



The King of Skid Row: John Bacich and the Twilight Years of Old Minneapolis

James Eli Shaffer

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City blue laws drove the liquor trade and its customers—hard-drinking lumberjacks, pensioners, farmhands, and railroad workers—into the oldest quarter of Minneapolis. In the fifty-cent-a-night flophouses of the city’s Gateway District, they slept in cubicles with ceilings of chicken wire. In rescue missions, preachers and nuns tried to save their souls. Sociology researchers posing as vagrants studied them. And in their midst John Bacich, aka Johnny Rex, who owned a bar, a liquor store, and a cage hotel, documented the gritty neighborhood’s last days through photographs and film of his clientele.

The King of Skid Row follows Johnny Rex into this vanished world that once thrived in the heart of Minneapolis. Drawing on hours of interviews conducted in the three years before Bacich’s death in 2012, James Eli Shiffer brings to life the eccentric characters and strange events of an American skid row.

Supplemented with archival and newspaper research and his own photographs, Bacich’s stories re-create the violent, alcohol-soaked history of a city best known for its clean, progressive self-image. His life captures the seamy, richly colorful side of the city swept away by a massive urban renewal project in the early 1960s and gives us, in a glimpse of those bygone days, one of Minneapolis’s most intriguing figures—spinning some of its most enduring and enthralling tales.



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