Big Bad Bill's New Book

"BIG BAD" BILL DODD earned his nickname after he whipped Congressman Otto Passman with his fists in a hotel lobby in Monroe. But physical attacks were not the only kind of violence Dodd dished out to his political enemies. He was a mean stump speaker who was raised in a political era when attacks on other candidates were an unquestioned part of every campaign.

Dodd came by this propensity for rough and tumble politicking by dint of his years of association with the Long dynasty, especially Gov. Earl Long. Dodd fell in and out with Uncle Earl over the years and was both the deliverer and recipient of Long political abuse.

In his recently published book, Peapatch Politics: The Earl Long Era in Louisiana Politics, Dodd presents a lively, insider's view of state elections and government during the middle decades of the 20th century. Dodd, a master storyteller, spins dozens of yarns about life on the election trail, including a comprehensive portrait of the psychology of Earl Long, one of Louisiana's most complex governors.

The book has its spicy side as well. The sexual tastes of several prominent state politicians are presented for review.

Dodd was a journeyman politician who served at various times as lieutenant governor, superintendent of education, state auditor and state representative. He never achieved his lifelong ambition to serve as governor of the state, finishing a weak fifth in the 1951 and 1959 elections.

In Peapatch Politics, Dodd blames his own failure to reach the...
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Mansion on Earl Long. He says that Uncle Earl conspired against him in both those elections because he feared that Dodd, as governor, would take control of the pro-Long forces in the state.

But Dodd does not appear bitter toward the man who served as both his mentor and adversary. He argues that Earl Long was one of the most capable governors in Louisiana history and was the political equal of his more famous brother, Huey. Dodd, who was a Long official at the time, disputes Long family members and doctors who declared that Earl was insane in 1958 and shipped him off to a mental institution in Texas.

Peapatch Politics suffers from serious shortcomings as a book. It is in need of a comprehensive editorial overhaul, to say nothing of proofreading. There is little if any organization based on chronology or themes.

But those faults aside, the book is a compelling read for those who are interested in the minutiae of Louisiana politics. Dodd is a walking encyclopedia of Louisiana history and geography. He recounts in fascinating detail long-forgotten stories of political intrigues in out-of-the-way parishes in Louisiana. He hearkens back to a time in our history when politics was virtually all retail, before television supplanted the stump as the primary means of communication.

THE 1991 GOVERNOR'S ELECTION is off to a boring start. So why not take the time to read (or reread) some of the classics of Louisiana political literature which recount campaigns that were more colorful than our current contest. Here are some recommendations:

BIography

Huey Long, by T. Harry Williams. This is still the landmark work on the Kingfish, though it has been the subject of rough criticism in recent years from Louisiana historians who dispute its favorable view of Long. Still, it is a scholarly and very readable journey through Louisiana politics in the first third of this century.

Earl Long, by Morgan Peoples and Michael Kurtz. This recently published work, though not as substantial as Williams' treatment of Huey, does a creditable job of separating myth and fact about Uncle Earl. Though scrupulous in their research, the authors allow Long's character and his unmatched political rhetoric to shine through the scholarly prose.

REPORTAGE

The Earl of Louisiana, by A.J. Liebling. This recounting of Earl Long's last campaign in 1960 is still the definitive journalistic account of this state's politics. Liebling's deft comparison of Louisiana's political culture to that of Lebanon's has been substantially reinforced by events of the three decades since it was written.

The Last Hayride, by John Maginnis. This work is first and foremost a portrait of Edwin Edwards, the modern day incarnation of Earl and Huey Long. But it is also a chronicle of a state struggling to emerge into the 20th century and often not doing it very successfully.

SCHOLARSHIP

Political Tendencies in Louisiana, by Perry Howard. This is only for serious students of Louisiana politics. This work, written by a prominent LSU sociologist, uses statistics rather than anecdotes to build a theory of Louisiana political geography. Political Tendencies in Louisiana is indispensable for the amateur or professional political observer who wants to analyze election returns in-depth.