

## **A New Angle**

### **Episode 52**

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**Justin Angle:** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

**Justin Angle:** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. My guest today is John Twiggs, host of the award-winning Montana PBS program, Backroads of Montana.

**John Twiggs:** That's the part of the job you really enjoy, and you look forward to getting out on the road, not thinking about politics, not talking about politics with anybody, just enjoying who they are and where they are.

**Justin Angle:** This is John's 35th year in television journalism, and he's been with Montana PBS for over 25 years. Last year, John was inducted into the Silver Circle of the Northwest chapter of the National Academy of Television, Arts and Sciences. John, thanks for coming on the show.

**John Twiggs:** Thanks for having me.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, it's been too long. It's been a long wait.

**John Twiggs:** It has been a while. You know, we'll occasionally pass each other on the sidewalk, but, yeah, it's been a while.

**Justin Angle:** Exactly. So welcome. And start with where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

**John Twiggs:** I grew up in, mainly I moved around a bit early on, but mainly grew up in Virginia.

**Justin Angle:** What part of Virginia?

**John Twiggs:** Just outside of Richmond.

**Justin Angle:** Okay.

**John Twiggs:** You'll easily see the connection here early on that in the 1970s, my mother was a video producer, worked at the local PBS affiliate there, and she was kind enough to let me tag along on some of those projects. And then in a brilliant stroke of nepotism, she put me in some of the shows. So, I thought I was peaking there at ten or 11 years old. And you probably remember me from such hits as Metric Marmalade and Math-o-Rama.

**Justin Angle:** That was you?

**John Twiggs:** Yeah, I know. Yeah, I get that a lot. Yeah, on the street. But that definitely ignited a passion as far as visual storytelling, the creative things you could do, you know, with video production. And it really took off from there. My dad, I'm sure, is disappointed that I didn't go into construction. He's a construction engineer. And that was part of how we were moving around the country a little bit when I was very young. And then he got tired of moving around a lot and settled there in Virginia where both of my sets of grandparents live. So, it was a family thing but worked out well.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And how did you make your way to Montana?

**John Twiggs:** The job was the first thing. So, I actually went to college in New Mexico and was studying in broadcast communications and wanted to work in television sports, big sports fan love sports, wanted to cover that. It turns out it's tough to find a job when you look like you're 12 years old coming out of college. So, I had a lot of no's as I was sending out resumes and tapes back in the 1980s. And then finally there was a station in Billings. KTVQ in Billings. And I don't even think that I was their first choice either, but as fate would have it, enough things happened to where I could find my way up to Billings and got my first first taste of Montana.

**Justin Angle:** His first time to Montana was for this job in Billings.

**John Twiggs:** It was. It was. I loaded up the 73-year-old cutlass with a small U-Haul, and I drove from New Mexico, got to Montana. I had a great time and working in Billings for about four years there in the late eighties and then eventually moved on to Indiana. And that was fun just to get to cover a lot of big-time events there, you know, a lot of professional things there. So that was fun. But at some point it started to kind of wear on me a little bit.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. Is that when you made the jump to public media?

**John Twiggs:** It is. It is. I had worked for I guess it was probably eight or nine years commercially and just starting to get a little burned out. You know, everybody's familiar with the local newscast and the sports within that. You don't actually see that as much today anymore. But, you know, it's somewhat limiting. You only get four or five minutes and there's only so much you can do. So, after so many years, I was starting to bang my head against the wall on that and had talked to a friend of mine who I'd worked with in Billings. He was over here in Missoula at the university, and he told me about their graduate program. He also kept telling me about this show he had come up with and that that would be fun to work on. And he kept telling me that they were going to start this public broadcasting wing in Missoula. The station was in Bozeman. They were going to start it in Missoula. And I remember he told me that in the early nineties and didn't happen and the mid-nineties still didn't happen. But I came back here, went to graduate school at the University of Montana, got my master's degree here. And as I graduated, they launched the wing of public broadcasting for Montana PBS in Missoula.

**Justin Angle:** Good timing for you.

**John Twiggs:** It was I definitely lucked out there. And then that kind of jumped me off into public broadcasting, which, you know, my mother thought was hilarious that it ended up back where she was. And yeah, it's been, gosh, 26 years now.

**Justin Angle:** And so, talk about your portfolio of activities at Montana PBS.

**John Twiggs:** I've got a variety of hats to wear. But honestly, that's what I enjoy most about the job. I just love, I love the variety. I love the different things that I get to do. And that's probably the best part for me. Produce documentaries, so longer form things and that can be a wide variety. Some of it's been current events about, you know, concussion research that was going on at the universities. Sometimes it's historical documentaries. When I first got here, I actually did educational shows for kids. Then, of course, we're starting a new news and public affairs initiative coming up. But I'm going to oversee that. Will have five producers across Bozeman, Billings and Missoula will be the launching points to go out and report on a variety of issues around the state. So, we're excited about that. That's coming up this fall. And then, of course, Backroads of Montana. I mean, that's the cherry on top, is probably the most fun to work on and I've enjoyed that. I've done stories on that show now for 27, 28 years. And then, of course, now I have a new job.

**Justin Angle:** Right, taking over as host as William has retired. Talk about that. You mentioned you've been working on Backroads for many years, but now to sort of step into the host role for many viewers and listeners, probably you're maybe seen as the new guy or the new face, but it's sort of an old gig for you.

**John Twiggs:** It is. It is, yeah. Internally, it doesn't seem like a huge change to me because the routine is somewhat the same. But yes, I can understand for people watching and that's, first of all, big shoes to fill. I mean, William, legendary in that role. And people, I think, have an affinity for William, his voice. It feels comfortable to have him tell you a story. You know, we've always said that when he's narrating the pieces. And so, yeah, I told William, I said, yeah, I'll be a little nervous on that first one because you never know how that reaction will be. But I think the heart and soul of the series, of course, would be the stories and the people and the places that we feature all around the state. And as long as we maintain that and the quality of that then I think we'll be fine and hopefully they'll tolerate the new guy.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. Well, tell us about those stories like what makes for a great Backroad story. How do you and your team kind of make choices about the stories to go after?

**John Twiggs:** For us I think the big word would probably be genuine. I think you're always looking for somebody in some place that would resonate as genuine. Yeah, and that's tough to achieve. I think when you're talking about television and video with the equipment and the camera and all of that, it's tough to capture the genuine nature of some of the places and the people. But that's one thing I think that we're always striving for.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And it occurs to me that, you know, this notion of Montana values kind of comes up very often, comes up during elections prominently. Yeah. It's kind of hard to pin people down on what exactly those Montana values are, especially a politician. But from your vantage point, actually covering these folks that you're sort of selecting based on their authenticity, what do you think that means as far as you've covered it in Montana for so many years? What are sort of the values of Montana that makes these stories genuine and interesting and something that people can connect with?

**John Twiggs:** Well, and from a process standpoint, one of the things that I'm always amazed by is when we go into a place and meet someone and they don't know us from Adam, you know, coming in, they're so welcoming and genuine to us to bring us in and

open their story up and their lives and their personal history to us. And in a day and age when people are so jaded towards the media.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, right.

**John Twiggs:** And so skeptical about the media, I am just always blown away at people who, and to be honest, you know, you can tell like sometimes they would never agree with you politically. They would never agree to have the same worldview as you. But, you know, they will throw the door open and welcome you in and open up the family photo album and share their story with you. I'm always amazed by that. I think just the openness and the willingness, I think, to give you the benefit of the doubt, you know, as you come in, because like I said, sometimes you might have some relationship over the phone or maybe you've met once or twice. But sometimes when we go to the other side of the state, we haven't met at all. And it's the first time showing up. And yet people are so welcoming to us. I'm always impressed by that.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, and it's such an interesting contrast, you mentioned that with people's general disposition toward media, yet you're not experiencing that on the road. You're these in-person interactions are just pleasant and people are excited to tell their stories and may be excited that somebody is paying attention.

**John Twiggs:** I think so. I think because one of the things I think that's always been kind of a counter in terms of Backroads and the current state of things and the media and all of that is when it comes to video production, and watching things on television, that medium lends itself to a big personality, and you see that all the time. And so, there's a desire for that. And so, to get ratings and clicks and bigger numbers, you need bigger personalities. And we're fortunate in terms of being in public broadcasting. I mean, we want people to watch the show, but it's not as dependent on ratings and clicks and that kind of thing. And we're afforded the luxury of personalities that aren't over-the-top and that aren't big, and Montanans recognize that as genuine. You know, they recognize that as that neighbor down the street that quietly goes about doing something nice for the community all the time. Not flamboyant, not big, over-the-top, but, you know, they're like that person deserves some attention. And so, when we can come and shine that light on them and honestly, sometimes they're just genuinely embarrassed by it when they're there. And I kind of feel bad, like, well, we're going to have to bring this camera out. But when we do that, it really resonates. And I think that's why the show has resonated, because people feel like, yes, this is an accurate portrayal. You didn't go out and find the wildest, craziest thing that you could find. You found real people that we recognize and identify with. You know, the rancher who might not be a big talker but does a lot or the person in the town over that has

volunteered all these years but doesn't make a big fuss about it. And now we can make a big fuss about it.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. So, tell us, you know, in episodes and seasons to come, like what are kind of the stories that you're looking to cover? What can listeners and viewers expect?

**John Twiggs:** Oh, we've got a variety of ones that we're working on right now. I think an interesting one, there was a a rancher out in a rural setting just outside of Big Sandy, kind of up towards the Hi-Line there, south of Harve, found himself in a situation where he had a pretty serious accident out in the field. The EMT crew came in and really, I think, basically saved his arm. I mean, it was very serious. And the notion of rural EMT work and the volunteers who take part in that, and he was so moved by what they did and how they helped him that he took part of his crop, and he held a hay auction to raise money for the EMTs. And so, I love those kinds of stories. There's another project, the Hope Foundation, which is Montana Law Enforcement, kind of a Make-A-Wish of Montana, if you will, that they work with seriously ill children to try and work with them and their families to grant a wish. So, we're going to be following along with that. We have one of the retired law enforcement officers in Billings, and we're going to go over to an eastern Montana town with him as they grant a wish

there. So, we're very excited about that. There's another project called Arm to Farm where they're working with veterans and agriculture. So, we're going to have another one featuring that. Another big one that's coming up this summer is down in southeastern Montana near the Carter County Museum in Ekalaka, where they have a big dino dig down there because that is just fertile country when it comes to archeology down there and they're going to have a big project there. So, we're excited to be down there. So, a lot of miles to cover.

**Justin Angle:** We'll be back to my conversation with John Twiggs after this short break.

**Justin Angle:** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with John Twiggs of Montana PBS.

**Justin Angle:** John, in our remaining time, let's talk a little bit about the news division side of your work. You cover the news, you cover politics in particular. We've collaborated on some political coverage. How is it to wear that hat?

**John Twiggs:** Well, if we're going to draw a contrast, then these would be the two, because my happy time is backroads.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah.

**John Twiggs:** That's the part of the job you really enjoy. And you look forward to getting out on the road, not thinking about politics, not talking about politics with anybody, you know, just enjoying who they are and where they are. This, on the other hand, it is a necessary public service. I will start with that. I think we have looked at the landscape and a lot of people have looked at the media landscape about what is needed, what can we provide as a public service. And unfortunately, on the commercial side, there has been a lot of cutting and there's been a lot of reduction in staff.

**Justin Angle:** Consolidation.

**John Twiggs:** Yeah. And we've been lamenting that. I think everyone has. And so, I think there's been a sense that there's a void there and a need for more in-depth reporting, an ability to spend more time on things. And that is a luxury that we have. That's again, that's a luxury that goes across all these different genres because we talk about that in Backroads. You know, when I was in the daily news grind, you'd be lucky to spend a couple of hours or an afternoon with somebody, and now I can spend several days on a Backroads trip, and we're going to try and apply that same approach to the news and public affairs. So, when we go out and we delve into some of these

issues that are important to Montanans, whether we're talking about, you know, inflation and dealing with the rising costs of everything, whether it's an agricultural issue, it could be mental health. There are all sorts of things that we need to be talking about to be able to spend time with people and take a bit of a deeper dive into that. That's our goal.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, maybe give us an example of like from the past where you've seen opportunity. Hey, this is a story that's not being told that is uniquely suited to, you know, PBS's ability to tell it.

**John Twiggs:** Well, let's talk about maybe agriculture and the drought and how that's impacting farmers and ranchers. And then, of course, that eventually makes its way to consumers. I feel like that's the kind of thing that you need to follow over a period of time. You know, you need to go through a growing season. You need to go through when you're going to try and sell that crop. And those are the things you can't really follow through and actually see the impact of in a quick news story. It's the same thing if we were talking about health care, being able to follow people who might have to go through the doctor's visit and then they're going to get the bills that come and then how are you going to adjust to that? And then how do you deal with not understanding what the charges are on this crazy bill? You know that all takes time and you need a

month or two months or three months to be able to follow along. And it's things like that where hopefully if we have the time, we can illustrate it maybe a little more strongly.

**Justin Angle:** So, one thing I'm curious about, John, is, you know, you do cover current affairs and politics and then you have this role at Backroads. Does one role affect the other? I mean, you have to maintain a kind of trusted voice as, I don't necessarily want to say neutral, but like you kind of have to stay above the fray, I would imagine in some respects. Talk about that sensibility, know what role do you kind of play in the storytelling and how do you kind of manage that?

**John Twiggs:** Right. Oddly enough, they do kind of go hand in hand because Backroads, for the most part, needs to be apolitical. I mean, it just, you know, nobody wants to hear that in Backroads and that's not what the appetite is for. So, in that sense, you know, it kind of keeps me on the straight and narrow path of let's not veer off into this worldview or that worldview. You know, that's not what the story is about. And for the most part, people are respectful of that. And they know that. And they know that that's not what that series is for. I feel like when we shift over to political coverage, because we travel so much, because we meet so many people, I feel like I have a better finger on the pulse of what the state is. I don't feel like it's quite so

superficial as far as you know. Well, you're only in this town or that town or you're only in Bozeman or Missoula because that's not reflective of what the whole state is. You know, when we get out into the smaller towns and other communities, I think you feel, you get a sense of where they're at and what they're thinking. Now, that might not be something that you share necessarily in a Backroads story, but it gives you a sense of where people are at. And because we have the luxury of staying a few days and spending some time there, you know, people will open up and they'll tell you about that. And I think there's a sense that you're going to respect their privacy. It's not like I'm going to go out and blab about what they were talking about politically. The story is about something else. But for me, internally, it kind of gives me a gauge of where people are leaning, where the opinions are, what's upsetting them. So, it's kind of your own little impersonal, or I should say personal, informal focus group.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And it occurs to me just looking at your long tenure in public media here in Montana, what has changed and what's stayed the same?

**John Twiggs:** I'd say what has stayed the same has been, you know, Montanans, they're very practical. You know, Montanans were notorious ticket splitters for the longest time. And it was done on a very practical basis. You know, I mean, if the governor was doing a good job, you put the governor back in. If this other person down

the ballot wasn't doing a good job, you kick them out and you would put somebody else in because you want this to get done. You don't see that as much anymore. It is a lot of more straight-line voting that's going on that way. And I got to be honest, I mean, I never thought I would see the day where Montanans, regardless of ideology, regardless of anything, Montanans would be okay with outside wealthy people coming into the state.

**Justin Angle:** It's happening more and more.

**John Twiggs:** Yeah. And that always was a backlash previously. Go back to the late nineties, early 2000. I can think of several candidates who came in and tried to do that and were smacked down by the voters. And now you see that happening with more frequency. And I don't know what that means. I don't know what that translates to. I don't know if that's, obviously, it depends on your point of view as to whether you think that's good or bad, but I have been surprised by that. And, you know, as I sized up some races in the last six, eight years, I thought, well, I don't know if that person can really pull this off. And they did. And I don't know if that comes back to the party loyalty thing or that part of it. But that's definitely changed in the last ten years.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And you mentioned before the consolidation and, you know, cuts on the commercial media side. And so, a lot of our political coverage has sort of been at the national level. Right, and national political ideology or affiliation has kind of driven people's attitudes towards everything. And so, yeah, you could see that maybe being part of the reason some of these things are starting to look similar in Montana. At the same time, it seems like a great opening to sort of not restore but reaffirm the need for, you know, folks like you and the coverage that you all do with Montana PBS. Public Media should play an important, more important role than ever. And then you also look at and it would be interesting to hear your thought on this, John, is there's been a rise of some not for profit media outlets in the state. Montana Free Press, The Daily Montanan and other organizations like that are starting to gain a foothold in a world where some of the commercial forces are kind of not liking the profit and loss model that they're looking at. What do you think of that, that the role of nonprofit media outlets?

**John Twiggs:** Well, the two examples you gave, I think that's been a positive addition, you know, to just the information that is out there for people. I mean, if people want to get, feel educated when they go in to vote, I think that they have done a great job with that. And I've been encouraged to hear when they're hired on more people, when they've bolstered their staffs. I think that's very encouraging because that's what we're

in need of. I mean, we're in need of some very basic information for people. And that's getting harder and harder to find for a lot of the reasons that you know, that you were you were talking about. Just to veer off, I mean, another job that I have that is given me the view of the underbelly of this process is I have to negotiate the debates, the political debates.

**John Twiggs:** Oh gosh, the rules for the debates.

**John Twiggs:** Yes, yes, yes. Who sits where and who gets water and who doesn't? You know, that that kind of nonsense. But it's interesting in negotiating those debates, because you can tell right away, if the campaign manager is familiar with Montana, they kind of understand how this would work and what Montanans need. If they're from the outside and like a big heavy hitter, national, whatever they play to that national narrative, you know, they want that and I'm just thinking, you're a fool for thinking that Montanans are interested in this or buying into that narrative. But it's an interesting insight into the national versus local or just, you know, talk to any local reporter who has to deal with somebody who might come in from even The Washington Post or The New York Times. And they just paint these cartoonish pictures of Montana and they're so disheartened. And I always think it's a shame that they don't talk to some of the local reporters who could at least get them up to speed and give

them a little more insight. I mean, I'm a little empathetic that they have a short amount of time and they come in and they have to try and paint this picture. But at the same time, they're not using all the resources available. And then they have this giant platform that that perpetuates an inaccurate picture of Montana. That's a little bit discouraging. I think we need more voices and more people disseminating this information. And so, the nonprofits are great. Public broadcasting hopefully can play a role and the commercial stations, I think on a daily basis, can do their part as well.

**Justin Angle:** You got to tell me what is the most ridiculous negotiating point in a debate that you experienced? Can you share that?

**John Twiggs:** I can. I'll try not to use any names. But yeah, we had, I don't know, 45 minutes or an hour of my life that I will never get back, going back and forth about whether they should sit or stand. We had a table and we wanted everybody to sit around the table just to get away from the visual of, you know, two lecterns and facing each other and confrontational and all of that. And we just went round and round and round about it, and they wouldn't really get to the point, you know, they're like, well, we don't really prefer this. And we really, you know, and so finally, after again, a waste of 45 minutes or an hour, somebody came clean and went, I just think that, well, if the candidate is sitting, it makes the candidate look fatter. And that was basically it. That

was the upshot of this entire argument was that they thought their candidate was going to look chubbier sitting down than standing up. And so, didn't appreciate that, and getting back to the original thing of like you could have just said that in the beginning.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. Say that from the start, we'll kind of deal with it right?

**John Twiggs:** There have been some days where I'm like, man, I need to go do a Backroad story. To cleanse the palate.

**Justin Angle:** Yes, to cleanse the palate. So. Last question, John. The Montana Broadcast Media Center's situated within the University of Montana system, you got the chance to work with students a lot. I mean, you're one of our students. And students work on a lot of the programs that you're involved with. Talk about that opportunity to work with students and for students who might be interested in kind of pursuing careers, successful careers in broadcast journalism, how would you, what sorts of advice would you give?

**John Twiggs:** Well, I'd start with yeah, one of the more rewarding parts of my job is, yeah, for the last 27 years, I've taught at the University of Montana School of

Journalism, and the experiences I've had with the students have been fantastic. I hope they're mutually beneficial. I've learned a lot along the way, and I hope they got something out of it as well. And it's been great for us at Montana PBS because we've been able to, and Montana Public Radio, and we've been able to incorporate students into the professional production, so they get real world experience, they get an audience for their work. So, it's been fantastic that way. You know, for students interested in it, they need to bring a curiosity and a passion. I mean, those are the two biggest things of all the people I've ever interviewed, some hugely famous, some not so famous, the one big factor with all of them was just an innate curiosity about things. I think if you can bring that and a passion, the rest of it will take care of itself. You know, don't be intimidated by the technology. Don't worry about buttons and switches and knobs and all of that which a lot of students get hung up on. To me, it's just such an exciting place to be, you know? There's so much you can do visually and creatively. And with all the technology that we have now, you know, to combine all that together, the possibilities are endless for what you can do and the impact that you can make because you can genuinely move people with pictures and sound. And I think that's always been exciting for me. It's still exciting for me. It's still what drives me every day to go out and do stories and tell stories and be a part of this process. That's another big part of my experience here has been interacting with the students, being on a university campus. I've learned so much about that because they will always push back

at me like, well, why do you do it that way? And it's actually forced me to stop myself and go, why do I do that?

**Justin Angle:** I got to stay current.

**John Twiggs:** Yeah, you got to stay up on things and you got to understand why you're doing it, not just because you always did it that way. And they pushed me in that regard and hopefully they got something out of it as well.

**Justin Angle:** Absolutely. I'm sure they did. John, thanks so much for sharing your time with us. Congratulations on the new role at Backroads and we look forward to the stories you'll tell in the future with you and your colleagues. Thanks for being here today.

**John Twiggs:** Well, thanks for having me. It was great talking with you.

**Justin Angle:** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michele and Loren Hansen.

**Justin Angle:** A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio.

**Justin Angle:** Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt, and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, social media by Aj Williams and Jeff Meece is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot, and see you next time.