

Robert E. Miller, Duane Bowler, and Albert Gaskill Reminiscences on Working on Anaconda Company-owned Newspapers

. . . Before the 1930s I was in the position of a lowly reporter of local news and I did not know what orders my superiors operated under. After I became a desk man about 1935 . . . the editor . . . took care of newspaper policy. Once, however, I ventured close to the point of knuckle-rapping. [Editor] Lynn Young was on vacation and I was designated to write the editorials during his absence. . . . The gold dredge was digging up the land at the lower end of Last Chance Gulch, just north of the Helena city limits, leaving huge piles of gravel. . . . I wrote a vigorous editorial pointing to the results and asking: Is a Gold Dredge an Asset to the Community?

When Mr. Young returned from his vacation he was called to visit headquarters in Butte and when he came back he told me that the rule was that no company paper ever questioned any aspect of the mining industry.

Not too long after that I was transferred to Livingston to be editor of the *Enterprise* and I have often wondered whether the transfer was a promotion or a demotion. In Livingston I was not close to company politics or policies. I knew enough about it so that I did not violate the rules. Every morning my first task was to read the *Montana Standard* very thoroughly and determine how many controversial matters had been handled. Thus I was able to follow company instructions without any day-to-day instruction. . . .

Robert E. Miller

What was it like to work for the *Montana Record Herald* and *Helena Independent Record* under

the ownership and control of the Anaconda Company? This must be taken in context. . . . A reporter first joining the *Montana Record Herald* in 1941 as I did, a year or two out of the Montana University Journalism School, had little frame of reference. I had grown up in Montana and was accustomed to its newspapers.

Truthfully, in those early days, they weren't all that bad, unless one knew the inner workings. . . . When I first went to work for the Anaconda Company papers the news I wrote was printed, some of it even somewhat daring for the day. It was not until one day when I uncovered a case of embezzlement in the county courthouse at Helena that the long arm of the benefactor became evident. The story was killed on orders from Butte because the malefactor, who was removed from office, had performed a useful errand some years before and had been promised protection. His job wasn't saved but his public name was.

Unless these incidents arose on one's run or a fellow reporter told you about them on his, there was little noticeable [trace] . . . of a heavy hand. It was not until I started desk work in about 1944 that the controls became evident. Union matters, industrial disasters, cost of living, consumerism . . . [were] given little or no attention. The legislature was played straight. No speculation, no interpretation. . . . Silicosis came under the euphemism of "industrial hygiene." Certain political figures' talks were give preminence, others didn't exist. . . .

You may well ask what happened to these newspapers, what caused them to fade? What made them deteriorate, lose an aggressiveness for which they were widely known? . . .

You ask, how did the change come about? The quickest answer is—owners were not newspapermen, owners who were not dependent upon the economic success of the newspapers for their profits. . . . Running the corporation were miners, metallurgists, lawyers and bookkeepers. They wanted good newspapers but they just didn't know how to let them be that. . . .

There were taboos. We didn't play up mine accidents or industrial diseases or labor troubles or the cost of living. But as far as news coverage went, at the time I went to work in Helena we pretty much wrote what we saw, heard or could uncover.

The attrition of coverage was a slow one, not something you could put your hand on day to day, but an accumulation.

The owners never made any great secret of who owned controlling interest but as time went by more and more people learned of it. As they learned, they found they could exercise an influence on what did or did not appear in the daily press. . . .

To make it short, editors of the company papers found their life was easier when the Sixth Floor—a name given to the company headquarters in Butte, Montana—received the fewest calls from politicians, lawyers, business (and just about anyone else) who didn't like something that was about to appear. . . .

The editors took the line of least resistance—stay away from the controversy at a state and local level unless it was found appropriate (by the Sixth Floor) to cut loose on some uncooperative individual. . . .

I firmly believe the owners didn't give a hoot whether the politicians like the newspapers or not. They did care how they voted. They were not worried about the newspapers but were highly vulnerable in other quarters. . . .

I am sure the owners recognized this, too. I am sure they did not like what was happening.

I believe this may have been a deciding factor in their decision to sell. . . .

Duane W. Bowler

My journalism school dean urged me not to leave the University of Montana to go to work for a "company" paper. Dean James L.C. Ford had his convictions, and I had mine, so I went to the company press. . . . I decided *The Standard* would be a fine place to get about five years experience. . . . So on the Ides of March in 1949, I began work as the night police reporter.

Butte became a home. It was an ugly mining town, but its people were great, and it wasn't far from choice fishing holes. . . .

Most Montana newsmen were paid shoe clerk wages. We stayed on the job because we liked Montana, not the pay. . . .

But, for dedicated newsmen, the Lee arrival in Montana meant more than wages; there was a new-found freedom of expression. People who wanted to criticize the Anaconda Company found the newsmen willing to listen—when complaints weren't just from crackpots. And, Anaconda's sacred cows weren't able to call the Sixth Floor (Anaconda's headquarters in the Hennessey Building in Butte) to keep their names out of the paper.

Much news critical of the Anaconda Company became Page 1 news. We new employees of Lee did everything we could to show the public the Anaconda Company's copper collar was gone. There weren't any real abuses, however, because the newsmen involved were good newsmen: they weren't conducting witch-hunts, or running vendettas. The critical news would have been on the front pages of many papers free of outside influence.

Many Butte persons were hard to convince that Anaconda still didn't control the press. They

also were critical of Lee because they believed local policy was dictated by Iowa “carpetbaggers.” The widespread difference in editorial policies of the Lee newspapers has largely dispelled the latter idea.

Other benefits immediately accruing with the Lee purchase included some denied by tight-fisted Anaconda executives who wanted the papers to make money, or at least not to spend it. You didn’t have to telephone everyone that would accept collect; you could use the phone for legitimate newsgathering without question. You didn’t have to beg to hire a commercial photographer to take a news picture. Anaconda had no trained photographers on its staff in Butte, and few elsewhere. Lee immediately put in a photographer, added a darkroom, and bought good camera equipment. . . .

Newsmen were isolated from their peers in the Anaconda days. There were no inter-office workshops for Anaconda newsmen, no meetings, no seminars, no outside training. In fact, when the Montana Press Association convened in Butte, the city’s newspapers weren’t

represented at the sessions, and little appeared in the company press about what was going on. It was many years after the Lee takeover before the state press group came back to Butte.

Lee believes in training its people: workshops, seminars, American Press Institute, press association gatherings—anything that might be of value. Its publishers, general managers and editors frequently get together to discuss mutual problems and work out programs of benefit to all. . . .

A new age in Montana journalism began June 1, 1959, with the Lee purchase. Montanans in general, as well as Montana newsmen, are well aware of this. And, they are thankful those “carpetbaggers from Iowa” liked the potential they saw in the company press.

Albert (Bert) Gaskill

Source: *Don Anderson Writing, 1959. Small Collection 1211.* Montana Historical Society Research Center. Archives. Excerpted in *Not In Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena, 1976): 217–19.