

Memoirs of a longtime lawmaker - Bill Ray comes to Juneau to sign his new book, 'Liquor, Legislation & Laughter'

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Section: This Week

Bless or blame Bill Ray's children. The longtime Alaska legislator says they convinced him to write a book for his grandkids, "so they know what their grandfather did."

It didn't take much prodding, and it turned out to be a whopper.

Ray's autobiography, "Liquor, Legislation & Laughter - the story of an S.O.B.," rolls in at 507 pages, trimmed from his original manuscript of 850.

There's no index, no chapter headings and few pauses for breath. It's put out by S.O.B. Publishing of Anchorage and the back page explains the term means "Sweet Old Bill." It's his story and his rules, and it could be a book of reference, but it's more like the longest conversation you've ever had.

Ray, a 62-year Juneau resident, now 81 and retired in Sequim, Wash., will be at the Hangar Ballroom from 5 to 7 p.m. Friday, April 25, for a reception and book-signing. He also will sign books from 1 to 3 p.m. Saturday, April 26, at Hearthside Books in the Nugget Mall. His visit is sponsored in part by KJNO-AM and TAKU-105; Ray co-hosted a Saturday morning talk show on KJNO for years.

"I want to see some ol' buddies," Ray said. "I want to see the surprise on their faces when they see I have a book, and the surprise on their faces when they read what's in it."

What's in it is a rambling, exhausting first-person narration - sometimes hilarious and other times stark - from one of the most important personalities in Juneau politics in the past 75 years.

Ray moved from North Idaho to Juneau with his family in 1938. He was 16, and they traveled in the cargo hold of a steamship.

"It didn't seem to be anywhere I wanted to stay," Ray says of his first impression of Juneau's shore. "It was colder than a well-digger's butt."

He stayed. Ray worked as a longshoreman and commercial fisherman and worked his way into the directorship of the state Liquor Board - his introduction to politics.

He served in the state Legislature for 22 years, six as a member of the House of Representatives and 16 in the Senate. At one time, the State Office Building was known as "Fort Ray," a reference to the garrison in "The Guns of Navarone."

Among his many accomplishments, Ray gained state funding for construction of the State Office Building, Egan Drive and numerous other local projects. He fought to keep the state capital in Juneau. And the University of Alaska Southeast's Bill Ray Center is named in his honor.

"Every time I hear the name Bill Ray Center, the narcissism in me jumps a little bit," Ray said. "I love the sound of it."

Ray retired from office in 1986 and considered a political comeback in 1997. He decided instead to concentrate on family and his memoirs. Ray and his second wife, Nancy, moved to Sequim, a popular retirement spot for Alaskans, in 2000.

"Being (in Sequim), naturally I think about Juneau and I don't particularly like what's happening," Ray said. "There's too much divisiveness, and it's hurt the city terribly. Juneau doesn't go forward. They've prostituted themselves to tourism. It looks like a poor man's Lahaina," a popular Hawaiian tourist town.

Ray's book pulls few punches. The first page even starts with a knockout. He was 6, a first-grader, when he socked a schoolmate for insulting 1928 Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith.

Parts of the book talk about the effect his political life had on his personal life, particularly the breakup of his first marriage. There's also a primer on how the Legislature works - thorough enough for political newbies and burnt-out cynics alike.

"I'm really not that sweet-natured of a person. At least that's what some people tell me," Ray said. "But in my mind's eye, I'm a lovable bandit."