don't think there was any great amount of resistance to the concept. It has been amended very substantially in this last session of the legislature. I haven't had a chance yet to study or know of the purport of all of these amendments, but it was amended very substantially, which indicated that the siting act in its original form needed some doctoring.

I think that, oh, it isn't so much in the act itself. It's in the administration of it that makes a great deal of difference on how it works. And we haven't had a lot of experience in Montana on a siting act. I think that the mine reclamation act, on the other hand, was influenced, the passage of it was influenced substantially by the attitude of some of the press. There was a strong position on the part of much of the press that there should be reclamation requirements by law

if people were going to surface mine coal. I think that the press had a lot to do with the interest that was developed in a mine reclamation act. Not so much with the siting act.

JN: How did the company feel about the reclamation act?

GO: Our company?

JN: Yes.

GO: We didn't have any objection to the reclamation act as a concept at all. As a matter of fact, before we ever started to mine we recognized the need for reclamation because we had some history of mining, surface mining where there had been no reclamation in the past. We felt that this was not the way to leave the ground. So, we entered into a reclamation contract with the extension service at Montana State University to make studies for us, to make recommendations for us on how the land could best be reclaimed. An ongoing contract is still in existence; they're still making these studies. They're independent of anything we do. So, we recognized the need for reclamation before there was a reclamation act. The reclamation act has some provisions in it that we think are maybe unnecessarily harsh. We think it has some provisions in it that are probably not very—probably not really founded in very sound reasoning. They are more emotional than they are—but by and large I'd have to say we don't have any quarrel with the reclamation act.

JN: Gee, I can't think of anything more to ask.

GO: Well, I appreciate you're dropping in. I think there is only one gratuitous thing that I could say that has to do with a lifetime of observation of the Fourth Estate. You know, that is that you, like the utility business, at the present—

[Break in audio]

—business itself to the whole reporting fraternity. I think that people are skeptical of the media, I think that they are skeptical of business. I think that all of us suffer from this common affliction and it's a dangerous one, in my estimation. I don't believe that newspapers now have the same degree of credibility as they had 25, 30, 40 years ago, and this would be regardless of ownership.

I think the Anaconda papers, of course, always had a problem with this, because there was a great deal of talk about the fact that this was a muzzled press, that this was a controlled press and that they served the needs of Anaconda. There were some newspapers in the state that did not belong to Anaconda. They didn't suffer from this criticism, but I think that those newspapers suffered from the same criticisms as your papers do now. People are inclined not to want to believe newspapers and not to want to believe television and not to want to believe businesspeople. They discredit these statements, and I just think that maybe all of us suffer

from this common affliction. I think that the Lee newspapers are not popular in Montana, and I don't mean this critically.

I think that, probably, the *New York Times* is not popular in New York either, so this may be just a way of life anymore. I'm sure that CBS is not popular, the National Broadcasting Systems [Corporation] are not popular. People still turn to them, they still read papers, they still watch television, but at one time, your newspaper was kind of your bible. It was something you, you went to the newspaper for the things that you—on the base of which you formed your opinion. I don't think this happens anymore.

JN: I think you're right. And it's a damn sad thing that it is that way.

GO: It's a sad thing for America. One of the real things that worries me about this country is the lack of faith that we have in systems that are fundamental to this country, and among those, of course, are the freedom to make a profit, freedom to do business, the freedom of the press, and the fact that we have

lost sight here in the very, very real truth that all of these things have contributed so much to each of our well-beings. We don't give them credit for that anymore. We take an adversarial position as a people. Right? It is bad.

JN: It is bad. I've been probably one of the most vocal critics of my own profession in my own town, that I know of. A lot of it, of course, is our own doing, when you write stories based on sources, when you write stories that are somewhat self-serving. You can do this for just so long and then you are in trouble and I think this is where we are at now. Watergate, of course, didn't make it any easier and I think some of the editors in the East, particularly the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*—you can't blame a reporter for going out and bringing in the story. But somebody ought to take a look at it and decide whether it really should be run. And sometimes stories, perhaps they should be run, but the play you give them, the emphasis you give them, the stories you pick, this all can create a somewhat unreal situation sometimes. And I think this is what we've done, and I think we're paying for it.

GO: And I think, of course, the so-called metropolitan press, the national press, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, papers of this nature, the *Chicago Tribune*, or the Los Angeles paper, all of these have developed this atmosphere of hostility toward the press. Because of just what you say. There are a lot of people who are pretty sound in their analysis of these things, who think that reporting has gone beyond reporting, that it's become a narration of the opinion of some one reporter. His concepts.

JN: This is what he wants to happen, and when it becomes what he wants to happen, then you're in trouble.

GO: And this is, I think, one of the things that has gotten the press into some trouble. And whenever the press is in trouble, all of us are in trouble because public opinions have to be formed on something. Nobody is sufficiently knowledgeable so that they can be acquainted with all of the ramifications of business and government and so forth. And these opinions have to be formed on what they read and fear and that sort of thing, and whenever these sources are sources that are discredited, then the whole system is discredited.

JN: Yeah, you're in real trouble. So, you're a consultant with the company now rather than president, as you were last year.

GO: Right. I retired on March 1. I have no executive title at all. I am a consultant to the company. I'm still a member of the board of directors, and I try to serve the interest of the officers that are trying to run the company now to whatever degree they want to work with me and assign me.

JN: Well, it's been a pleasure to talk with you.

[End of Interview]