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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: 465-022

Interviewees: Robert "Bob" Corbett, Alec Hansen

Interviewer: John Newhouse

Date of Interview: 1975

Project: Lee Newspapers Oral History Project

Note: Robert Corbett worked for the Anaconda Co. for 39 years, starting as a sampler and retiring in 1978 as the vice president of the company's mining division. Alec Hansen was director of communications for Anaconda's Montana operations at the time of this interview.

John Newhouse: You've had pretty good relations, haven't you, with the Lee papers here?

Robert Corbett: Yes, you mean me personally, or the company?

JN: Well, both.

BC: Well, I think by and large, yes, I think that my relationship personally has been an excellent one, and I know a lot of the people that are involved in each of the papers. I think I'm well acquainted with the people who head up each of the papers and I'm talking about publishers, editors, and so forth. Mine has been an excellent relationship. The company relationship hasn't been that good in every area.

I think the Billings Gazette particularly has been extremely hostile to the Montana Power Company. The Missoulian, to a lesser degree. However, I think that we have been treated fairly or, perhaps, more than fairly by the Montana Standard, the Helena Independent and, I don't want to leave the impression that we haven't been treated perhaps fairly by the other papers, but there has been a degree of hostility editorially in those two papers where Montana Power is concerned.

JN: How about the news columns in those papers; have you had what you've considered a fair break there?

BC: Well, if we haven't had it may be because we haven't made news available to the degree that maybe some of the other, some of the antagonists of the Montana Power Company have made news. So that I could not direct a criticism at the paper for that count, maybe there has just been more available from the other side. I don't think there's any question but what the Northern Plains Resources Counsel, Friends of the Earth, the Sierra Club and the people who are opposing a great many of the activities in which we're involved have gotten a lot more columns of news in the Billings Gazette for example than has Montana Power Company. But I think they made a lot more columns of news available to the papers than the Montana Power Company did.

JN: If something is definitely wrong, you can go to them and say, "Hey, look, we'd like to get our side out and with some assurance that you get it?"

BC: I think that we get reasonably good treatment on that count—

[Break in audio]

BC: —really an expert on Montana's background history. I haven't worked for the company for some time but, and was not knowledgeable, for example, about the earlier history of the newspapers when Anaconda owned them and this type thing. You know, I know when we—I recall when we sold the newspapers. Incidentally, I went to school with Scotty. He was an old high school classmate of mine, [Duncan] Scotty Campbell.

John Newhouse: How do you get along today with the papers?

Alec Hansen: We get along fairly well. We don't have any real problems. I think they do a pretty good job [unintelligible]. There are a lot of people that complain about it. I think Anaconda's been pretty well treated. But we make a pretty conscientious effort in terms of press relations. In fact, we had a guy whose primary responsibility in Butte operations is press relations, former city editor of the Montana Standard did an excellent job.

JN: That was a—

AH: Tom Wigal. Did you know Tom?

JN: No, but I heard of him.

BC: Well, he incidentally retired not too long ago, within the last week or 10 days or so, after a long career with the newspapers and later Anaconda and, as Alec said, he handled our—director of press relations, Butte operations then.

AH: On the basis of what Tom did, the Anaconda Company was, built up a fairly decent situation. We've got a pretty good trust with the newspapers. They handle our stories fairly well; we're fairly treated.

BC: We've had an organizational change here recently too, John, several, in fact. The one that was pertinent was some time ago the Montana operation of Anaconda was set up in such a manner that the Butte operation reported to our primary metal division headquarters in Arizona and Anaconda did and Great Falls did. Then a year ago there was a change made wherein the Anaconda and Great Falls part of our operation was named the metallurgical division and the Butte part was named the Montana mining division. And those two entities reported to our, not our primary metal division in Arizona, but to what we call our group.

JN: Where do go for policy?

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BC: Well, I was going to say, now just within the last month or so, the two divisions operating in Montana have been merged. The division name is the Montana Mining Division but it now includes Butte, Anaconda and Great Falls and that is the way we are set up now.

JN: When a reporter asks you a question, can you come up with the answer right here in this building, or do you have to go beyond that?

AH: Well, it depends on the type of question it is. You know, if somebody says to us, say we have some sort of a problem in Butte, and [the question is], will this problem in Butte have any effect on the total performance of the Anaconda Company or will it have any effect on the profit picture of the corporation in a certain period? We can't answer that question in Butte, that's a question that has to be answered from New York City. But most questions, in terms of local questions, certainly can be answered.

BC: Yeah, the division—there are two divisions—there is quite a bit of autonomy in the division itself.

Like Alex said, if a reporter were to question, “Why don't you expand your savings plan?” Or, “Why don't you expand anything that involves Anaconda corporate policy?” Obviously, you would have to refer that to the New York office because it is a corporate question.

JN: What if it's a purely local question?

BC: Most of the questions that you get here are: what are some of our new developments; why do we do this or that type of thing; what are your plans for your mining operation?

And I might say that, Alec, very frankly, a year or so ago, Frank Monninger, who was our division president, who is now Mr. Len Powell, but Frank put together a meeting with the media people. We get a lot of static, some of our problems in the community, so he set up a meeting where there would be a forum for people to bring questions and for him to provide answers back to the community. He brought into that meeting the radio, television and newspaper people and I think made quite a bit of progress in developing a better rapport.

JN: It's one of those things you start, and build on.

BC: By the same token, the question always comes up, well, what are you going to be doing in 1976, or '78? And you just can't answer those questions, and I think that he opened up a rapport there, and the cooperation from the media, I might say—television and radio and the newspapers—was quite good. If they got into a question area that, like we might have a study going on, some new development and they were wondering what that was, he wouldn't discuss that if we didn't, or hadn't reached a point where we could discuss it. He felt that we should work this project out, analyze it within the company before we start discussing it with the media.

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JN: How does Anaconda feel about sale of the papers now? Do you suppose there is any regret they did?

BC: Very frankly, I would feel relatively unqualified to comment on that. That event took place some time back. I really don't know. Do you, Alec?

AH: Well, I don't know [unintelligible.] We're not being punished, there is no punitive attitude, and we've taken it as an open dialogue between the company and the newspapers. We take our chances and I think they have done a good job of representing our interests and our views. Not our interests, but our views.

We through the years have established personal contact with the newspaper. We've have had some problems; it's only natural. Any corporation operating as Anaconda does is going to have some problems with the media, but I think that we are fairly treated and I couldn't see any reason to regret the selling of the papers. In fact, in the old days, we probably were more criticized and there was more suspicion because they claimed that we control the press. And there are professors at the university who had said that they didn't even carry the election results in the papers when Anaconda controlled them, and that's a lot of garbage.

I worked at the papers when the company owned them, as a copy boy. It's not that long ago and I can remember, I can remember Tom Wigal working up there election night smoking five packages of cigarettes putting out the election results. So I think the company owning the papers created more suspicion, and probably a larger public relations problem than the way we do it right now. The papers [are] now owned by Lee and we will just take our chances like everyone else. I think we have done all right.

BC: One thing that comes to mind over the years, John. Occasionally you'll have someone come into the area, maybe they have specifically come to Butte. Butte is kind of known in a way; it developed quite a reputation as Siberia, the FBI [sent agents out of favor to the Butte office] and I read about it in Time magazine. Well, there are many, many cities in the U.S. much bigger than Butte, well known, and Butte always had a way of getting in the headlines but once in a while you would get national media people come to write a story on Butte, perhaps.

I always was, frankly, disappointed in those stories, because they would come to town and they would talk with the local people and get a few tips down at the local bar and you get tired of reading the same old story about Butte. About a rip-roaring mining camp and all that. And I have always had a feeling, this is personal now, that many times some of these fellows that have showed up have almost had their story written before they got here. They really didn't come to get some input, or if you gave them some input in good faith, answered questions, it never showed up. They would come out with something that would catch a person's eye perhaps, I don't know.

AH: The only guy that ever wrote a good story about Butte is Jack Kerouac. The guy that wrote *On the Road*. He was a spokesman for the beat generation; he died recently. He wrote a good story about Butte. It is called *The American Bus Ride*, and he rides a bus from Seattle to Minneapolis. A big part of it is about Butte. He could see beyond some of the stuff that these other guys, you know. We get a lot of stories on the national media about the pit gobbling up the city and all these things. It's so superficial and overwritten that it doesn't present an accurate picture.

BC: You know, one time I got a call from a woman, apparently from Denver, she was connected with a national magazine, maybe a western representative or area representative. She expressed a desire to come up to Butte and write a story on it. So we said sure, come on up. And she came up, and I feel that—a Butte native, incidentally, and someone comes in here for either the first time—so before they start asking questions or write out their story, I thought it would be nice to take her up and give her an overview of the operation. What we were doing here in terms of our mining operation, even took on myself—Tom was with me, Tom Wigal—and we very quickly kind of made two or three passes in the whole Butte area, saying this is the Finntown area and this is the earlier part of Butte, and this is where new Butte seems to be going.

And we're going over a famous street in Butte's past, she says, "Is this the whore town?"

I'm driving down the street, so I knew right away that she had done some research before she came, and she wanted to put together a story, which—I don't know, I understand later that it never showed up. I think every community, whether it's a company or a community, don't mind someone writing a story on them if they cease and desist from distorting it, putting these things into it that—but I would say all in all, good relationship. Don't you think, Alec?

AH: Yes.

JN: Well, that is what I mainly wanted to establish. I really don't have much of anything more to ask unless you really have something to add.

RC: No. How long you going to be in the area?

[Break in audio]

[Audio resumes in another location]

AH: Right at the end of the Civil War, 1864, 1865, and primarily was an underground district up until the mid-'50s. And at that time, we started an open pit. One of the unique districts, the mining districts of the world, where in the late '50s we had underground mines, we had an open pit, we had a leaching operation, and we had a block caving, which is another type of mining all going in one. I don't think there's a district in the world you could go to as a mining man and visit and find all four of these things in the same area.

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JN: Montana School of Mines, is that what they call it? It's Montana Tech now, but wasn't it Montana School of Mines?

AH: Montana School of Mines, yes. In fact, that's one of the things the school is used [for] with a famous district right in its backyard. The nice thing about it for years is the fact that the students could get exposed to a little practical experience, pick up a few dollars while they're going to school.

You know, in the mining world you can travel all over the world and invariably you can go out in the jungles of some distant country, and you'll find a guy and he's worked in Butte. It's just one of the great districts in the world. Very technically difficult district, I would think. Well, anyway, I just mentioned that because the mining industry in copper is pretty much in an open pit area now. It has been—our competitors and other companies.

JN: What happened to you in Chile? Were your mines nationalized there?

AH: Yeah, they were expropriated by the Chilean government.

JN: It was about \$300 million?

AH: Well, we can argue about the amount—that probably, among other things, it was operation there in Chuquicamata. It was an open pit. Probably, no one really knows, but probably the greatest mineral deposit in the world.

JN: Can anybody tell me why in the heck you got copper around here in this hole in the ground when there isn't any someplace else?

AH: Geologically, or—? Funny thing about Montana, if you take a map of the United States, particularly the western U.S., say you were down in Arizona, and you've got a map on the wall, and you'll see all kinds of dots all over Arizona, and you'll find a few in Utah, a couple in Nevada. Bing! One little dot right in Butte and there has been no significant amount of copper found anywhere in Montana other than here.

JN: And the other states? Well, Michigan had some.

AH: Michigan, a lot of Butte people came from there in the early days. Those were deep mines of native copper and—

JN: Is this something that came up, boiled up?

AH: Yes, geologically, this area, there's—you almost said it. It's not a boiling up, but what it is, it's a molten granitic intrusion. This thing kind of heats and works its way up—it's called a batholith. In essence it's an extrusion. And it covers quite an area, like it runs over here about

20 miles, and runs over there about four or five miles, runs out this way about 20 miles and runs over almost to [unintelligible]. In and around that batholith, there's—

JN: Well, is this material that runs all through the core of the earth, or is there just this one place?

AH: Well, I think what happens is there's this mass—this took place millions and millions of years ago. And then there is a falling taking place, cracking, cooling of the mass, and they call them magnetic juices, but really, they're mineral-bearing solutions that percolate up through these cracks. This doesn't occur over night. This process could take 50 million years and then suddenly these veins are established or whatever, and then they're discovered and mined. One always asks the question, well, if the batholith was that big, why isn't there a Butte over here and a Butte over there? And the way I answer is that there just isn't.

That's a hell of an answer but it has to be. You can go out maybe three miles away from the Homestake mine in South Dakota and look for gold because that is a big famous gold mine, there's no assurance that three miles away there's nothing.

JN: Your name is—

AH: Alec Hansen.

[Unrelated crosstalk]

[End of Interview]