

Critical view of former governor's book on his Vegas past

By John L. Smith, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Consider it the memoirist's prerogative: He gets to recount his life's events any way he wishes, and readers expect he'll place himself in a sympathetic light.

Whether he flashes a glimpse of stocking or lets it all hang out, the writer of a memoir needn't adhere to the biographer's bibliographical standards or share in the investigative reporter's obsession with documents and law enforcement sources. Like Frank Sinatra with a laptop, the memoirist can recall it his way.



The trouble with a memoir by a longtime public figure, however, is that his recollections of high-profile events might not match the memories of others who experienced those same events. And when those clashing memories concern the quicksilver days of the mob's substantial presence inside the Las Vegas casino racket, the subject matter can be tender, indeed.

Such is the case with former Nevada Gov. Bob Miller's memoir about growing up in the long shadow of his father, old-school gambling boss Ross Miller, "Son of a Gambling Man: My Journey from a Casino Family to the Governor's Mansion."

With a foreword from former President Bill Clinton and jacket endorsements from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, "America's Most Wanted Host" John Walsh, and business magazine scion Steve Forbes, the book is a neatly packaged inoculation of Miller against the ravages of time and Nevada's tumultuous

and tawdry gambling and political history. The gambler's son spends substantial space attempting to come to terms with his father's streetwise stoicism and undeniable notoriety.

As a practical matter, he needn't have bothered. His life's legacy should rise and fall on its own merits. And, frankly, Miller would have been better served if he hadn't opened some of the doors of memory. Other doors easily could have been secured with more thorough editing and a clearer appreciation of the ghosts lurking behind them.

At its best, "Son of a Gambling Man" gives insight into the complex psychology of the offspring of casino men and the sociology of our neon-lighted privileged class. In that regard, it ranks with the late Susan Berman's memoir, "Easy Street: the True Story of a Gangster's Daughter."

Miller tells us his father had been a bookmaker and nightclub operator with some notorious relationships, but he can't quite bring himself to admit his dad was a loyal Chicago Outfit representative whose Las Vegas opportunity was essentially sponsored by hoodlum friends in the Windy City.

Instead, we get a toe in the water. It's almost as if the son of the gambler is still sensitive about his old man's past. Although Ross Miller's memory gets the usual Al Phillips-the-Cleaner treatment – a ringing character endorsement by no less a paragon of ethics than former Sheriff Ralph Lamb – even cursory research reveals a side of the gambling man that made him look very much like a mobbed-up casino overseer.

In addition to beating a casino skimming investigation that took down his peers, Ross Miller had a decidedly old-school approach to addressing dealers suspected of stealing. In January 1963, he punched a Riviera dice dealer in the mouth and ordered his hotel goons to drag him into a backroom, where he was terrorized. (The dealer sued and in 1965 won a settlement.) In that same incident, the *Review-Journal*

reported, Miller ordered security to take the dealer's suspected accomplice out behind the hotel and "break his arm."

Memoirist Bob Miller, of course, needn't recall that anecdote. Certainly no one could blame him for wanting to forget something that made the newspapers when he was a high school kid.

More problematic are his depictions of the relationships with his father's green-felt protégé, convicted mob casino skimmer Carl Thomas, and family friend Allen Dorfman, the consummately organized crime-connected Teamsters Central States Pension Fund and Las Vegas casino insider.

Bob Miller admits writing a post-conviction letter to a sentencing federal judge on behalf of Thomas, in connection with skimming on behalf of the Kansas City and Chicago mobs at the Tropicana.

Invoking William Faulkner, Miller eloquently observes, "The past, they say, is never really past. And after I became district attorney, my past – or should I say Ross Miller's past – became the present."

He goes on to recount how, against the advice of political adviser Billy Vassiliadis (to whom he dedicates his book), Miller decided to write the letter in July 1983 to U.S. District Judge Joseph E. Stevens that attempted to show Thomas in a sympathetic light.

Miller then focuses on how a political challenger later attempted to make campaign hay of the letter. What he fails to admit is that the letter was a huge embarrassment to the community and to the office of the district attorney, the county's top prosecutor.

It was inappropriate, but unsurprising. In Nevada politics, friendship almost always trumps duty.

Equally incomplete is Miller's treatment of Dorfman. Miller acknowledges that Dorfman was a family friend, and on a wiretap uttered some embarrassing statements about their relationship, but he doesn't finish the story.

The reader is left to ask, "Hey, whatever became of Allen Dorfman?"

The felon was considered such a key player in the mob's presence in Las Vegas that the FBI devoted a team to taking him down. With wiretaps, undercover agents and confidential informants, the government was pressuring Dorfman to cooperate.

On Jan. 20, 1983, just a few months before DA Miller penned his apology on behalf of Thomas, Dorfman pulled into the parking lot of the Hyatt Hotel in the northwestern Chicago suburb of Lincolnwood and exited his Cadillac. Investigative reporter James Neff writes in his meticulously researched book "Mobbed Up:" "Eight rounds from a silencer-equipped .22-caliber semiautomatic handgun struck Dorfman in the head at close range. Allen Dorfman had just kept thirty years of Mob secrets the hard way."

So that's why Dorfman doesn't write, doesn't call.

How close was Dorfman to the Miller family?

"Dorfman himself was a secret owner with Chicago gangster Ross Miller of the Bingo Palace, while Miller's district attorney son held stock in a blind trust in the casino, (Teamsters boss and FBI informant Jackie) Presser said," wrote Sally Denton and Roger Morris in their best-selling Las Vegas exposé, "The Money and the Power."

The memoirist can remember as much or as little as he wishes, and owes no one an excuse for the sins of his father. But "Son of a Gambling Man" is a reminder that when you open those creaking doors of Las Vegas past, there's no telling what

ghosts will come swirling out.

Bob Miller outgrew his father's shadow long ago, but after reading his memoir I'm still not sure our state's celebrated son of a gambling man believes it.