

JOSEPH KINSEY HOWARD (1906–1951)

“MONTANA’S CONSCIENCE”

“By the time [Joseph Kinsey] Howard died, he came closer to being the spokesman of the West than any other writer has ever been.”

—Bernard De Voto, 1952

Journalist, historian, crusader—Joe Howard packed a whirlwind of activity into only 45 years. Born in Iowa and raised in Alberta, Joe and his mother Josephine moved to Great Falls in 1919. Upon high school graduation in 1923, he became a reporter for the *Great Falls Leader* and soon its news editor. Joe substituted voracious reading for a college education.

Howard stayed with the *Leader* for 20 years where he developed a writing style of sparse, clear, emotive language and vivid images. Howard also cofounded the Great Falls Newspaper Guild, which organized local newspaper employees.

From the mid-1930s through the late 1940s, Joe wrote Montana-based pieces for national periodicals including *Survey Graphic*, *Pacific Spectator*, *The Nation*, *Common Sense*, and *Harper’s Magazine*. These articles challenged the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, advocated the creation of a Missouri Valley Authority, and investigated the plight of Montana Native Americans, Hutterites, and Métis. Howard also published regional fiction in *Collier’s*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Esquire*, served as the Montana stringer for *Time* and *Life*, became a book reviewer for the *New York Times*, and worked as an editorial correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

Howard’s reputation as a preeminent Montana writer-historian benefited most from the publication of *Montana: High, Wide and Handsome* in 1943. The book articulates Howard’s “plundered province” interpretation of the Montana story and provided him enough income to leave newspaper work. In 1944 he joined the Montana Study project in Missoula and worked to promote small-town identity. Howard released *Montana Margins*, the state’s first literary anthology, in 1946.

The recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, Joe spent the late 1940s writing *Strange Empire*—the story of Métis

leader Louis Riel and his Canadian-American followers. He also taught at the prestigious Bread Loaf Writers workshop in Vermont, helped to found the Montana Institute of the Arts, and created the Northern Rocky Mountain Roundup of Regional Arts—Montana’s annual writer’s conference—in Missoula.

Joe Howard died of a heart attack in 1951—silencing a unique, influential, truly imaginative Montana voice. Generations of Montanans have learned their state history from this journalist-historian, who championed the Native American, the worker, the land, and the community long before they became fashionable topics. Montana author A.B. Guthrie, Jr., simply remarked: “*With Joe’s death, Montana lost her conscience.*”

