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Oral History Number: 465-005

Interviewee: James "Jim" Burgess

Interviewer: John Newhouse

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Note: James Burgess was production manager of the Missoulian, and publisher of the Helena Independent-Record and the Wisconsin State Journal before becoming executive vice president of Lee Enterprises.

Jim Burgess: I think that, and I'm sure you've reinforced elsewhere, in the early days of Lee, like any environment of a new owner, there's a lot of sensitivities, a lot of watching and waiting. I think that when younger people like myself, and to a certain extent Lloyd [Schermer], are vocal in the company, there is a lot more tenderness than there would be otherwise; a lot more sensitivity to what you're saying or maybe what you're not saying. I think that point made in 1967 represents that. A lot of new people, just getting the measure of other people for the first time. I was convinced, as was Lloyd, that—still am—that the way to really, in fact, provide the resources for a good newspaper—money, time, news hole, equipment, services—was to be able to create a discipline for the whole operation so that we didn't spend our resources on getting the paper out, but spent them on what we put in. Hard thing to sell because if you very superficially judge the editor's prerogatives, it has to do with the kind of super simplistic things like who gets to make over what pages and under what circumstances. Who decides the deadline.

Now, think about it a bit. It really is insignificant, in what is really an editor's opportunity to effect [unintelligible]. It's not important at all. But that was what at that point they reacted to. We had designed a system to look, whereby we attempted to even out flow of work so that it wasn't like the electric company necessary to maintain the equipment people and investment for the maximum moment. If you spread it out evenly, you can do it more efficiently. Made a speech in Phoenix about that. It had to do with dividing up the content of the pages of the paper into priorities. I think we had four or five different priorities. First priority is the comic page, you can do it a month ahead and nobody cares. These kinds of things. The second priority is the women's material and some of the pick up from the other news cycle, and some of the inside pages, and color pages that you use [unintelligible].

So, on up the line. But we create a mutually agreeable discipline on which pages fit into which categories. Having done that, then we get the flow of our paper in sequence.

John Newhouse: What was your capacity, Jim, at that time?

JB: Very simple system. I was production manager in Missoula.

JN: And you'd been there about a year or two.

JB: So, we talked about this blackboard and [unintelligible]. Here's a 20-some year-old editor and production manager, and now suggesting to editors who really feel defensive about anybody dealing in words other than themselves, telling them that they've got to create priorities in their pages and that they have to operate more like a factory, an assembly line.

You can conjure all sorts of things awful things. That's what happened. Gee, all sorts of people got mad and gee, they made up their minds and hung a tail, hung a can on my tail about what my motives were and my objectives.

JN: Were they mad on the floor?

JB: No, no. I just think the company had evolved to the point where an editor had the guts yet to stand up and say bullshit. We're there now, but we weren't there then. What they did is they'd go off in a corner at a cocktail party and say, "My god! The world's coming to an end. This young punk whose father is involved in the company is trying to make a shoe factory out of this."

I guess that was a point that's not indigenous to Montana. It happened across Lee in general. Several of our editors got very defensive about it. What this perceived indicates the way of the future and that was bad news that day. The system that I was describing now is used almost universally and the editors that I'm familiar with that do it best and wouldn't do it any other way because they can't organize their time and priorities in order to put their brightest people and their most thoughtfulness into their most important pages which is what they can do if the system is—

JN: What kind of experience did you bring to this, Jim? You were production manager in Missoula, and you'd been there about, what, two years before you made your talk? And before that, you'd been in—

JB: Before that I'd been in a training thing in which I was in Davenport for a year and a half, and Madison for a year and a half.

JN: So, you come in with a lot of thought and a lot of youth.

JB: Oh sure. It was young turks. Isn't any question about that.

JN: How old were you? About 22 then?

JB: Oh no, no. That was 1967. Eight years ago. 30.

JN: That's still pretty young.

JB: Well, it wasn't that particular thing; it wasn't an attempt that I know of to say, "Here's the new way to the future. Here's the new tablet from the Mount. What it was was a description of the system we had found to be useful in one paper.

JN: You weren't ramming it in down their throats, you were presenting it.

JB: Obviously, I was in no position to ram it down throats. But it sure got the bees buzzing, which is good.

JN: Well then there was—I can't quite tell from Don's letter where the—there was your talk at Phoenix, and was there another meeting then at which Don was at? Don and [Missoulian editor Edward] Coyle apparently, where there was a gripe meeting?

JB: Yes, and I don't know that it necessarily had much of anything to do now with what the question was at this round table discussion at Phoenix. Sometime after that, in response, I believe, and I'm not good at this. Coyle and Doc Bowler had developed a good bit of admiration to Don and wrote him or got him on the phone and said, look, we got a bunch of very angry people and I think you ought to talk to them. [unintelligible] very angry people, editors who—I don't know what went on in the conversation.

JN: Who's Coyle?

JB: Ed Coyle is the editor—and was then—at the *Missoulian*.

JN: He's still there. And [Duane] "Doc" Bowler of course is still there too?

JB: Doc is no longer editor. Doc is editorial page editor.

JN: By his desire, or...?

JB: Doc is probably, probably the best newsman in the state of Montana in my view. He knows how to write, he knows how to think, he's got all the sources, all the [...] that a [...]. Good newsman. He had a lot of problems in dealing with young, long-haired, sandaled advocacy journalism. And you know, I'm sympathetic. There's a lot of people, and I think that he is doing today what he does best, and he is doing one hell of a job down there. A lot of people think in this world that unless you end your career or reach your pinnacle on the last day, you haven't achieved something properly. I think that's ridiculous. I think you gotta do what you do best, and happiness [unintelligible].

JN: He's still well liked, well respected and speaks with a good deal of authority.

JB: You bet he does, no question.

JN: Good because I met him once and got very fond of him.

JB: Young man named Bill Roesgen is the editor. He has just joined us a few months ago; he's out of the south; most impressive. Most impressive.

JN: But Doc Bowler would be the source of the history of the last 15...

JB: Oh, yes, and you have to talk to him. He's a part of it; his family is a part of it, they're a newspaper family. The family runs a weekly—for all I know they may still have it; I'm not sure. His young nephew [Printer Bowler] worked for us for a while and went out to San Francisco and got involved in the underground press. Bright young journalist. Yeah, I think Doc—

[Break in audio]

JB: —decisions were made.

JN: Morrison sounds like a guy that I—

JB: Another guy that might be interesting to you is Jimmy Cook. Jim is the controller at Missoula. He was a bookkeeper in Missoula for the Anaconda Company with Dick Morrison. He goes a long way back.

JN: How do you assess Morrison?

JB: Dick is, and was, very different in terms of goals and style of management. The way of handling people and decisions, and then myself. Dick represents a different era of managing newspapers. He certainly was successful in what he set out to do and the way he set out to do it. He lived at the time of rough and tough unions out there; rough and tough politics; he worked for a company that's interests were underground and not in the minds. I guess it would be easy to criticize Dick because he's techniques were different. But it would be unfair.

JN: Don Anderson asked him to write a resume of his days before Lee and after; and it was a fascinating thing to write [sic] from the standpoint of a person who's looking under the heart and soul of a guy. A psychologist would have a ball reading that. Started out—

JB: We think we have tough activities these days. We think we work hard, and we have all the hard problems. Well, that's not so. A lot of our forefathers of not too many years ago lived in an environment in which they were busy eliminating the newspaper down the street, fighting off all sorts of violence and intensity. You know these guys that carved a niche; we haven't had to carve anything; we've had to build on what they've done.

JN: Tom Williams apparently had himself a hell of a time with the unions in Butte. Doesn't sound like Morrison—

JB: Everybody had a hell of a time there.

JN: Doesn't sound like Morrison. Sounds like Morrison may have been fighting the unions, but it doesn't seem like he had them licked. At least not in Butte.

JB: Well, there again, a difference in outlook. I personally don't think that well-inspired, well-considered employees need unions. It's only when they don't have an opportunity to express themselves and be rewarded properly and be recognized that they seek unions. Well, Dick Morrison would say that's a bunch a tommyrot. He would say it isn't a question of having them, it's a question of licking them. Dick's style of negotiating was different than it is now. They all went to Butte once every couple of years and Dick sat down with all the unions and made big deals in Butte, then they told the rest of the world what the deal was going to be. It was power negotiation with the best of them.

JN: First, he had all of Anaconda's dough backing him, so he didn't really have to have a prospering newspaper.

JB: Yeah, he did. On the other hand, he had towns that were heavily union oriented, Butte particularly. For their isolation, they were an extraordinarily strong union. Miners, teamsters, even our printing trade guys, were strong unions, and I guess there was a reason for them to be strong or they wouldn't be. But they dealt a different game, and—in my own view, which I can't support at all—was that Dick really loved that fight. He was good at it, the power plays, negotiating by poker. He was good at it and he loved it, and I think when he retired, he missed that.

JN: Of course, he had a lot of his power trimmed when he—there was this one time when he and Lloyd apparently came to loggerheads on a political endorsement and that was another of the milestones such as this one probably was, where Morrison found he didn't have the heavy artillery and had to step back one rung on the ladder.

JB: Yeah, I'm afraid what you found is maybe one incident of changing times and outlooks. I think Lloyd's view of how to deal with people and how to run a newspaper was substantially different from Dick's. Lloyd came from stockholders who were the parent. Dick was the guy that had been there before and was having to get acquainted with a new parent. So, they obviously, it was going to be tough. Everybody wants to elbow out his own position in the beach and there was a good bit of that with Dick, with all of the Lee papers. I guess that's natural. If we're going to have our desks together, we always seem to—

JN: Well, of course, there's always the fact, I know better than you.

JB: Yes, that's true too.

JN: You can have your opinion and I'll be right.

JB: Lloyd had strong views; he still does. He's a strong leader. He felt very strongly about Missoula. Dick had been there a lot of years; they had different views, just like Don now sitting at home reading the State Journal, seeing views expressed that may not agree with his. I expect that every once in a while he pounds the front page too. My father does too. I think we would question if they didn't.

JN: Lloyd is not a native of Davenport, was he? Where did he grow up?

JB: Oh, he's a native of St. Louis or one of the communities around St. Louis. He, after completing Harvard Business School, as I understand, started a small air-conditioning company somewhere in St. Louis area. After he married Betty.

JN: When he went out to Montana, had he been with Lee for a while? Oh yeah, he had been editor or publisher—

JB: Well, I don't know if he had the title of publisher, but he ran Kewanee for a while.

JN: That's right, there was a boiler strike down there and that sort of thing, so when he went out there—

JB: He was quite pivotal.

JN: He had been exposed to the Lee philosophy of operation.

JB: Then he worked here for a while.

JN: That's right, he wanted to go out to Montana, as I recall.

JB: I don't know if he told you this personal story, but I think it's cute. I think he was applying a great deal of pressure to his friend, Don Anderson, and anybody else who would listen to him about how he was determined to broaden his horizons and Kewanee wasn't broad enough and that they damn well better find something pretty soon; he was chomping at the bit, and Don took the message back to Phil Adler. So, they put together the notion that perhaps in what Don was doing in reorganizing the management in Montana that there would be a place for Lloyd and he and Phil thought maybe they ought to consider Lloyd for Missoula. Phil insisted these Midwestern, big city people probably would not at all like Missoula. It is a pretty rough and tumble place, it was then, and kind of an overgrown logging camp. Phil said, "Well, I don't know what we ought to do but why don't you go out and look at Missoula and then you come back and we'll talk about it." It was that vague. Lloyd went out to Missoula, and I believe it was within 48 hours he bought a home. He either called or wired or came back to Phil and he said,

"We've bought a home and it's just a matter of which day we move." I know Lloyd loved every minute he was there.

JN: Did he want to come back to Davenport?

JB: No, I don't think he did at all. I think he had a good life out there; he was very successful, very popular, very influential. He had built a kind of relationship among the Montana papers in which they were beginning to put out very good papers, but they were doing it in their own way and they were very excited and he was successful.

JN: What was his capacity out there?

JB: Well, after Dick retired, he became the group manager.

JN: After Dick—

JB: Morrison. So, he kind of pulled together—well, there were five papers.

JN: Now this wasn't on a policy level, this was on an operations level, production level primarily.

JB: Primarily, yes.

JN: But there is an advisor if anybody wanted to ask about policy—

JB: Well, and then it's a matter of creating the kind of climate where the people can get excited and excel. He did that, built a—the signs are still there—a group of people that really like their work. They have good competitiveness and we put out awful good papers. We serve our towns well.

JN: Then he came back here about—

JB: Well, now, you've got me. Four years ago? I don't know.

JN: He came back as what?

JB: He came back in a job which is vice president of Newspaper Operations.

JN: That would be second in command at that time to Dave Gottlieb.

JB: Oh, I don't think that's fair to say. It was a position in which Lloyd's responsibility was the operation, running the newspaper. I'm sure he was one of the most important people in the company at that time. Phil was still involved. Walter Rothschild was an important advisor to Dave Gottlieb, also called a vice president, so there were a lot—

JN: But then a lot of things happened. Phil retired, Henry Hook retired, then Dave Gottlieb died—what was it, two years ago?

JB: Not quite two years ago this July.

JN: There was a heart attack, was it? Then Lloyd all of a sudden found the mantle down around his shoulders. What was he then, about 45? Then of course there's been this—oh, it's really kind of a hoot because here you've got this bunch of papers out here with, theoretically, people that have held on a lot of years and maybe they've got some spunk left and maybe they haven't and the great white fathers come in from the Mideast to tell them how to run the damn place. They kind of get up on their high horse, and they train a lot of people of their own, and people from the East—now all of a sudden the tide is going the other way and you sort of—the philosophy, and a lot of it I suppose there's a wide open places philosophy of Montana that sort of permeated the fact that this place where a lot of the old guards—the Don Andersons, and so forth have retired either because of age or death.

JB: It's called the Montana mafia, and I'm not so sure it's called that with any note of friendship, because a lot of us are on the scale of the outspoken side, on the aggressive side, on the opinionated side. And I think if there's somebody joining the company now that's never been west of the Missouri, really has a bit of an inferiority complex for a little while because he doesn't know anything of how to get on a horse. We did have exciting times, we did have fun out there. I think we all look on it fondly. I think that the credit for creating the excitement is Lloyd's. I'd never been to Montana, our other people hadn't. We went out there, we took newspapers that were really sleepy, they didn't make much of any money and didn't make much of any impact in town, toed the line. A lot of exciting people grew up, made good papers, made good money; it's a success story.

JN: Well, after this meeting that Don speaks of here where everybody apparently just let their hair down and said what they really thought, well then Don got out of that and he had to write to Lloyd this letter here which says, "Look, these guys have had all this stuff beneath the surface has been boiling around, now it's out in the open and now we've got to do something about it." About that time, why apparently at that time they thought all the dough was being spent in Davenport and they were mad because they weren't getting money, getting help, something must have happened as a result of this.

JB: Well, I don't think you can satisfy that kind of concerns of an enlightened editor, superficially. You can't give them a bunch of pat answers and say, "Now go back to your typewriter and don't bother me anymore today."

I don't think we had. There was an organization put together called the editorial board. It was superficial to Nth the degree in the sense that somebody said, "We'll create this group and we'll let them meet two or three times a year and they can go off to some sunny or cold place and carp and that will solve this problem." Of course, that's bad business.

They said, "Now, you fellows go create programs and dreams and tell us how to put out good papers and this will give you a voice in the upper reaches of the corporation and in the area where influence has been magnified."

I don't really think any of these things are true in a meaningful way. Meaningful way means that your editor is paid and given visibility, given decision-making involvement among highest management. That's the way you do it. You let him help design where you're going to go with that paper, which is a role that editors are very suited for. You don't create a group and say go on off and meet. That was one thing that was done.

Another thing that was done was to select a dean of a journalism school and put him on the board of directors. Since the board of directors doesn't talk about journalism, nor does it talk about education, no does it really very often talk about editors. It really was very difficult for him to use that as a way to meaningfully address themselves to the problems. A board of directors worries about hiring the president and accommodating the stockholders. That's their work. Things were done, but they were—in my judgment—the wrong things. But we're doing better now.

JN: When you've got down to the nitty gritty of the one-to-one relationship and...

JB: Well, helping editors edit good papers is basic.

JN: You have this group concept now where, what? You have five papers; you're the group leader now, aren't you?

JB: No, the group leaders work for me.

JN: Oh, that's right. They report to you.

JB: Editorial activities are not terribly involved in that, that's primarily a planning and budgeting type of thing, although editors participate periodically. We have, not as part of this problem, but as an outgrowth of our original long-range plan, we have disbanded the editorial board and created something that has the name Lee Newsroom Consultants. It consists of editors, some editors, some publishers, some staff people, and they run a series of programs and they have money to do it with. One of the things they do is put on a workshop where all the editors can get together and have some sort of a group activity. That resembles the past. The others don't. They sponsor intern programs, they provide seed money for editors to start state bureaus—like the Wisconsin State Bureau, which is a fiasco. It started with corporate seed money through the Lee Newsroom Consultants. It provides subsidies—

[Knock on door]

John Talbot: [*Missoulian* publisher] Are you telling all the secrets?

JB: Yeah, I'm ready to go.

[resumes answer] —a lot of activities that they define are useful in stimulating good newspapers. In other words, they give an editor an opportunity to identify the things he needs and money to do it with.

JN: So, Doc Bowler, when he was editor, he had some way of having his voice heard.

JB: You bet. He wanted to send somebody to API [American Press Institute]. It was a good thing for him to do; the money was there for him to do it with.

JN: Who'd he call?

JB: Oh, they have communicating facility, I think Forrey [Forest] Kilmer [editor of the *Quad City Times* in Iowa] is in charge of that. Or if you want to have what's—

Unidentified Speaker: In actuality he has "X" number of dollars automatically provided each year for this kind of enrichment, and he doesn't call anybody, he just sends them to API and then bills it and subtracts it from his allotment.

[End of Interview]