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Oral History Number: 465-032

Interviewee: Russ Hart

Interviewer: John Newhouse

Date of Interview: 1975

Project: Lee Newspapers in Montana Oral History Project

Note: Russ Hart was owner of a prominent downtown Billings department store, Hart-Albin, and was an enthusiastic booster of the Billings central business district.

John Newhouse: —have they had it now for?

Russ Hart: Sixteen years. Goodness gracious. You remember when the [Anaconda] Company ran the paper. It was the best of all possible worlds. There wasn't much controversy put on front pages, or even on back pages, and in the early years it seems to me— and I used to visit with Don about this—on such things as city council meetings, commission meetings, and things like that, it was as though they had turned a bunch of people who had been under wraps loose. And for a while, I think they went a little too far.

If the mayor used a four-letter word, they dutifully reported the exact four-letter word. That kind of thing. And for a while, a number of us had the feeling, particularly at the local government level, the paper was—I don't think deliberately, but inadvertently—making the town look bad in the eyes, perhaps, of our trade territory. As a merchant, I might notice that more, you see.

And so, some of us had a concern about that, and then I think they got that much better—a little more responsible journalism, I guess, is the word. I think as the reporters— maybe not the same reporter, but different reporters—were told to try to get the sense of the meeting rather than the abrasiveness of the meeting, it did get better. Now, there are some people you are going to talk to that will tell you that it is still a bit at times—I don't know whether to use the word abrasive or not. I suppose every paper is accused of being sensational.

John Newhouse: That part of the job, yeah.

RH: One thing that has happened that is interesting, is that when we have the evening edition, they used to put the big slant on local news for the evening edition— which was primarily, an in-city edition. And we often got big black headlines on things that really weren't that important. Now, since there is only one morning paper, that part of it has been sort of toned down, I guess is the word.

JN: You get more meaty stories?

RH: Yeah, and I don't think there's the tendency to play local stories up as much out of proportion as there might have two, three or four years ago. Or else I'm getting older; I don't know which. Maybe I'm getting more used to it.

I do think though that there is a feeling in the community that quite often there is a lack of—and I suppose they say this about every newspaper—a lack of accuracy perhaps, a tendency, sometimes, to get one person's point of view and publish it as if it was the gospel truth, and publish it without a further check of the facts. I'm sure you've heard this 40 times, without a check of the facts and sometimes without giving the other person a chance to answer until the next day. And then he answers the next day, and the day after that, the first guy answers him, and so you have the old story of generating an apparent feud, if you read the newspaper when, in fact, a feud may not exist at all. Have you ever heard that before?

JN: Oh, yeah, I have. You have to admit it, at my age I'd have to.

RH: The lot of the newspaper is not an easy one, because there are the usual lot of local people who say, "I don't know why I can't get my story in the *Gazette*," that kind of thing. And in many cases it's because so many—and I don't claim to be a bit smarter on it except I've had a few more years' experience—I've always found, personally, that anything I've had anything to do with that concerns our company or things I was interested in, that if I went to the paper and leveled with them, and told them the whole story, I usually got treated pretty well. But at the same time, on the street, you hear this a great deal.

Maybe from people who think that if you hand out a press release it should be printed verbatim, the usual thing. So as far as I'm personally concerned, and in my personal dealings with the paper, I have no complaints at all. Not that everybody says, well we're a big advertiser in your paper. You knew as well as I that the advertising department and the editorial department never speak to each other anyway, so, if anything, they lean over backwards not to do that.

So, it is in that viewpoint. I have found, generally, seriously, that on things where you've gone to them and told them the story and answered their questions to the best of our ability, that you usually—well, it was a fair presentation. There is a tendency at times, and I know with the press at times, there is a tendency to try to get interviews over the phone, which are always difficult. And I try not to do it when it comes up, because quick answers to pointed questions over the phone are sometimes quoted out of context and can be very misleading. I'm giving you the stock interview because I'm sure everybody says the same thing.

JN: You've been interested in a number of civic projects. Have you got help from the papers?

RH: Generally, yes, generally where they felt it was the right thing, yes. There have been some cases in where, in my personal viewpoint, I have pretty much felt that in most cases, they took my viewpoint—the right viewpoint—but there are instances where they haven't. For example,

there has been a feud going on, as you may or may not know—guess maybe feud is too strong a word, but the paper rather opposed the building of the large community building.

Not really a civic center, but an athletic closed arena at the fairgrounds here. They opposed that from the beginning, and the voters voted for it. Turned out that the cost of the thing had been misrepresented to the voters, and in that respect, the paper was right. In the respect that maybe it's a good thing for the town to have it regardless of cost, well, you might debate the paper was wrong.

JN: Well, did you get it?

RH: Yes, it's being built. I don't know what they're going to use for money, but they're building it, and in the long run it'll be good for the town. There's a great deal of argument or discussion about the location of it, and there is in any such thing, and there are pros and cons, as usual, but I don't think that was—

JN: How much was the difference in cost?

RH: There was a bond issue of \$3,000,000, and they had something like \$300,000 in the kitty from an insurance policy from a building which was destroyed by fire.

JN: And the new building will cost?

RH: Between five and six. That's not quite 100 percent more. New Orleans is having the same thing with their Superdome. Everything tends to go up, you know.

JN: A couple of million dollars for a town this size probably won't break you.

RH: No. It isn't catastrophic from the viewpoint of the town. Ask me some questions, I think I'll do better.

JN: Okay, under—are you getting more done for the town under the Lee ownership than you did under the Anaconda ownership? At that time, you had your—well, the company, I gather, stayed out of controversies pretty much, and didn't take too much of an editorial stand on things.

RH: Well, of course, you see, I'm kind of establishment, and therefore I don't sense a great deal of difference, because in those days this town has been blessed with a group of businessmen who generally work together pretty well. Not in a monopolistic fashion, but things that they thought were good for the community. And generally, the business interests "ran the town." And under the old regime, they went ahead and let them do it.

And under the new 16-year-old leadership, I think for a while there may have been a tendency because of more local news, because of more quoting verbatim, for some businessmen to rather pull their horns in and not assume as big a position of leadership as they did when they knew they had a benign group saying, "Well now, go ahead and do it." Maybe I've oversimplified.

JN: I know what you mean. It's very easy for people to try to avoid newspaper criticism by saying nothing.

RH: This can happen, you know.

JN: It's a bad thing when it does. This has happened at Madison. For a long time, it was very hard to get people to run for political office there, because they knew the Capital Times would take their hide off, and they did. And as a result, it's still hard to get people to run for political office.

RH: Well, this is one of the penalties one pays for—

JN: There's been some criticism... well, one of the smaller newspapers around here, I believe, has criticized the newspaper here—the *Gazette*—for the way they're treating the Montana Power Company. Do you think that's justified? Are they going overboard in this Colstrip thing?

RH: I kind of think they may be a little bit.

JN: Seem to have the feeling they were driving industry out of the state. I don't know whether that's—

RH: I do know this, that if you were—I don't know who all you're going to interview on this go around, whether you're going to interview the Power company people or not, and the Burlington Northern people. I really think you ought to as a part of your research, it might be interesting to talk to the Burlington Northern people, who have their divisional headquarters here with the vice president of the railroad in charge, John Davies. And it is certainly one of the major factors in the state now, because of the coal, particularly. Because, you see, they have an awful lot of the coal rights themselves, the railroad does.

It was a land grant railroad and alternate sections of each side of the road were owned by the railroad. Therefore, they sold the Colstrip mine—where all the shooting is about, really—to Montana Power, and while you're in Billings—I don't know whether [publisher] Strand [Hilleboe] suggested or not, I think it would be a very good idea to try to—

JN: I saw George O'Connor down in Butte, I guess. Well, he was president—until this year—of Montana Power Company. I got his side of it. I think Billings—the *Gazette*—has somewhat overdone their opposition.

RH: Think they've been carrying the torch maybe too much for the environmentalists.

JN: They seem to have that feeling. I think pretty damn definitely.

RH: I'm inclined to think most businessmen feel that way. Now, whether the man on the street feels that, that's another ball game.

JN: This is at the Burlington?

RH: Burlington Northern. That's the merger of the old Northern Pacific Great Northern-Burlington Railroad. And this man's name is John Davies. He is really their main man between Minneapolis and the coast. I really think if he was available, he's the best one to try to visit with if you have the time.

JN: I'll try to make the time.

RH: With a special regard to that situation. The petroleum people, of course this has been the petroleum headquarters for a long time, Billings has, and with the development of coal now, a lot of the same people—same companies—have interested themselves in coal, so the petroleum people and the railroad and the power company are more or less on the same side of the fence on this sort of thing.

JN: I'll suggest that to Strand and see if we can do it. I guess that covers everything. Don wanted me to talk to you. He's not doing so very well, by the way—

[End of Interview]