

## **Don Bolles: Episode 1**

### **“Shattered Naivete”**

**Richard Ruelas:** This is a story about Don Bolles, who was a reporter for The Arizona Republic. He worked there from the late 1960s into the mid-1970s. If you saw him around the newsroom, he was recognizable for his black-rimmed eyeglasses and his military buzz cut. And his pipe.

**Richard Ruelas:** But if the name Don Bolles rings a bell with you, it's likely because of one thing: the way he died.

THEME MUSIC

**Richard Ruelas:** Bolles was killed in June 1976. Outside a hotel in midtown Phoenix. He was supposed to meet a source for a lunchtime interview. But the man cancelled on him.

**Richard Ruelas:** Bolles got into his car to leave. Started it up. Backed out. That's when the bomb that was affixed to the underside of his car detonated.

**Walter Cronkite:** Don Bolles is a 47-year-old investigative reporter for the Arizona Republic. Today, as he attempted to start his car, a bomb went off.

**Bill Redeker with KTVK-TV (channel 3):** His doctor said he's never seen a more heroic fight for life. But after 11 days of hospitalization in which both legs and an arm had to be amputated, Don Bolles died.

**Richard Ruelas:** The murder of Don Bolles shocked what was then a much smaller, sleepy city.

Man 53:00 - It made you feel vulnerable. It made you realize that this isn't just a little place of cactus and margaritas. All of a sudden, it was a dark and dangerous place.

Woman 53:11 - And the realization of that, it really shattered a lot of naiveté.

Man 53:14 - And I don't know that we've been the same since then.

**Richard:** It also shocked the country. He was a reporter killed for doing his job. It was -- and still is -- a rare incident in the United States, a country where freedom of the press is a defining principle.

**Richard Ruelas:** The Arizona Republic, where he worked, ran front page stories about his death. There was a sense of urgency. Of wanting to find out how this could happen to a newspaper reporter.

**Bill Shover:** There was a spirit at St. Joseph Hospital that Don Bolles is our guy at that place and I'll always remember how they handled everything. [00:23:10][11.9]

**Richard Ruelas:** That's Bill Shover. He was an executive at the Republic at the time. He stayed with Bolles at the hospital for 11 days after the bombing. Right up until his death.

**Bill Shover:** I couldn't believe it; that, that here was this mangled body. And that was one of the saddest things I ever did in my life by staying there for eleven days and watch the man die.v

**Rick Davis (NBC national):** The governor of Arizona ordered flags to be flown at half-staff in honor of a man much respected in this state.

**Richard Ruelas:** Bolles's life would come to be defined by his death. But there's more to the story of Don Bolles than his murder. We found a story that we think adds to the man's legacy. We found it by looking through file cabinets that contained some of Bolles's files and notes. Those cabinets also held cassette tapes that Bolles made while reporting. And because someone – for some reason – saved those cassette tapes, it means that Don Bolles himself will help tell this story.

**Intro:** My name's Richard Ruelas, I'm a reporter for The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. And this is Rediscovering: Don Bolles, a murdered journalist.

THEME MUSIC FADES OUT

**Richard Ruelas:** The story we found in those materials takes place in 1970, six years before the bombing. It was a story that upended Bolles's life. It changed him professionally. It changed him personally. Although by the time of his death, not many people remembered that it happened. But Bolles did. There are clues that this story was still on his mind at the moment a bomb went off under his feet.

MUSIC INTERLUDE

**Richard Ruelas:** In late 2018, a set of file cabinets was brought into the Arizona Republic newsroom. They had been stored in a warehouse. And, just like you might clear out a storage room, the newspaper decided to sift through that warehouse and decide what to keep. But what was inside those cabinets was a mystery. They were locked shut. And no one knew where the keys were. We hired a locksmith who cracked them open. We removed the iron bar that kept the drawers closed. And we looked inside.

**Richard Ruelas:** It quickly became clear. These were files related to Don Bolles. The day of the bombing, the Republic executive Bill Shover, whom you heard from before, went to Bolles's desk at the State Capitol press room. He boxed up everything he could find.

For years, those files were kept under lock and key.

**Richard Ruelas:** Only certain people had access to the files. Some reporters had picked through them over the years, looking to follow up on what Bolles was working on. Or looking for clues as to who wanted him dead.

In late 2018, my editor assigned me to look through these decades-old files to see what was there. It was a lot of material. I wasn't sure where to begin. Then, I found the stash of cassette tapes. <tape hissing>

**Richard Ruelas:** The Republic that Bolles worked in the 60s and 70s was strictly a print newspaper. The same held for me through much of my career in newspapers. There was no website when I started working for this company in 1994. Now, we've learned to tell stories in different ways. Maybe there was a story in those tapes. One that had never been told in this way before.

**Richard Ruelas:** Let me describe these tapes. They were in bad shape. Some were held together by Scotch tape. There was writing on some of them. But it was hard to read. All of them looked weathered. I wondered how the actual tapes themselves would hold up.

**Richard Ruelas:** I put a cassette in a deck at my house. I pushed play. <insert tape noise> I hoped for the best. I heard hissing. Then buzzing. Then, a conversation. It sounded like a phone call.

**Richard Ruelas:** But I didn't know who was talking, when they were talking or what they were talking about. There was mention of a Sam Steiger. I knew Steiger was a former Congressman from Prescott, a city north of Phoenix. But there were names I didn't recognize, like Stark and Reger. And something about a \$20,000 payoff.

**Richard Ruelas:** After a few minutes, that conversation ended and another one started. It was another phone call. But this one started with a different voice. And he introduced himself.

MR. BOLLES: Hello, Bob.

MR. KIECKHEFER: Yeah.

MR. BOLLES: Don Bolles here.

MR. KIECKHEFER: Yeah.

**Richard Ruelas:** It was Don Bolles. This was his voice.

**Richard Ruelas:** Don Bolles's picture hangs in our newsroom. I see it every day I'm in there. But I never thought about what he sounded like. This was him. This was his voice.

**Richard Ruelas:** He was talking to someone named Bob about something to do with the racing commission thing. It was all hard to make out. Bolles's voice was pretty clear.

Bolles: How did you do on getting the legislation?

**Richard Ruelas:** But the man he was talking to sounded distant.

MR. KIECKHEFER:: Well, we are still -- well, we filed a lot of stuff with them, and we think one of the (undecipherable) -- of course, we are fairly practical about it.

MR. BOLLES: Mm-hum.

MR. KIECKHEFER: And we got down to as far as One thing that they jumped on right away, and -well, they -- they took to it with complete...

**Richard Ruelas:** The distant voice competed with an electronic hum. That came from the primitive way the conversation was recorded. Back then, to record a call a reporter would stick a suction cup to the phone's receiver. There was a cord coming out of it that would send the signal into the tape recorder. But depending on how close the reporter was to the phone -- and probably a host of other factors -- the tape would pick up a buzz or a hum.

**Richard Ruelas:** It took some time to decipher the tapes. To figure out what was being said, by whom and when. And when I put it together, I realized that this was a Don Bolles story that I never knew about. It is a story of corruption. And power. And the lengths people will go to hang on to their empire.

Even in a small city. Like Phoenix was in the 1970s.

**Richard Ruelas:** Millions of people live in Phoenix now. It's the fifth largest city in America. And that's not counting the suburbs. But in 1970, the population of Phoenix was in the hundreds of thousands.

Arizona Memories - Phoenix turned 100 in 1970. From a dusty desert farm town grew a metropolis of nearly a million people. By the end of the 70s, another half-million people would call it home, making it the fastest growing in America. And yet, at the beginning of the decade, even the big cities didn't feel so big.

Woman: My sisters lived in Phoenix. I lived, to them, way out in Tempe. There were some sheep ranchers out there. And there were times that traffic would be stopped while the people herding the sheep would take their time, and the sheep aren't fast.

**Richard Ruelas:** Much of the city's life took place in central Phoenix. There were the government and court buildings downtown. And a line of high-rises on either side of Central Avenue as it headed north. Scattered in between those buildings were a series of bars frequented by the power players: lawmakers, lobbyists, lawyers, judges, cops and journalists.

**Richard Ruelas:** This was the Phoenix that Don Bolles inhabited. Bolles was born in Wisconsin. His grandfather was a Congressman from Waukegan a small town three hours north of Milwaukee. His father was a bureau chief in Wisconsin for the Associated Press.

Bolles was proud to be from Wisconsin. Listen to his reaction when the city of Milwaukee came up in a conversation he had in December 1970.

Man: Milwaukee

Bolles: my stomping ground and birthplace

Man: I'll be darned. I came from Madison, Wis. Didn't know that.

Bolles: You did? My grandad was editor of the Janesville Gazette He was also a representative in congress from that district 38 to 41 when he died. My Dad was associated press chief of bureau in Milwaukee 1928 to 1933. Then we moved into NY. We got a lot of ties back there

**Richard Ruelas:** As Bolles just told you, he moved to the East Coast when his father became an AP man in New Jersey. He'd move back to Wisconsin for college

**Bolles:** I went to Beloit.

**Richard Ruelas:** He graduated from Beloit College in 1950. He served in the Korean War. Then, Bolles got a job with the Associated Press. He worked in bureaus in New York, Newark and Kentucky.

**Richard Ruelas:** In 1962, Bolles moved to Phoenix.

**Man:** Do you like it?

**Don Bolles:** Oh, I love it.

**Man (Levine):** What part of town?

**Don Bolles:** Sunnyslope. It's real nice and cool up there in the summer town.

**Man (Levine):** I'm from New York City...

**Don Bolles:** Yeah, it's a good place to be from. \*laughs\*. Some, some parts are OK.

**Man (Levine):** \*inaudible\*

**Don Bolles:** I used to work in the associated press there and XX plaza, which is a real nice area but working in New York and going in that subway wasn't my cup of tea.

**Man (Levine):** I don't blame you.

**Don Bolles:** So, I like it out here.

**Richard Ruelas:** Bolles got hired by The Republic and took to the city. He bought a house in the Sunnyslope area of Phoenix. By 1970, he was married to a woman named Rosalie. Their household was busy. Lots of kids. He had four children from his first marriage. His wife, Rosalie, had two from her previous marriage. And they had one child together.

"We just fell in love with each other, and started seeing each other and... eventually ended up getting married and then we had this wonderful little girl."

**Richard Ruelas:** That's Rosalie. We traveled to South Carolina to interview her. She lives in a rural town about an hour south of Charlotte.

**Richard Ruelas:** Don and Rosalie met at a party. The attraction was instant.

**Rosalie:** I saw Don and everything just went by the wayside after that ...

**Richard Ruelas:** And even though Bolles was well-known in some circles, his name or job title did not impress Rosalie.

**Rosalie:** And the funny thing is ... I didn't even take the paper. \*laughs\* Isn't that funny?

**Richard Ruelas:** While visiting her, we played her some the audio we found from her late husband. Hearing his voice brought up a lot of memories for her. One of the tapes included a conversation that, for some reason, Bolles recorded of himself and his wife.

**Bolles:** I'm going to be early tonight. Well I mean I'm not going to be late.

**Rosalie:** Ha

**Richard Ruelas:** Don and Rosalie had one child together. Her name was Diane. And she sat next to her mother for the interview.

**Richard Ruelas:** Those who did know Bolles as a reporter saw him as tenacious.

**Charles Kelly:** He, he had great sources not only in Phoenix and Arizona but across the country. He had, he had great files on mobsters so he not only was passionate but he was very organized and so he had a lot of impact for that reason.

**Richard Ruelas:** That's Charles Kelly, a reporter who worked with Don Bolles back in the day.

**Charles Kelly:** Well Bolles was, he really was an old fashioned passionate investigative reporter. He really when you look at film noir and you look at the mob and the businessmen who are corrupt and the legislators who were involved, That's the kind of thing he was digging into as late as the 70s.

**Richard Ruelas:** Bolles reported on the legislature, but he was given room and space to report on other things that came his way, too. Like the mafia.

**Richard Ruelas:** People knew who Bolles was. And some people feared their names being in his stories. As this attorney told Bolles in a phone call.

**Craig Mehrens:** I read your articles in the paper and I don't particularly want to be part of it I'm serious. I don't need my name in those articles. I don't think it should be there. But I don't need it there.

**Bolles:** The best way for you to keep it out I guarantee you is to make a full disclosure

**Richard Ruelas:** Back then, it seemed like everyone read the newspaper from cover to cover.

**Charles Kelly:** Journalism was really seen as something that would improve the world and we still hope that that happens today. But to a degree, it was much more dramatic and close to people in the street then. And Bolles was a reporter, a reporter that really exemplified that.

**Richard Ruelas:** The Republic still has the largest reach of any entity in the state of Arizona. But the Republic of the 1970s -- in an era before the Internet, before social media -- had an even more intense influence. It was a powerful entity. People living in Phoenix at that time described the newspaper as seemingly being able to dictate public policy and decide who was in office.

**Bill Meek:** I mean that's how that's how Pulliam wielded the paper's influence. He learned pretty early what it took to make a real weapon out of the newsroom which basically meant putting it on for me on page one.

**Richard Ruelas:** That's former Republic reporter Bill Meek who worked alongside Bolles in the late 60s and early 70s. And it wasn't only reporters who felt that way. Here's an attorney, Patrick McGroder:

**Patrick McGroder III:** The Arizona Republic was a tremendously powerful force in those days, not that it isn't today. The editorial page, the publisher, the manager, were very, very powerful folks. The Phoenix 40 was emerging in those days so there was kind of a hierarchy of power structure here in Phoenix

**Richard Ruelas:** Patrick McGroder mentioned a group called the Phoenix 40 that started in 1975. It was a group of businessmen, organized by the publisher of the Republic, Eugene Pulliam. And the fact Pulliam would start such a group showed his mindset as a publisher.

Former Republic reporter Bill Meek said that the publisher wasn't a daily presence in the newsroom. But he could make his feelings felt when he wanted to.

**Bill Meek:** He only got involved in stories that he cared about. Which typically had met political stories but not always. He was also concerned about. Issues that really affected the long term outlook of the state.

Pulliam wanted Phoenix to be squeaky clean. He wanted it to be a place where people and businesses would want to move. He didn't want to see it taken over by scandal and corruption.

**Richard Ruelas:** In that way, Don Bolles became a favorite of Pulliam. Bolles also wanted to stamp out any corruption he came across. He had seen what dirty public officials and organized crime could do to a city. And he didn't want it to happen in Phoenix.

**Don Bolles:** What we're writing about is organized criminals, organized syndicates coming into Arizona and trying to walk away with the place, and that's what they're doing.

**Caller:** It's going to get worse if somebody doesn't stop it.

**Bolles:** That's why we are going strong on it because we're afraid that they're going to mark this as the new Miami, and we don't want that.

**Richard Ruelas:** In 1969, Bolles started looking at possible corruption in the dog racing industry. It wouldn't be long before he suspected mafia ties.

Bolles visited the dog tracks. Here he describes a tip he got on a race from the tracks' press relations man

**Bolles:** Well I thought things were mighty peculiar one time when I went down out to the track and they gave me the big royal treatment. And this was early in the game. And I was just diddling around, throwing \$2 down on a dog just to see what'd happen. And got near the end and I was about \$20 down or something and I didn't care? And the public relations guy said, "Hey, uh, I think I know who's gonna win, got a good shot at who's going to win the next race.

So you wanna go in on a quinella with me?" And I said ok. This dog came out of nowhere to win the race. (laughs) and he wasn't in the form at all.

**Richard Ruelas:** At that time, there was only one family that owned the tracks: the Funk family. James Trow was the business manager for the Funks at the time they owned Greyhound Park. The key members of the Funk family have all since passed away, so Trow was our best bet at getting their insight. I talked to him over the phone. He remembered the night Bolles visited the track.

Trow - I was there the night he was given the tour. I wasn't introduced to him, didn't particularly want to be. It was kind of a strange situation I thought. For a guy to come in and pretend he was a great friend of the tracks. And then two days later I think it was a the Sunday paper ..it was like headlines, I thought, well...

**Richard Ruelas:** Over the next year, Bolles wrote a series of stories that questioned whether it was in the state's best interest to have one family monopolize the tracks' ownership. And whether the Funk family was too cozy with a larger company called Emprise that had ties to organized crime.

Given the gravity of the Republic, those stories had impact. Here's attorney Patrick McGroder again:

**Patrick McGroder III:** of course if the Republic branded Emprise or some other business or institution as vile or running some type of scam or some type of illegality, boy people ran scared. Yeah you didn-- You didn't want your name and the front page above the fold in those days

**Richard:** The stories didn't please the Funk family or Emprise. And Bolles knew it.

But he didn't know how far the Funks and Emprise would go to stop him.

**Richard Ruelas:** In August of 1970, Bolles got a call from Congressman Sam Steiger.

**Richard Ruelas:** Steiger asked to meet him in the parking lot of a motel in Globe, a little town in eastern Arizona. Bolles drove up there with an aide from Steiger's office. In the parking lot, Bolles went into a camper-like vehicle that Steiger used on the campaign trail.

**Richard Ruelas:** Inside, Steiger introduced him to a man named George Johnson. Johnson had a confession to make. Johnson said he was hired by the Funk family to dig up dirt on Bolles. That they were doing this because they thought there was some conspiracy against them. That maybe Bolles was being paid to write those stories that made the Funks look bad. And – Johnson said – as part of his plan to prove the conspiracy, he had gained access to his bank records. He had obtained a list of phone calls made from Bolles's home phone. He had also hired someone to tap into Bolles's home phone and Johnson had listened to some calls.  
\*end music\*

**Richard Ruelas:** We don't have a tape of that initial meeting.



But Bolles would later reveal his frustrations in conversations with the FBI and other law enforcement officials. Here he is talking about it with a racing commissioner whose phone was also supposedly tapped.

MR. GOODMAN: And you can imagine my -- how I feel about it.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah. Well, I feel the same way.

MR. GOODMAN: And --

MR. BOLLES: 'Cause I'm sure, you know, I'm in the same boat.

MR. GOODMAN: No, I did not.

MR. BOLLES: Oh, absolutely. And a lot of other people.

MR. GOODMAN: Did they put a tap on you?

MR. BOLLES: Yeah.

MR. GOODMAN: These guys -- well, you know.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah.

MR. GOODMAN: I mean, they're just something else.

And here's Bolles speaking with someone from the FBI:

**Bolles:** As I told ya, the thing that we're most interested in is finding out where the hell the physical evidence of those wiretaps is. We just really ... I'm just afraid that the words gonna get out and those damn things are going to disappear.

**Richard Ruelas:** Bolles wanted those tapes. Because those tapes would solve the mystery he had on his hands. He had to figure out if George Johnson was telling the truth. Were people so desperate to smear him that they would take the radical step of tapping his phones? And pawing through his bank accounts? And, if so, who was responsible? And how could he set this right? How could he make them pay?

Next time on Rediscovering Don Bolles, a murdered journalist ...

**RICHARD RUELAS:** Dom Frasca had started at the paper just a few months before. He was from the New York / New Jersey area. As if his voice didn't give that away.

**RICHARD RUELAS:** And now, at the Arizona Republic, he had been assigned to work alongside Bolles. Bolles had spent months investigating how organized crime was entering Arizona. Frasca had written a book on mafia figures. He seemed a natural reporting partner for Bolles on that organized crime project.

**RICHARD RUELAS:** Johnson told the tale of the wiretaps again. Bolles and Frasca asked questions, trying to suss out whether it was true. Each man heard something that made him think it was.

**Richard Ruelas:** Rediscovering: Don Bolles, a murdered journalist was reported and voiced by me, Richard Ruelas. Taylor Seely is the lead producer. Katie O'Connell is the executive

producer. Script supervision came from news editor Shaun McKinnon and news director Josh Susong. Web design for this project came from John Paul McDonnall. Social media was lead by Danielle Woodward with help from Grace Palmieri. Kim Bui provided research assistance for this podcast. John Adams is our senior director for storytelling and innovation. Greg Burton is our executive editor. This episode included audio segments from the Arizona Memories of the 1970s DVD by Arizona PBS. It also included archival audio from CBS News and KTVK Channel 3.