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Nevada politics: Backscratching at its best

New book a compelling narrative of how public policy is shaped

LARRY HENRY

WHO would put up a plaque in the henhouse honoring the fox? The Nevada Legislature, for one.

Above the elevator in the lobby of the legislative building is a plaque - the only plaque in the building - honoring a lobbyist, Wally Warren, who died in 1987.

Warren was held in high esteem and deserves recognition, but the special tribute he received symbolizes the cozy nature of Nevada politics.

A new book published by the University of Nebraska Press, "Nevada Politics and Government: Conservatism in an Open Society," illustrates how Nevada's political system was constructed not necessarily by men of vision or reason or conviction, although there have been plenty of those.

It was built - and is still being built - by men and women (but mostly men) who banded together in helping one another attain power.

Politics everywhere rewards those who are connected. But the authors of "Nevada Politics and Government," Don Driggs and Leonard Goodall, demonstrate how backscratching in this state achieved legendary stature.

The reason: One or two industries have always controlled Nevada's economy, and therefore many of its politicians.

In order to win election in Nevada, most political hopefuls have had nowhere to turn for campaign contributions except to the railroaders or miners or gamblers who've run the state.

In return, those industries have expected preferential treatment. They have extracted favors, the authors argue, by employing skilled lobbyists, from Henry Yerington in the railroading era to the gaming industry's Harvey Whittemore today.

The story about the plaque is not included in the book, but the tone is. As the authors note: "Prior to 1979, when the rule was changed, favorite lobbyists often sat on the floor of the chambers with the legislators."

Where the book excels, however, is that it takes the high road in terms of attitude but draws in the reins on moral posturing.

It presents the facts in a comprehensive, clear package that readers can pick through in order to locate the morsels that stimulate their particular tastes. (The book should be in local stores soon.)

Adherents of good government will be aghast at some of the shenanigans, such as lobbyists sitting with legislators. Realists who assert that most politicians are like Popeye ("I yam what I yam") will think their pragmatic point of view has been reinforced. After all, they would say, you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.

The book's premise, that a state which appears liberal to outsiders is in fact so conservative it is anti-government, gives the treatment an authoritative air that keeps readers hooked.

But the theme is just the gravy. The real meat and potatoes are in the compelling narrative, which is larded with details and inside information about the manipulative shaping of public policy.

The chapters about recent governors contain nuance uncommon in such books, including a look at Gov. Bob Miller's close relationship with the teachers union and an explanation of Gov. Bob List's notorious tax shift, which helped set in motion a power struggle between Northern and Southern legislators that continues to this day.

While impressive, "Nevada Politics and Government" is not the sort of juicy book you'll want to take to the beach. Yet political junkies, and even general readers, will delight in the comprehensive presentation. Driggs, a University of Nevada,, Reno professor, and Goodall, former president of UNLV know the subject matter better than anybody except the participants themselves.

As a result, they've written the most interesting book available about Nevada politics, especially contemporary politics.

Most readers will come away from the book thinking it is worthy of a plaque.

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Caption: THE CAPITOL represents a symbol of political power. But as a new book on Nevada politics and government shows, that power has often been controlled by Nevada's main industries and their lobbyists.

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