

Hudson surgeon's memoir details life in the shadows of the Mob

By [Chuck Nowlen](#) on Jul 31, 2015 at 4:08 p.m./Hudson Star-Observer



Dr. David Florence in his study, with his manuscript for "A Touch of the Underworld" on the computer screen behind him (Hudson Star-Observer photo by Chuck Nowlen)

Trained with the best by Harvard and the U.S. Army, he went on to a highly distinguished, 55-year medical career that took him to the bedsides of Elizabeth Taylor and Elvis Presley, and to hospitals from the Twin Cities to the Middle East.

He's also tempted death many times.

"I was in Teheran just before the hostage takeover," 84-year-old orthopedic surgeon Dr. David Florence notes during an interview at his Hudson home. He

was working for the deposed, gravely ill Shah of Iran, widely reviled amid the country's Islamist revolutionary chaos at the time.

"I can remember being in my hotel room on the eighth floor and seeing military helicopters below," Florence recalls.

As a child in Cleveland, he was given up for dead after contracting rheumatic heart disease, which at the time had no effective treatment.

"I spent 14 months in a hospital," Florence explains. "I was sent there to die, but I didn't get around to it."

He adds later: "I've had about five miracles in my life, so I'm a firm believer in God because I wouldn't be alive otherwise."

More to the point for this story, Florence was chauffeured to his high-school prom in a bullet-proof car. He's also been threatened by a gangster at gunpoint.

"I don't have normal fears. Someone could put a gun to my head and say, 'Do this or else,' and I'd say, 'Sorry, but if you do this, you will be dead in a couple of hours.'" he says matter-of-factly.

"A gangster once told me that, and that's exactly what I said to him. He later found out that it was true."

Florence, you see, grew up mob-connected — closely mob-connected — in Prohibition-era Cleveland and beyond.

He wasn't a mafia member, but he and his family saw it and worked with it every day. Florence calls it "the life I had to live."

His new memoir, "A Touch of the Underworld," provides a rare, detailed look at what that incredible life was like.

It's not what you'd expect if all you know about the mafia — particularly Cleveland's "Silent Syndicate" -- is the "they break legs for a living" stereotypes.

As Florence wrote in a promotional questionnaire for "A Touch of the Underworld":

"The book is educational, humorous and entertaining. ... I also acknowledge continued association with the underworld, which I consider to be a necessary component to our broken society, which tends to ignore the needs of the middle class in America."

Notes Florence, who writes under the trademarked pen name, "Dr. Trucker":
"When you grow up in something, it's normal for you. I was fearless and brainless, and when you're fearless, you do things other people won't do."

More on the pen name later.

Mayfield Road beginnings

Noted for keeping the mob's darker internal realities as low-key as possible — unlike Chicago's Al Capone and future New York boss John Gotti — the mature Cleveland version instead focused strictly on business.

It succeeded in spades. When Florence was growing up, if you were in Cleveland's construction industry or dealt with the local government and judiciary, for example, the mafia was intricately woven into your day-to-day life.

So it was for Florence's dad, an architect and builder who created warehouses for the Cleveland mob's vast Prohibition liquor caches, as well as the mansions its top dogs lived in.

Same with Florence's Aunt Kitty, "the first ultra-successful woman in real estate in the United States," who all but created Shaker Heights, Cleveland's

richest suburb, and also helped spearhead the city's commuter-railroad system.

In fact, one of Florence's earliest memories is of having lunch with his dotting aunt and a man named "Moe," who arrived with two guys in "a large sedan with darkened windows."

"One accompanied Moe into a back room of the restaurant, and the other guy stood at the front of the car," Florence says in his book.

"I do not remember the content of the meeting except for Moe to close the conversation with: 'Okay, Kitty, it's a deal.'"

It was almost certainly Moe Dalitz, a never-convicted bootlegging kingpin, World War II Army veteran and future philanthropist known as one of the major figures in the development of late-1940s Las Vegas.

Dalitz famously once told the early-'50s Estes Kefauver Congressional committee on organized crime: "If you people wouldn't have drunk it, I wouldn't have bootlegged it."

Other early-era names mentioned in "A Touch of the Underworld" that mafia observers might recognize: onetime Cleveland boss Joe Lonardo, "Whiskey Dick" Percoco, Frank Milano, "Big Al" Polizzi, and James Porello, of the legendary "Mayfield Road Mob," the Silent Syndicate's precursor.

Sometimes, it wasn't pretty early on.

Florence wrote of that last name, for example: "After James Porello was blasted with a shotgun as he was holding lamb chops he had just purchased for a holiday dinner, Dad stated that he could not eat lamb chops for a year."

The book explains that the Mayfield Road Mob eventually "made a reasonable transition from the bullet to the bribe, and the latter allowed everyone to live a long and prosperous life, including my relatives."

Shocked at the idea? Dr. Florence isn't, and although he never told his children about that part of his past until a few months ago, he sharply contrasts the mafia he knows with the current political circus in Washington DC.

"In the underworld, there is a definite line between legitimate and crooked, and you decide and take the consequences," he says. "But today in Washington, there is no line -- and you can't change the direction of the Titanic when the iceberg is only a mile away."

He adds from personal experience: "Probably the most crooked organization of all is the US pharmaceutical industry. Did you know that we're the only nation in the world that allows medication commercials on TV? And at least 80 percent are inaccurate."

In other words, as he wrote in his book's introduction: "Before you judge me as an individual, I wish to call your attention to the American Indian adage: 'Do not judge me until you have walked a mile in my moccasin.'"

"Remember, we are all products of our heredity and environment, and in my case, being brainless and fearless did not help."

Elizabeth Taylor's eyes

Florence, who still works as a medical/legal consultant for insurance companies, industry and law offices, has a professional resume that's five pages long – full of impressive accomplishments.

Among them: medical-affairs vice president at Pennsylvania's Polyclinic Medical Center, now known as the Pinnacle Health System, the state's second-largest healthcare company; medical director at Detroit's People's Community Hospital Authority; chief of medical rehabilitation services for the Ohio Industrial Commission and founding medical director of Columbus's J. Leonard Camera Industrial Rehabilitation Center; and orthopedic surgeon, and disability and pain-management specialist in Minneapolis.

He also has a master's in public administration.

Along the way, Florence treated Elvis when he was in rehab, radio and TV personality Arthur Godfrey and NBA great Wilt Chamberlain. He also gave Elizabeth Taylor her pre-surgery physical.

It's true, Florence says, Taylor had mesmerizing violet eyes.

"I placed the end of my stethoscope on one side of her chest, then on the other," he deadpans.

"Then she looked at me, smiled and gently put the other end of the stethoscope into my ears."

And the Dr. Trucker pen name?

That came from Florence's work at Ohio's J. Leonard Camera Industrial Rehabilitation Center.

"I found that 90 percent of the patients on worker's compensation were truckers, and I saw the wrong things being done," Florence explains.

"The single sickest portion of the workforce today is big-rig truckers."

All of the profits from "A Touch of the Underworld" will be donated to that cause. The money will go toward Florence's dream of building a \$2-\$3-million healthcare facility for truckers near Hudson's Hwy. 12/Interstate 94 truck stop.

So will the proceeds from Florence's 2013 children's book, "Tweedle's Tales." It's a 37-page collection of stories centering around a girl named Betsy and a little bee, who learn important life lessons with their friends, including Sally Skunk and Sadie Squirrel.

The book has gotten great reviews from readers and has been selected for the World Book Fair Conference in Beijing, China, in August.

Wait a minute -- a mob-connected, 84-year-old surgeon who can make a children's book sing?

"Believe it or not, my mind works the way children's stories go," Florence says.

"The greatest joy to me in life is small children. My daughter says she doesn't think she's ever seen a child I didn't like. Even a crying child will pacify me -- which isn't normal."

He's also planning a sequel to "A Touch of the Underworld" -- with more personal details, including his take on what the mafia's mysterious "11th Commandment" is all about.

"There will be more in it about the story of my life -- which even I can't believe," Florence says.

"A Touch of the Underworld" and "Tweedle's Tales" are available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble.