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## ROCKY'S FAMILY HORROR SHOW

ROCKY AOKI AND HIS FEUDING HEIRS ARE BRINGING OUT THE KNIVES, TO SLICE AND DICE HIS BENIHANA FORTUNE.

By Logan Hill

**"MY DAUGHTER GRACE IS TELLING ME,** *Daddy, your wife is going to poison you to death. Be careful what you eat,*" says Rocky Aoki with an odd, amused grin.

Rocky hasn't been much inclined to listen to Grace lately. Sitting in an Olympic Tower conference room a few floors below his apartment, dressed in a crisp, pin-striped suit a shade darker than his blue-tinted sunglasses, the trim, 68-year-old king of Benihana is attempting to explain why he's suing her and three more "disloyal and incompetent" children for attempting to wrest control of the companies he founded. It doesn't take him long: "Basically, they think my wife is, like, gold digger," he says, referring to his third wife, Keiko Ono, 51, whom he married four years ago. Then he cracks a joke. "But money not everything," he says, winking behind his shades. "Just 99 percent."

Rocky giggles. It's his second-favorite joke, one of many he'll blurt out, often at surprising moments, as if afflicted with a kind of comedic Tourette's. No wonder he's such a lady-killer, such a charmer. No wonder he's in such a mess. And no wonder his favorite joke, the one he most likes to tell, is the long, ridiculous story of how this whole feud with his family began.



Photograph by Kyoko Hamada



*Rocky and wife Keiko at their  
apartment in Manhattan.*





SOME FAMILIES ARE SO THOROUGHLY and mysteriously dysfunctional that no amount of therapy will determine exactly where and when everything went wrong. The Aokis are not one of those families. Their problems, according to Rocky, began on September 14, 1979, in a San Francisco hotel.

Back then, Rocky was rolling. In 1964, just two decades after World War II, he had struck gold with a Japanese gimmick as American as the fortune cookie (invented by another Japanese guy, in San Francisco): the Benihana restaurant on West 56th Street, which popularized Japanese food by juggling it in the air. By 1979, Benihana was a multi-million-dollar company with locations across the world, and Rocky was on his way to the cover of *Newsweek*, the poster boy for immigrant success. "I was like Trump," brags Rocky, whose hair is still as distinctive as the Donald's: a tightly permed Jheri curl he says he adopted in the sixties so that white people could tell him apart from other Asians. "Anything to promote my company, I did it. Richard Branson? He copy me."

A celebrity chef who couldn't cook a dish, Rocky became a star by mastering the fine art of cheap publicity stunts. He posed for photos in the hot tub in his stretch Rolls-Royce and drove a cross-country race in a stretch Volkswagen bug. ("I also have stretch Corvette.") He cameoed on *Hawaii Five-O*, won a national backgammon championship, and set a world record when he became the first person to cross the Pacific in a hot-air balloon (stamped with the Benihana logo, of course). By 1979,

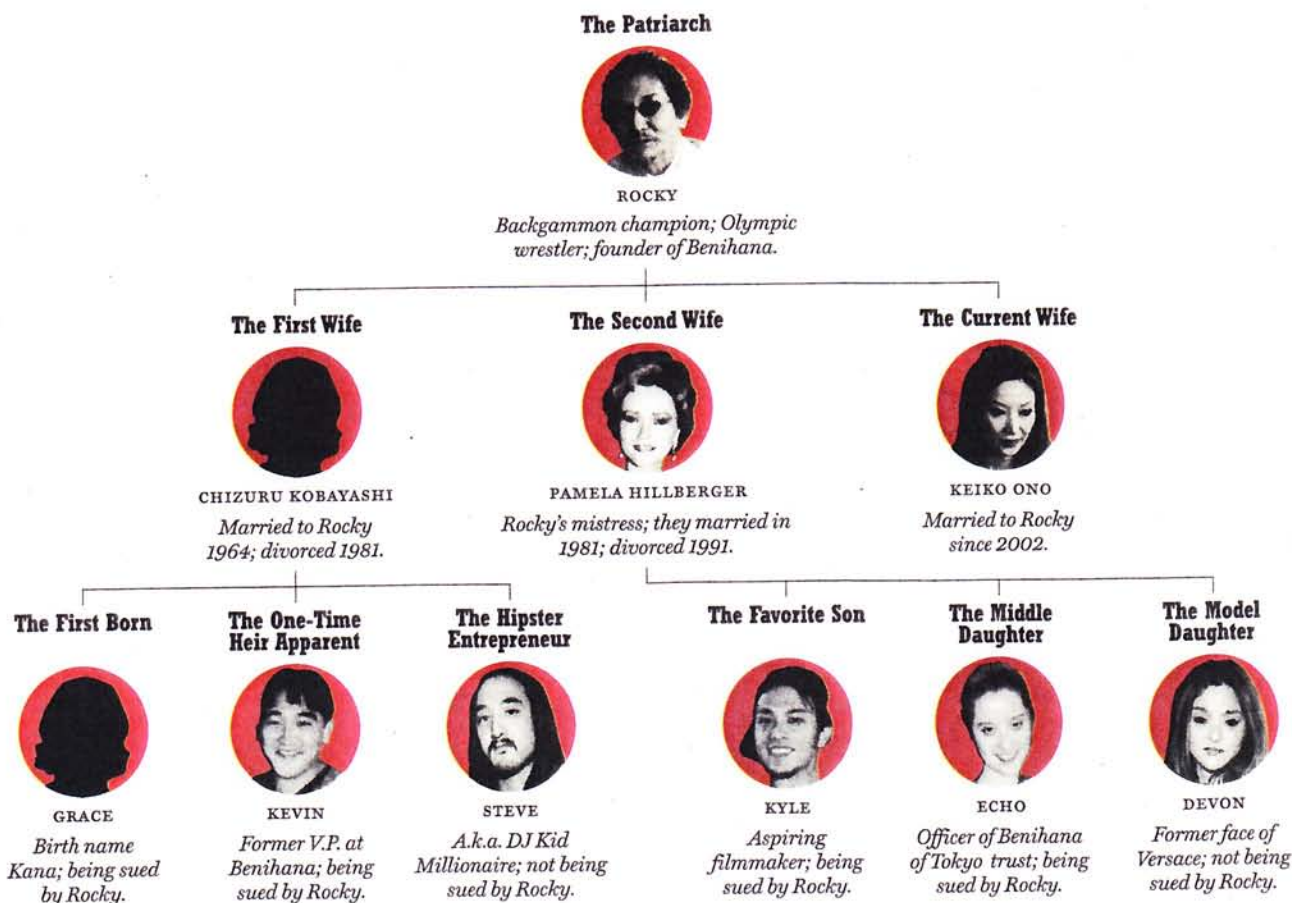
he was obsessed with speedboats. So on the warm, windy morning of September 14, Rocky was with his 3-year-old son Kyle in a San Francisco hotel room, preparing for the Benihana Grand Prix. Then Rocky heard a knock on the door.

He was surprised to find two unexpected guests: 11-year-old Kevin and toddler Steve, Rocky's two sons by Chizuru Kobayashi, his wife of fifteen years. Rocky had expected Chizuru and the kids to stay home in New Jersey—that way, he could enjoy some time alone with Kyle and his mother, Pamela Hillberger, Rocky's mistress. "Kevin sees Kyle," recalls Rocky, who can't help grinning, no matter how badly this story ends for him. "He asks me, 'Who is this kid?'" Rocky panicked and lied—badly. "I said, 'Oh, he's my friend's boy.'" But Kyle says, "Daddy! Daddy!" Rocky said, "No, there's no daddy here. He somewhere in New Jersey!" But Kevin, his oldest son, wasn't buying it. "One day before the big race, and Kevin found out that Kyle's my kid. Big mistake."

But that wasn't the worst of it. "Another mistake was when I had accident," Rocky says, "almost dying."

Later that afternoon, in a scene straight out of Rock Hudson's *Magnificent Obsession*, Rocky took a 38-foot racing boat out into San Francisco Bay. He hit 80 miles an hour near the Golden Gate Bridge and then, as *New York Times* sports columnist Red Smith put it, "Rocky Aoki's speedboat disintegrated ... and so did Rocky." Rocky splashed down with a broken arm, a shattered leg, a torn aorta, and his liver sliced in half. He was helicoptered to a nearby hospital, where doctors removed his spleen and gall blad-

## YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO THE AOKI FAMILY SQUABBLE





der and cut open his chest to perform a ten-hour coronary bypass. "Three days, unconscious," he says. When he woke up, he recalls, "I'm completely naked, tube in my penis. I see my wife standing over me, on one side. On other side, I see my girlfriend.... I say, 'Ohhh ... shiiiit!'"

LYING ON THE HOSPITAL BED, wife and mistress hovering over him, Rocky didn't know what to do. So he closed his eyes and faked a blackout. Then he started to think things over. Sure, he was rich, but lately things had gotten out of control. He wasn't just a high-flying businessman, he had become "like Hugh Hefner." He'd even founded a porn magazine, *Genesis* (which had its own Benihana-style gimmick: two centerfolds for the price of one!), and opened a four-story midtown disco called Club Genesis, which became his own private playpen. Night after night, Rocky stayed up till dawn, snorting cocaine, picking up girls, and betting \$100 per point on backgammon. For years, he'd been hiding his mistress, Pamela, from his wife, Chizuru, while hiding his other girlfriends (including a Miss Iceland) from both of them. Before his accident, Rocky boasts, he had "three kids from three different women at exactly the same time"—though he only found out about the third via a paternity suit.

Lying there, Rocky asked himself if he wanted to "go on with this two-girl type of situation." He decided that he did not. Then he asked himself if he wanted to live at all. "I decide I want to die," he says. "I want to rip out all the tubes—the IV, everything—but I can't, because my broken bones."

Rocky finally opened his eyes and Chizuru spoke. "She says, 'It's okay. It's okay to have a girlfriend. Japanese custom.'" Rocky couldn't believe his good fortune.

"Then Chizuru found out I have a *baby* with Pamela," he says, slapping the table. "That's why we divorced."

**I**F IT HADN'T BEEN FOR THAT spectacularly unlucky day 27 years ago, Rocky says he might not be suing Kevin and Kyle now, or Echo, his daughter with Pamela, or Grace, his daughter with Chizuru. "At the back of everybody is my ex-wife," says Rocky, a few days after our first meeting. Dressed in another pin-striped suit, he spoons clam chowder in the Harvard Club while explaining why he thinks Chizuru is using astrology against him. "She's using what's happening in the heavens to tell Grace what to do," he says conspiratorially. "She still cannot forgive me because I have babies with Pamela. Now she hate Keiko too."

"It is revenge," Keiko says flatly. "Long time, keep anger. Unfortunately, he married a difficult lady."

(Chizuru's son Kevin later explains, "I can't comment on any matters that may concern the pending litigation," but he adds that his father and mother "don't talk that often. Because of that, my father may think that she's come up with all sorts of ideas to plot against him, but that's definitely not the case." Grace and Chizuru did not respond to requests for comment.) Regardless, Rocky's new wife is the focus of the feud. So today Keiko's on the defensive, down to her outfit, which she tells me she picked specifically for our meeting: a short, skimpy blue dress with a plunging neckline that highlights her figure (as a marketing consultant, she introduced the Wonderbra to Japan) and a plush, pastel Chanel jacket acces-



Rocky defeats another backgammon challenger at the New York Athletic Club.

sorized with glittery Chanel sunglasses pushed back through her highlighted hair. Around her wrist, she's clasped an eye-popping diamond-studded Cartier watch, for which, she stresses, "I paid half," splitting the cost with Rocky.

The couple met at a party in 2001, and as their relationship heated up, Rocky's health worsened, with diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver, and hepatitis C (which he says he contracted from a transfusion after that boat crash). Keiko cared for him. "She saved my life—I would be dead without her," says Rocky, who adds that he trusts her absolutely.

Still, Rocky's kids have reason to be suspicious: Keiko and Rocky dated for less than a year before they married at New York's City Hall in July 2002—and Rocky wasn't expected to live for very long at the time. They didn't tell Rocky's kids about the marriage until weeks later. According to the lawsuit, when Rocky and Keiko finally held a small party, Kevin, now 38, and Grace, now 40, brought the perfect wedding gift for the woman who was about to have everything: a postnuptial agreement, requiring Keiko to renounce interest in Rocky's Benihana assets. Keiko refused to sign it and Rocky refused to force her. He claims Kevin then hired a private detective to investigate Keiko. That's when the feud exploded.

Since then, Rocky and Keiko have battled the children named in the suit—Kevin, Grace, Echo, and Kyle—over Rocky's inheritance and, specifically, the family's Benihana of Tokyo corporation. Rocky estimates BOT's current worth at "between \$60 million and \$100 million," largely because it controls all of the family's assets in the larger Benihana Inc. (which reported an operating profit of \$23.1 million in fiscal year 2005 via its Benihana, RA Sushi, and Haru restaurants). In 1998, Rocky's legal counsel advised him to step down as chairman in light of a pending insider-trading conviction, and to place all of his Benihana assets in the BOT trust. As a result, the children gained an unusual amount of control over BOT and have used that leverage, after Rocky's remarriage, to preserve their inheritance.

In the fall of 2003, Rocky made a desperate attempt to force peace on the family. But it was about as savvy as blurting out *Your daddy's in New Jersey!* back in that San Francisco hotel. Rocky rewrote his will, giving Keiko control over how to disburse 75 percent of his estate to his children after his death. That way, he explains in his lawsuit, he hoped that his "children would realize that making



peace with her would be the best possible course of action ... and would bring everyone together." He was very, very wrong.

"You said this is a way your kids and Keiko will get along," Grace wrote to him, according to his lawsuit. "What sick-twisted logic ... None of us are naïve enough to believe that she would give us a penny. It is amazing how far she will go, and how far you let her go." That's when Rocky decided to sue his children. His lawsuit claims that the four children "breached their fiduciary duties," in part by losing BOT's controlling interest in Benihana Inc. (through a stock dilution and sale that reduced its stake from 50.9 percent to 36.5 percent). Rocky says the children have canceled his salary and, in the words of the lawsuit, are trying to "wrest control" of the companies, largely because of their "hatred of Plaintiff's wife."

"I want to help my kids, but I want my children to crawl, to walk, then run on their own," explains Rocky. "Then I help them. But they can't even crawl. They just collect money and do nothing. What else they want? Can't wait till I'm dead?" Rocky says he barely speaks with Grace and Echo anymore and focuses most of his anger on Kevin. Meanwhile, Pamela's daughter Devon and Chizuru's son Steve have both steered clear of the conflict, perhaps because they've made their own money independent of Benihana. Steve runs the indie record label Dim Mak, which broke Bloc Party, and he imported the Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A. to the States (both acts have crashed at Rocky's house). He's become a clubland celebrity, D.J.-ing under the name Kid Millionaire. "People always think I'm really loaded," Steve says, stressing that his nom de discotheque is a way of pointing out that his father *hasn't* funded his record label. "I'm close to my dad, but if Dad was investing in me, I'd have a big problem—" He stops himself. "Shit, I should rephrase that."

As Rocky will repeatedly tell you, his favorite daughter is Devon. The licorice-thin, moonfaced model was discovered at a Rancid concert at age 13 and later replaced Naomi Campbell as the face of Versace. When "Page Six" began calling her "hotter than a grill at Benihana," Rocky was proud. When Devon started dating thirtysomething Lenny Kravitz around her 18th birthday, he couldn't have been happier.

"She always do the right thing," says Rocky. "She say, 'You sure?' I say, 'No problem.' She say, 'He's half-black, half-Jewish.' I say, 'That's okay ... That's America! I can't get away from the blacks and the Jews!'" He nearly falls over laughing.

He says he loves Devon, a budding actress who reportedly just signed a \$2 million deal to design a line of jeans for Levi Strauss Japan, more than any other child because she's loyal and perhaps the only one who shares his drive. "All I ever want is to make money," Rocky says. "When I wake up, I think about how to make money in my brain. Devon's the same way." Even as a child, Devon loved money so much she would leave bills strewn all over her room, like toys—"\$100, \$200, \$300! Hundreds of dollars. On her bedside! On the floor! In the bathroom! I say to her, 'You don't think money is important!' And she say, 'I want to see my money, Daddy. I want to see it when I'm in my bed, when I'm in the bathroom, everywhere—I want to see it always.'"

Rocky smiles. "She's my favorite, very smart."

IT MUST BE HARD BEING one of Rocky's children—and not just because you'd probably be in the middle of an ugly lawsuit right now. "It's brought a lot of pressure being his child," Kevin says. "He basically changed the way Americans think about Japanese culture and cuisine." Rocky's life story has been held up as a modern-day Horatio Alger tale, lionized in eleven Japanese books, a made-for-TV Japanese movie, an American biography,

and on the walls of Benihanas from Milwaukee to Bucharest.

Hiroaki "Rocky" Aoki was born on October 9, 1938, in Tokyo. His father, Yunosuke, was a "playboy," a "child actor," and a flashy vaudevillian, Rocky says, who "loved Fred Astaire." He taught tap-dancing to Katsu, a tango dancer who would become his wife, and entered the restaurant trade. Rocky was 6 when American B-29s firebombed Tokyo, killing close to 100,000. After the attack, the legend goes, Yunosuke was walking through the wreckage when he spotted a tiny red flower and decided to name his new café after the Japanese word for such a blossom: Benihana.

"My father said, 'You could be a movie star,'" says Rocky. But Rocky didn't see himself as the next Astaire. "I like Elvis." A bad-boy rebel, Rocky sold stolen girly pictures at school, was suspended for pushing another student down a staircase, and joined a rock band called Rowdy Sounds. "We copy our American idols, like Japanese doing rap now," he says, laughing at himself. "I play bass. But I tell you why I change to wrestling: No good on tempo."

He earned a spot on Japan's 1960 Olympic team and an American scholarship. When he lost that scholarship after breaking one student's leg and another's nose, he moved to New York.

"Why anyone come to New York?" he asks. "Smell money. Japanese businessmen come here and always say 'I. Smell. Money.'"

**"I want to help my kids, but I want my children to crawl, to walk, then run on their own," says Rocky. "But they can't even crawl. They just collect money and do nothing. What else they want? Can't wait till I'm dead?"**

Rocky studied restaurant management at New York City Technical College, won two AAAU wrestling championships, and drove an ice-cream truck. "Everybody afraid to sell ice-cream in Harlem then," he says, so Rocky taped a newspaper article about his wrestling championships to the side of his truck to scare off thieves and had the neighborhood to himself. He made \$10,000 in the summer of 1963, enough to persuade his father to co-invest in a four-table restaurant. Rocky wanted to apply the Japanese teppanyaki concept to the trusty "beef, chicken, and shrimp" formula he'd studied in college, but his vaudevillian father thought that was boring. "He say, 'Rocky, chefs cooking on an open grill is not what American likes to see—could you do some showmanship in front of customer?'"

So Rocky, just 25, asked his reluctant chefs to clang knives, juggle shrimp, and crack jokes. For six months, he lost money, then a rave from the New York *Herald Tribune* brought crowds and taught him the value of media. "Soon, all the television wants to interview me." Soon, he was opening new restaurants in Chicago, Honolulu, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. As if that weren't enough, he says, "One night in back of restaurant, I invent green-tea ice cream." He also says he invented the saketini.

But Rocky's father felt overshadowed by his flashy son: The two feuded until his death, just three months after Rocky's boating accident. So I ask Rocky if he worries about ending up like his own father: estranged from his children, fighting over business. "My father only graduated from elementary school, but he smart about business," he says carefully. "Maybe he was good at business because his family was not rich."



RECENTLY, ROCKY CALLED ME TO explain that things are looking up. He's sold his cluttered East Side townhouse for about \$5 million and auctioned off its magpie collection of Picassos and kitsch. Keiko is planning what she calls a "simple, modern life" for the two in Rocky's Olympic Tower condo, which she's redecorated.

Thanks to Keiko, he says, he's healthy enough to make his beloved Tuesday-night backgammon game at the New York Athletic Club. And he's confident that he and the children might soon reach a settlement. As proof, he says, "my favorite son, Kyle, is in town." So I meet up with Rocky, Keiko, and Kyle at the flagship Benihana on West 56th. Like most Benihanas, it's a living shrine to Rocky. There's the daredevil in his prime, mugging for the camera in speedboats and hot-air balloons, and posing with Steven Seagal.

"I'm the only kid who doesn't have a photo in this restaurant," complains Kyle, a 30-year-old dressed in all-black.

"Really? Devon is my favorite daughter and Kyle is my favorite son," Rocky teases, slapping Kyle soundly on the back. "But I sue Kyle! I almost put him in jail!"

Kyle laughs a bit uneasily. "My father is a very proud man," he says. "This whole thing, it's all about pride."

Before things can get too serious, a Benihana chef clangs knives like cymbals on the steel grill, and father and son begin to kid each other about old times. Kyle says he's found old photos "of my dad, with a Benihana chef pretending to cook and a naked girl lying on the grill."

Rocky grins. "My father say, 'No good to have naked lady on grill! Grill for business only!'"

Kyle, an aspiring movie producer, says there ought to be a film about all this, "but it would have to be a comedy—otherwise it would be too depressing." He imagines the boat scene, the hospital scene—"Dad waking up, saying 'Ohhh ... shiit!'"—all with Rocky played by Christopher Walken. The Aokis start laughing—even Keiko, who admits she's been "depressed" because her dog just underwent surgery.

"Kyle is my favorite son," Rocky says again. "He's a straight shooter. He doesn't want Benihana. He says, 'I want money.'"

"I want security—not money. That's different," Kyle corrects.

"But can you make your own security?" Rocky says, then stops himself. "Kyle just wants money, Keiko wants money, Grace doesn't give a damn," he trills cheerfully. But after "\$3 to \$6 million to lawyers," it's time to move on. "Lately, everybody like a hyena. After all, money isn't everything!" ... Kyle and Rocky harmonize the punch line: "Just 99 percent!"

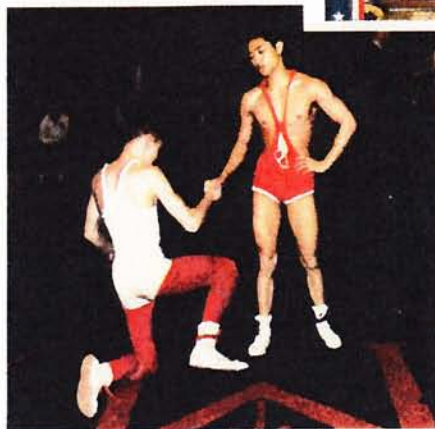
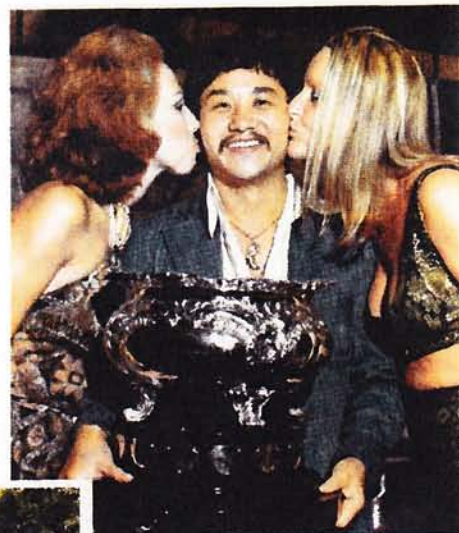
The chef has stacked a steaming pyramid of onion slices on the hot grill, and as steam spews up through the rings, he shouts "Volcano!" Rocky barely notices. I ask him why he's so hopeful.

He leans forward. "Now is like astrology war," he confides, in a low, hushed voice. "An astrology war between two wives. Chizuru uses astrology to look for bad for me. Keiko, she always using stars to look for the good."

I ask Rocky if he really believes in that stuff. "Look at Reagan!" he says. "Keiko's astrologist say Rocky's life, like, go to hell for two year. And it's right. Last two years like a hell. But that two years, almost over right now. Now my life go up like this." He grins crookedly and raises his hand up, palm down, like a kid with his hand stuck out of a car window, riding in the wind. "Only one problem," he says, dropping his hand and lowering his voice. "Keiko's charts, they say someone close to her die this year."

It's a thought that could confirm the worst fears of Rocky's children—*Daddy, Keiko is going to poison you to death!*—so why is Rocky grinning?

"For a while, I worry. I think, Maybe it's me. Maybe I die this year. But now ... You know, now Keiko's dog sick. It's terrible, terrible. But if Keiko's dog die," he says, grinning, "maybe Rocky be okay."



Clockwise, from top left: Rocky wins the Benihana Grand Prix; Rocky flanked by two Miss Benihanas; the company balloon; Rocky on the cover of Newsweek's May 4, 1981, issue; Rocky the wrestler in 1959; Rocky in Miami with one of his many cars.