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Before battling Obama, Koch siblings' spat was internal

By: Mike Stimpson
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Charles and David Koch are famous for two things: enormous wealth derived from Koch Industries, and support for right-wing causes. *Sons of Wichita* covers both those themes, as well as the duo's decades-long conflict with their brothers.

Daniel Schulman, Washington senior editor for *Mother Jones* magazine, clearly did a thorough job researching along all three themes. And he seems to have taken pains to treat the controversial billionaires fairly -- perhaps a bit too fairly (but more on that later).

Koch Industries has its roots in oil refining, specifically a refining process Fred Koch and partners developed in the late 1920s. Since Fred's death in 1967, two of his four sons -- he had no daughters -- have expanded the company through acquisitions that include the makers of, among other things, Brawny paper towels and Lycra fabric.

Their empire also includes a notable Manitoba component: the Koch Fertilizer plant in Brandon.

For decades, Charles and David emphasized the "private" in the privately held company they control.

Sure, Charles used his wealth to fund the libertarian Cato Institute think-tank, and David was on the Libertarian presidential ticket in 1980. Otherwise, however, they kept a low profile and avoided the spotlight.

That changed after Barack Obama's election to the White House in 2008.

"Charles considered him a 'dedicated egalitarian' who had 'internalized some Marxist models,'" Schulman writes. "David... declared him 'the most radical president we've ever had as a nation,' a leader steeped in the 'hard core economic socialist' politics of his Kenyan father."

The billionaires decided they had to act quickly in response to the Obama threat. They did so by seeing that Americans for Prosperity, an organization that gets much of its funding from the Kochs, supported the "tea party" rallies that sprang up across the U.S. in 2009.

Their role in anti-Obama activities became well-known and the brothers became, in Schulman's words, "the Punch to Obama's Judy in the partisan puppet show."

The business and political aspects of the Koch story are interesting, but *Sons of Wichita* actually begins with a vivid scene from the 1950s on the theme of sibling rivalry: teenage David and twin brother Bill, both wearing boxing gloves, angrily throwing punches at each other near the family estate in Kansas.

That scene foreshadowed a 20-year conflict Bill was to have with David and Charles through the 1980s and '90s. With oldest brother Frederick on Bill's side but minimally involved, the war was waged in the boardroom, until Bill was kicked out of Koch Industries, and then continued through a series of lawsuits Bill filed against David and Charles.

They reached a settlement in 2001, and haven't publicly sniped at each other since.

Bill has an energy company of his own, Oxbow Corp., and spent many millions of dollars to win the America's Cup yachting trophy in 1992.

Frederick, who will turn 81 in August, has since the 1960s led a guardedly private life, with no involvement in Koch Industries. He's known in New York and Europe as a generous patron of the arts.

Schulman and his aides have clearly done their research, as evidenced by 30 pages of endnotes, and *Sons* is very well-written.

But it's a tad disappointing that someone from a liberal-left "hell-raiser" magazine such as *Mother Jones* would pull his punches so much on the right-wing "Kochtopus."

Schulman goes out of his way to be fair to these fomenters of anti-Obama rage, whether they deserve it or not. A little invective would have been appreciated.

Charles and David might disagree with that, but surely as libertarians they would defend a reviewer's right to say it.