K. Ross Toole

K. Ross Toole (1920-1981)

K. Ross Toole was born to John Howard and Margaret Ross Toole in Missoula, Montana, 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 and joined the faculty. He earned 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. course work 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 an archives, expanded the fledgling museum, archival, and library collections, secured a major collection of Charles M. Russell's works from the Stroh Foundation, and brought the society to national prominence.

Western History, into the most popular historical journal in the West.

It was during this productive period that Toole wrote Montana: An Uncommon Land, a book that established him at Montana's premier historian. In it, he analyzed the state's past and concluded that Montana was first a personal history—one in which human relations had been more important than historical events—and secondly a story of exploration, expansion, and often tragedy. The content of the picture has often been restored and reinterpreted through the years. The political scene has been equally dynamic—from forty wicked open votes to one selected turnout.

The problems of the Great Plains were central to the perceptions of Montanans since the book's publication in 1959.

In 1958 Toole accepted as Director of the Historical Society and soon became the director of the Museum of the City of New York. From New York, in 1965, he returned to the directorship of the Museum of Montana in Bozeman. In 1971, Toole and his wife, Mary, retired to the Red Lodge area to operate his family's K-Ranch.

Just two years later, Montana history drew Toole back into public life. In 1963, he accepted the position of Andrew J. Haukenson of the University of Montana and Montana. He would stay until his death in 1981. From here his influence would spread and grow across the state through his numerous alliances, articles, and books, Twenty-First Century Montana (1972) and The Rapture of the Great Plains (1978).

At the University of Montana, Ross Toole inspired scores of graduate students and on their teaching and researching aspects of the Montana past. He taught an undergraduate course, "Montana and the West," that drew students from across the country. In his final year, 1300 students attended these Montana history lectures, which were often two lectures a week. In his lectures, he taught his students to understand the relevance of Montana's history to the present and its future. His influence on Montana's thought cannot be overstated. In many ways, our understanding of Montana's history is his understanding.