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Oral History Number: 465-023

Interviewee: Bill Christiansen

Interviewer: John Newhouse

Date of Interview: 1975

Project: Lee Newspapers in Montana Oral History Project

Note: Bill Christiansen was a Democrat who served four terms in the Montana House, including as minority leader in 1971. He was elected lieutenant governor in 1972.

John Newhouse: You were in politics here back in the days when the Anaconda owned the newspapers, weren't you?

Bill Christiansen: Not really; I was concerned with politics. My history in politics dates back, I guess officially, as a candidate, to the 1964 election and '65 when I first came into office in the House. But I'd been in Montana since 1947; I've been a Ford dealer and still am.

I'm just about to get out of the business, I think, this weekend. I'm selling my dealership to four 20-year employees, which pleases me. But I've been a reader of the *Billings Gazette* for all those years, from 1947 to '65, and then from '65, of course, I started taking the *IR* [*Independent Record* in Helena] and the *Trib* [*Great Falls Tribune*] and did a little broader reading. That's the best I can say as to my background.

JN: Did you notice a change in the papers from the time that Lee took over?

BC: Well, I'd like to give you an honest answer about that. I don't remember enough of the policy, having been pretty much exposed to our local weekly and the *Gazette* from the time, '47 on, and very rarely picked up the other the papers. That sounds strange, but you get in that part of the country and that's just the way it goes.

I think that, I've heard that it was pretty well locked into policy and directed the policy by the powers that be. That's a pretty common story in this state, you know. The old story is, of course, that Anaconda wrote the constitution and supplied the legislature with bodies for a number of years. There used to be a standing joke about that in which they said that the Anaconda Company will appoint 49 members of the Senate, and one will run at-large. That was what they thought might be a very—

JN: Fifty members in the senate?

BC: Yes. That's just a standing joke about it but that just kind of sets the mood of this thing. I want to say in the spirit of fairness, in my recent observation of the papers, the Lee chain, is that they tell it like it is. I really mean that. I'm not here to give you answers of convenience. There are the same problems, and they are inherent of the newspaper business that we sometimes get restless about, and that is, old story to you, I'm sure, that sometimes the

headline writers don't grasp the meat of the story, and they have a job to do and I understand that. They want that to be read and they have put something in there, I think they don't try to distort it, I think sometimes they do their work in a hurry too.

JN: It's also damn difficult to compress it within that space.

BC: Right. I wouldn't like to be one myself, but we sometimes get restless and that's going to be with us as long as newspapers are around. There is no way to get around that so I'm not saying that as a criticism.

JN: Well, now you read all the papers, Butte—

BC: I read the *Standard* quite often, so go ahead—

JN: So, you read just, what paper?

BC: Well, the *Gazette* for the years I was in Billings. See, I was in the eastern end of the country.

JN: That must have been run by Anaconda at the time you started reading it, but I suppose you weren't quite so interested in politics at the time.

BC: I was so busy making a living. I had bought a dealership on a shoestring and I think my whole life was devoted to that from 1947 until about '57 until I got to where I could see beyond my accounts receivables. I was, belief or not, a fairly young fellow there, and bit off a big chunk of dealership and then had to—it's a small town, but it took quite an investment to get in there. I was overwhelmed with that task and probably couldn't spend the time I should have with [unintelligible].

JN: Did the newspapers have a fair amount of influence in this end of the state?

BC: Well, that's a tough thing to measure. I could give you a very easy answer and say I think they do have fair amount, probably is stating it as well as I could. There was a standing joke in Billings during the years that we're talking about prior to my getting into the legislature when the editorial endorsement of a candidate was the kiss of death and we use to kid Doc Bowler about that, you know—don't endorse me. But that doesn't always follow.

The thing that happened there through those years, Billings was so traditionally Republican that any endorsement beyond a Republican you were just going against the law of averages. Billings, Yellowstone County to be more specific, you would have six or seven seats in the House and, of course, our senators jumped around, you know, because of the one-county thing that was declared unconstitutional. But anyway, the political power at Billings was so predominately Republican that if anyone endorsed another candidate, good as he may be, he probably wasn't going to win anyway. That's just one of those old folksy stories we had. You've heard that I'm

sure. I guess I would have to say, I think we all respect the powers of the newspapers and I'm sure they are influential.

JN: I picked up this affidavit on this [James] Carden thing [worker's compensation case.] Gee, what a long, long thing. I suppose that was read by awful lot of people, though?

BC: I'm not even going to comment on that. I think some people are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of it and quit right there. I think at that time it was very timely, though. In spite of the legality of the thing, I agree with its publication and were I governor, I think I would even more agree because the innuendos, he didn't come out as clean as a hound's tooth in that anyway.

In some respects, I think as far as the case itself, he did, in a sense that I don't think that it ever came in that affidavit loud and clear that he put the finger on this Carden and he said, "You go out and pick pockets." And that's the thing that people had drawn the conclusion, that he just ordered this fellow out.

JN: The governor ordered the investigation at least twice, so I would say this was to his credit, but then when they, came up about this campaign contribution thing, I don't see how that got in there. It doesn't seem to be germane to the case.

BC: Well, it really isn't. I guess in one sense, they were trying, of course, to indicate that part of the plot was that Carden—although it doesn't have anything to do with the legality of the things he may or may not have done—I think it was trying to establish that they would like to get the administration tied fairly tightly to the whole thing.

JN: Would that have been possible in the old Anaconda days? I don't mean for the public, I mean for the papers to engage in that type of journalism?

BC: Well, it would be editorial judgement. I don't know, that's a really grey area question. I think I better stay away from that one. That would have to be a judgment that was made at that time.

[Break in audio]

BC: The broad overview of the papers, as I see it in the recent years, are that they are fair. I tell you one thing, that may not be the point that you're digging for, but some of the reporters have really made themselves knowledgeable about government. Let me give you a couple specifics. Our school foundation program is a complex program.

There is a lot of people in the legislature, and I say this in the spirit of fairness. I was on the education committee and I used to go out and make talks on the foundation program because it was so complex in its financing and its budget authority and the whole bit. But a fellow by the name of Dan Foley [who was a reporter for the *Lee State Bureau*], who now is in Washington,

and he came into government and he and I went into the Department of Public Instruction together, and he dug out and learned that Foundation Program, so he was very conversant with it. This is just a for-instance. He could talk like a school administrator, and many school administrators didn't do as well as he did in their grasp of the foundation program.

Then when Dan would have any problems, he was more comfortable with me than with the department and he knew I knew it and so he would come into visit with me about it. But I like that. I like the attitude of coming into government and learning about that government from the inside out instead of looking at it from the outside in and making some judgments that aren't as fairly done as when you understand the mechanics of that government. And that is only an isolated—I just picked out Dan because I remember that instance. The same thing happened when we had a very complex coal tax.

I revised the coal tax on a BTU [British Thermal Unit] value basis, 1971 when I was in the legislature and it now still prevails. And it was a little complex in its first concept, but when you are talking about coal,

you're talking about the heat value and it isn't a ton of coal, and as a consequence, he came in and we went through all that. I'm just saying that in the broader sense. I picked out Dan for two examples, but I

think there are other reporters who have done the same thing, who have made a point of learning about some of the intricacies of government.

JN: Do you have good relations with the editors as well? I notice you did with this one.

BC: Well, I've always been friendly with them. My press relations, I guess, have been excellent as far as I'm personally concerned. I don't think they figure I'm a golden boy or anything, I think they treat my material the same as anyone else in the spirit of fairness, but I'm comfortable with the press.

JN: If something goes wrong, you can pick up the phone and say, "Hey, look."

BC: That's true. I feel that forum is open, but I haven't had to use it.

JN: That's fantastic.

BC: There might have been some distortions in stories, but that happens. I don't get uptight about those things. Sometimes you get the best of it.

JN: I never thought of it that way. Of course, you never count that.

BC: Well you shouldn't if you're really a political animal. I appreciate sometimes that I get the best of it. But I'm not going to get excited about trivial things.

JN: The new state constitution. That must be another instance of a place where the press had a fair amount to do.

BC: Yes, yes, I'm sure that's very true, because the coverage of that was excellent. Of course, it was an extremely important historic event and, as a consequence, I'm sure the coverage should have been what it was, but I think that was really great and I think that had some residual.

In other words, it brought some people, I think, into a contact with their government because it was an exciting event and I think that carried on. In other words, they got an awareness of what was going on and became not as complacent about their government, as a consequence became involved later on and still are involved. I really think that happened; I think it was a great time for that to happen. And then we had, of course, executive reorganization here, which was an exciting event in government. We at one time had 186 boards, bureaus, departments, you name it, we had it and we're down to 19. That was covered very well.

I was a member of the commission that studied government for two years, just luckily. I really learned more about government in those two years than I could have by any other procedure, I'm sure, because we looked at the whole broad spectrum of what was going on and searched out and found all those 186 boards, bureaus and departments. Some of which haven't been very functional for a long time. And that was covered very well, I want to say that. You know, I followed that very closely, I was part of the action.

JN: When it comes to ecology you've had this reclamation bill and the siting bill that I imagine is something else that was covered pretty closely.

BC: Oh yes, in fact I think the '73 sessions—'71 started and '73 session really got into it, of course. They had some other problems, too, to address in implementing the constitution. We had 155 bills in 1973 alone that implemented the constitution, so it was a tremendous workload. But I will agree with you that the very fine, I'd say, legislation to protect the environment and really, I think it allows—it's not really what many think of a moratorium-type situation, I think it's just responsible development and I'll defend that to my last breath.

I will say that I don't take this position, but some of the industry have thought—I suppose they will be interviewed too, I don't know, they could well speak for themselves—

JN: I talked to George O'Connor and the Montana Power Company—

BC: —and that's covered, but I've heard the industry complain that if you go to a public meeting the ecologists get the banners and the headlines and so forth and poor company doesn't do so well. And I'm not going to even ask you if he said [that], but that's one thing. The company people, particularly because of my involvement in the coal tax, come in here all the time and

I'm friends with them and I've heard them very honestly say that they feel they don't get the visibility when they make some positive statements. Maybe it's not as readable, I don't know.

JN: Well, that's part of it and I don't think they're quite as aggressive and they're kind of old on the scene and then they're rich. You add it all up and it isn't very good. But I can see their side of it all, right.

How does that coal tax work? That's a 30 percent...

BC: Well, it's based on the mine mouth values, less the other taxes, and it's just 30 percent.

JN: Where does the money go to?

BC: Well, it scattered all over; they cut the pie about five different ways. The general fund which is, of course, the cash balance that Montana operates the government on, gets 40 percent. The impact of cities and towns, to try to hit the impact on the front end, gets 22 and a half, I think; highways get seven and a half, two and a half for—percent I'm speaking of now—research devoted to trying to find some federal matching money, they're always doing research [unintelligible]. And then in the educational trust fund there was a dedication to developing our natural resources, the renewable natural resources as opposed to the non-renewable. We poured the non-renewable revenue into the renewable resources.

JN: Timber and so forth.

BC: And water. But the pie was sliced many ways.

JN: That's about the highest tax there is, isn't there?

BC: Well, there's no question about that. And I think they were not, they, the legislators, were not prevailed upon by that argument. They just felt it was a tax that, regardless of what the historic taxes were in other states, that Montana wanted it.

JN: If the Arabs are going to get it, why, the Montanans might, too.

BC: Well, I think you're right, and you might say that about our Canadian neighbors too. Oil from Canada is high-priced oil. I see Canada raised natural gas to a buck and a half. It started at 34 cents 18 months ago, it's a buck and a half now.

JN: Well, all the have-nots are getting to be haves.

BC: Well, even with our tax, coal 's still a bargain in the fossil fuel marketplace.

JN: It's still here. You've got it.

BC: I think you're looking, now, at two dollar a million BTU oil, two dollar a million BTU gas another six months, I'm sure.

[Interrupted by unrelated talk from someone who comes in to ask a question.]

I still say with that tax coal is a bargain.

JN: Just, one other thing, how in the world did [J.D.] Lynch get away with the library for Montana Tech?

BC: Well, I just don't know. That sure was a political pork barrel, there's no question about that. It was a trade-off made upstairs. It even surprised me that—

JN: The people who are I noticed, educational, but educational television people were kind of mad about—was there really a tie there?

BC: Well, do you mean did they actually cut one program to be able to support the other? I think the economics would bear that out. I felt a little bad about educational TV. I've been a long-time supporter of it, of course, we do—

[Interruption from outside person.]

I haven't really given you all the solid things I think you intended to get. In the broad sense, I think the process of state government—that's what I'm looking at, I guess, maybe that's narrow but that's what I'm in and that's what I look at, and I look at the coverage of the state government, and I think it's done well. It is a tough thing to sort out the important bills from this legislature and put them in there because one guy's interest is in one place and one in another and the volume of material goes through there just overwhelms a guy.

JN: What would it be like if you went back to the Anaconda press the way they say it used to be back in the '30s and '40s?

BC: It'd be very well sorted out for you. What they wanted you to read. [Laughs]

JN: Yes, it would be but I'm thinking now from the standpoint of the people of the state, how well would they be served?

BC: Well, I'm sure I'm talking ancient history and hand-down stories, but I guess I would say that the perspective was totally distorted. You know, you read what they wanted you to read.

JN: And this was not always in the people's interest.

BC: Absolutely not. I just am sure that it wasn't in the people's interest. And I guess I can't blame them. They had the power structure and so they put it to work.

JN: Well, according to their [unintelligible], they were doing right.

BC: Right, you got to look at that perspective.

JN: Some people are supposed to be very rich, and others are supposed to be very poor and the very poor are supposed to—

[End of Interview]