

Author's daughter works to publish 1960 version of 'Boardwalk Empire'



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By STEVEN LEMONGELLO Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, November 11, 2010

Before HBO's "Boardwalk Empire" exposed him to the world, before Nelson Johnson's book made him a household name, there was another book about Enoch "Nucky" Johnson.

For decades, an old, unpublished, type-written manuscript was passed around by those in the know - bandied about by some of the most notable names in Atlantic City's history. At a whopping 562 pages, it exhaustively chronicles the life of Nucky Johnson, the former boss of Atlantic City, from his birth to his upbringing in Mays Landing to his methodical rise through the ranks of the Republican machine.

The author of the 1960 manuscript was listed as one John Henry Stoneburg, a name so obscure that most people - including one Nelson Johnson - thought it was a fake, a pseudonym for some faceless reporter.

The title of the book?

"Believe it or not," said local author George Wren Jr., "it's titled 'Boardwalk Empire'."

Now, with Nucky riding high in popular culture thanks to the TV series based on Nelson Johnson's 2002 book - also, as it happens, called "Boardwalk Empire" - a Louisiana woman who said she's Stoneburg's daughter is looking to get the manuscript published at long last. Although she does have a few questions.

"I want to know where all these copies come from," said Gloria Badeaux, of Baton Rouge, La. "And my dad's book is copyrighted - but I don't know how much that means."

Badeaux's name, as well as her sister, her brothers, and her late father, is listed in a 1980 copyright of her father's 1960 book, "A Boardwalk Empire: The Atlantic City Story," filed with

the U.S. Copyright Office. She's also listed in public records as Gloria Stoneburg Badeaux.

That's how Wren, a former State Police trooper from Sea Isle City and author of "Jersey Troopers II," tracked Badeaux down after he was given a copy of the Stoneburg manuscript a couple of years ago. He had borrowed it from Rich Black, the son and grandson of Atlantic City private investigators Al and Dick Black - who, in turn, had gotten copies from none other than former 500 Club owner Paul "Skinny" D'Amato, himself a legendary figure in the city's history.

"They sat in my dad's closet for years," Black said of his father's copies. "I never paid any attention to them."

Wren had first heard about Stoneburg's book after it was listed as a reference in "Chance of a Lifetime," the 2001 book by D'Amato's sister-in-law, Grace D'Amato. After reading one of Black's copies, he was greatly impressed by the quality of writing and the level of detail into Nucky's life.

"It's a fantastic read," Wren said. "(It's) written in an older style than what you see nowadays, but I think John Stoneburg was an outstanding writer. ... When I first read it, I thought, 'This should really be in print.'"

So early last year, Wren reached out to Badeaux - who, when he asked if she was looking to publish it, told him that "she hadn't considered it," he said.

Pursuing a publisher

Since then, Badeaux, 73, said that she and her daughter Julie are "in the process" of reaching out to publishing houses to gauge their interest in the manuscript.

By phone from Louisiana, she filled in some of the details about the mysterious Stoneburg. Her father, she said, was a reporter for the North Beach Beacon newspaper in Maryland who was introduced to Nucky sometime in the 1950s.

Their partnership was cemented, she said, when a Judge Edward Costigan in Trenton drew up a contract between her father and Nucky Johnson for a book on Nucky's life - though Badeaux said her family did not have a copy of the contract anymore. Stoneburg spent an entire summer holed up in an apartment on the Boardwalk, she and Wren said, talking to various sources and interviewing Nucky - who occasionally would clam up when Stoneburg wanted certain information.

"When Nucky didn't want to tell him things, he'd go find out," Badeaux said. "Then he'd come back and tell him, and (Nucky) would say, 'Who told you that?'"

But getting the book published proved more difficult.

"The publisher, Simon and Schuster, wanted to change some of the names," Badeaux recalled,

"Some of the people in it were still alive. ... But my dad didn't want to change the names. He wanted it to be true."

When Stoneburg died in 1980, his children decided to register his manuscript under their names - leading to the first official mention of the phrase "Boardwalk Empire." But Stoneburg's apparent creation of the now-familiar term may not have much legal staying power behind it.

"Book titles cannot be copyrighted," copyright attorney Mark Ingber said. "The copyright protects the original expression of art, and the original expression is the words in the book, not the title."

The copyright does, however, "give them exclusive rights to publish it, duplicate copies of it and the right to display it," he said. "The commonly held term is the life of the author plus 75 years."

Copyrights are automatic upon creation, Ingber added, though Stoneburg's children went one step further by registering their copyright, which gives them enhanced legal protections such as the right to sue for damages.

John Bryans, the editor and publisher of Plexus Publishing, which published Nelson Johnson's book, said he has read the Stoneburg manuscript, "and I would not rule out the possibility that Plexus would publish it. I can't really say more than that, because there are some copyright issues and that kind of thing. ... I think it's going to be a while before things (happen). It will require careful study."

Rise of 'Empire'

For his part, Nelson Johnson said that while he was "very familiar" with the Stoneburg manuscript, it was not the origin of his book's title. Instead, he said, it came about independently while brainstorming ideas with Steven Perskie, at the time a Superior Court judge like himself.

His 2002 book, a history of Atlantic City from its founding, originally was going to be called "Nucky's Town" - but when Grace D'Amato used Nucky's name in the subtitle for her book, Johnson wanted to avoid confusion.

"Perskie and I kicked around a dozen different names before we came up with 'Boardwalk Empire'," Johnson said. "'Rise and Fall of the Boardwalk Empire' is what we started out with. ... I'll take credit for the name and let him take credit for the name if he wants to."

Bryans, meanwhile, when asked if he knew about the Stoneburg manuscript's title before Nelson Johnson's book was published, said that he "wasn't aware of the manuscript at that time."

Johnson said he was first made aware of the Stoneburg manuscript by Marie Boyd, a reference librarian who also happened to be the wife of Nucky's longtime right-hand man, Jimmy Boyd.

"She showed me the Stoneburg book and called it 'fantasy,'" Johnson said. "She noticed some

very long quotes and told me, 'Nucky Johnson didn't say those things. How can those quotes be real?'"

The extended quotes in the manuscript - which include "Commodore" Louise Kuehnle on the day Nucky was born and extensive, screenplay-like lines of dialogue between Nucky and a number of famous and obscure figures - "(was) a problem with most of the people I spoke to," Johnson said. "It's one thing to hear somebody say something, remember it, repeat it and get it even 70 to 80 percent right. Do you want me to believe that's accurate? Any long quotes in my book are from a text or from the public record."

Of course, Marie Boyd also believed there was "no such person" as John Stoneburg, which she thought to be a pseudonym for a Philadelphia Evening Bulletin reporter.

"Oh, there definitely is one," Badeaux said. "My dad was a good writer, and I'm telling you, all the way back in the history of my family, there have been writers."

All she wants to do now, she said, is to "get back control" of a manuscript that seems to have popped up in a number of places - including the Atlantic City Library - and finally see her father's work in print.

As for the HBO series, she said she did not think much of what she described as the overly "sensationalized" adventures of the fictionalized "Nucky Thompson" and his cohorts.

"I've watched the (series), and I know it's nothing like what I've read," Badeaux said. "Believe me, the truth is much more interesting than what's being shown on TV."

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