

# K. ROSS TOOLE

(1920 - 1981)

Kenneth Ross Toole was born to John Howard and Marjorie Ross Toole in Missoula, on August 8, 1920. He received his early education in Missoula before enrolling at the University of Montana in 1939. After stints at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, in Washington, D.C., and the University of Montana Law School, as well as a four-year tour with the U. S. Navy, Toole returned to the University of Montana, where he discovered Montana's past under the guidance of historian Paul C. Phillips. Toole received his B.A. (1947) and his M.A. (1948) in history, and his course was set. The history of Montana had become his passion.

After completing his Ph.D. coursework at UCLA, Ross accepted (1951) the position of director of the Montana Historical Society in Helena. Toole was 30 years old at the time, and he brought to this appointment an enthusiasm, a dynamism that was inspiring. In his seven-year tenure, he directed the creation of the Society's museum, established its art galleries, expanded ten-fold its museum, archival, and library collections, secured for it the Mackay Collection of Charles M. Russell art, and developed its quarterly, *MONTANA: THE MAGAZINE OF WESTERN HISTORY*, into the most popular historical journal in the West.

It was also during this productive period that Toole wrote *MONTANA: AN UNCOMMON LAND*, a book that established him as Montana's premier historian. In it, he analyzed the state's past and concluded that Montana was a "plundered colony," whose rich natural resources had been extracted by outside interests. "The Montana pattern has been brief, explosive, frenetic, and often tragic. The economic picture has often been one of exploitation, overexpansion, boom-and-bust. The political scene has been equally extreme—from fiery, wide-open violence to apathetic resignation." This interpretation has informed the perceptions of Montanans since the book's publication in 1959.

In 1958 Toole resigned as Director of the Historical Society and soon became head of the Museum of the City of New York. From New York, in 1960, he moved to the directorship of the Museums of New Mexico in Santa Fe. But Toole's roots were in Montana and, in 1963, he returned to the Red Lodge area to operate his family's K-Bar-J Ranch.

Just two years later, Montana history drew Toole back into public life. In 1965, he accepted the position of Andrew B. Hammond Professor of Western History at the University, where he would stay until his death in 1981. From here his influence would swell and spread across the state through his numerous addresses, articles, and two books, *TWENTIETH-CENTURY MONTANA* (1972) and *THE RAPE OF THE GREAT PLAINS* (1976).

At the University of Montana, Ross Toole inspired scores of graduate students and set them to researching divergent aspects of the Montana past. He taught an undergraduate course, "Montana and the West," that drew hundreds of students each quarter. In its final year, 1,700 students attended these Montana history lectures, which were often fiery attacks on apathy. No student left Toole's course untouched; each one understood the relevance of Montana's history to present and the future. But K. Ross Toole's power was not bounded by the classroom walls. His influence on Montanans' thought cannot be overestimated. In many ways, our understanding of Montana's history is his understanding of it.