

Don Bolles: Episode 2

“Wiretaps and wild allegations”

Richard Ruelas: Previously on Rediscovering Don Bolles, a murdered journalist ...

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.

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: 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 that had ties to organized crime.

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 obtained a list of phone calls made from Bolles's home phone. He had also tapped into Bolles's home phone and listened to some calls. And he had gained access to his bank records.

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.

theme music fades in

Richard Ruelas: Don Bolles had a story to report out. One that had him at the center. Bolles had to figure out whether what George Johnson told him was true. That the subjects of his stories were investigating him.

Johnson said he had gone through Bolles's telephone records. He had hired someone to tap Bolles's phone and listened to conversations. And he looked through Bolles's bank accounts. Bolles was upset when he heard this news. As anyone would be. But Bolles was also a reporter. He had learned to treat information skeptically. That part of him kicked in. The part of him that wanted to find out if this was true.

Richard Ruelas: I'm Richard Ruelas and this is Rediscovering: Don Bolles, a murdered journalist.

<music fades out>

Richard Ruelas: Don Bolles had never met George Johnson until that day in the motel parking lot. The day Johnson told Bolles these wild allegations. Johnson said he had tapped Bolles's phone. And that he had gone through his bank records.

And that he had been ordered to do so by the people who operated the greyhound racing track in Phoenix. The Funk family. And a corporation called Emprise.

Bolles wanted to look into the allegations. He also wanted to find out about George Johnson -- the man who had all this information.

We also wanted to talk to George Johnson about this story. Johnson still lives in the Phoenix area. He's still a businessman here. But he refused our request to revisit this story.

George Johnson came from a family of Greek immigrants. His father moved to Phoenix after a stint in the Army during World War One, and he had the last name Antonopoulos. He changed it to Johnson in the 40s. The family was in the produce business. <raking sfx> They farmed land in Mexico, and built a produce warehouse south of downtown Phoenix, near where the Phoenix Suns arena now stands.

Johnson got out of the produce business. He moved into real estate. He worked for a while as the building manager for Circle K convenience stores.

He also developed a reputation. And, among some people, not a great one.

Here's Don Bolles talking to Ralph Watkins, a Buckeye businessman and sometime political candidate.

MR. WATKINS: Okay. But another thing, Don, off the record.

MR. BOLLES: Okay.

MR. WATKINS: George was in the building business, and I have known him for a long time, and I knew his knew his -- well, this is off the record ?

MR. BOLLES: Yes.

MR. WATKINS: My brother and I have been scared of him for a long time. And we are scared of the people he's connected with.

RICHARD RUELAS: In that clip, you heard the source tell something to Bolles off the record. That's a promise reporters make with sources to not use the information. But some of the tapes

you're hearing were made public as part of a court case. A judge effectively forced the newspaper to break its promise. That's why we feel we can share them.

RICHARD RUELAS: George Johnson wasn't in the pages of the Republic very much. An editor remembered that George Johnson came into the newspaper in the 50s to complain. He didn't like the way the paper covered an accident involving his 16-year-old brother.

That brother would make the newspaper again when he was killed. Police called it a classic gangland style murder. That he was killed for being a rat.-George Johnson's brother paid the price for going up against powerful people. There was a powerful person in George Johnson's life. His name was Bradley Funk.

BRAD FUNK: George and I -- were boyhood pals.

RICHARD RUELAS: That's the voice of Brad Funk. His family ran the dog and horse tracks in town. They ran them with a New York company called Emprise.

That name -- Emprise -- came from a mashup of the words enterprise and empire.

Bradley Funk and George Johnson went to grade school together. And kept in touch as adults. So it seemed natural for Funk to turn to Johnson when he felt he was under attack.

And Bradley Funk began to feel his dog tracks were under attack.

There was a lot to protect. The Funk family made a lot of money at the dog track.

At the time, there were no tribal casinos, no state lottery. The tracks were the only legal form of gambling. *music*

Phoenix Greyhound Park was a place to be, an entertainment option in the city. Word was it had a pretty good steak.

Here's what Bill Meek remembered of it.

Bill Meek: After we finished we built a new track. They've got a pretty good pretty good sized handle out there after that most days. But on the other hand there wasn't much else.

Richard: But the Funks seemed frustrated that they couldn't get the newspapers to cover the dog racing industry.

There were hardly any news stories about the industry. Nothing about the Funks renovating the Phoenix greyhound park. Nothing about the opening of new parks in other parts of Arizona.

Other than racing results, it was like the industry didn't exist.

The publisher of the Republic, Eugene Pulliam, didn't like the sport. Neither did his wife.

The Funk family -- seemingly frustrated by the lack of newspaper coverage -- took to buying ads in the paper that were designed to look like sports columns. For them, it seemed the only way to share news about dog racing.

Finally, in 1969, there were stories about dog racing. The ones written by Bolles. And they did not paint a pretty picture.

Bolles stories reported that Emprise was involved in organized crime. And, by implication, that the Funks were involved in organized crime. And that the dog tracks were possibly mob enterprises.

Brad Funk thought that the stories were not just about journalism. He saw a conspiracy. The newspaper was out to get him.

Here's Brad Funk speaking with Bolles, complaining about the stories Bolles had written about him.

MR. FUNK: Don, you are getting into an area there that, you know, that -- we've been through this one before. There's no point in kidding each other.

MR. BOLLES: Well, I'm asking if you recall those conversations.

MR. FUNK: I can't -- I'm not going to sit here and knowing full well the way you might write something up and say anything.

RICHARD RUELAS: Besides Bolles, Funk thought a Congressman -- Sam Steiger -- was also part of the conspiracy.

Steiger had taken Bolles's information and run with it. He used his office to find out more.

And Steiger started publicly linking Emprise to the mob. A headline on a Bolles story from February 1970 made it plain: Steiger links Emprise with Cosa Nostra.

RICHARD RUELAS: This is James Trow, the business manager for the Funks who you heard from in the previous episode.

James Trow: It was clear from virtually from the beginning that don bolles and sam steiger and other people who I'm not familiar with were involved with trying to get the Funks and put the tracks out of business.

RICHARD RUELAS: The Funks thought that maybe they were working together to plant unflattering stories in the paper. Maybe they were getting paid to do so. Maybe by gambling

types from Las Vegas who wanted the Funks out of Arizona so they could move in. This was the thought, at least.

RICHARD RUELAS: Funk needed proof of that conspiracy. To get it, he turned to Johnson.

Brad Funk: George Johnson?

Brad Funk: George was -- was doing a little free-lance work for me, yes.

RICHARD RUELAS: It's not entirely clear why Funk turned to Johnson. Johnson wasn't a private investigator. But he was a childhood friend. And one who had connections. And maybe someone who wasn't above bending a few rules.

Johnson knew the guy who ran against Steiger in the last election. Maybe he had information. He could dig into records on Steiger. Maybe find something.

Johnson also had connections at the phone company and the bank. Maybe they could help..

Johnson got the job. The Funks paid him regularly. He was also supposed to give receipts for expenses.

Johnson got to work. And seemingly did a great job. He talked to his connection at Arizona Bank to get him information on Bolles's bank account. How much money went in and how much money went out.

Johnson eventually explained the process to Bolles.

MR. JOHNSON Of course, we were looking for that abnormal activity.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah. Of which there was none.

MR. JOHNSON: Yeah. And there was a \$1,500, there was --

MR. BOLLES: That was my bonus.

MR. BOLLES: Well, I'll be damned. I guess things what do they call it, the -- in 1984 where Big Brother watches you?

RICHARD RUELAS: Johnson's connection at the phone company worked on getting him a list of all calls made from Bolles's home telephone.

MR. BOLLES: Well, wait a minute. O'Neil got the list from the telephone company, okay. gave it to Colette? And he

MR. JOHNSON: No, he gave it to me.

RICHARD RUELAS: If Bolles were being paid by Vegas wiseguys to write the stories about the Funks, the cash would show up in his bank account. And if Bolles were conspiring with Steiger and others, the call logs would show a lot of communication.

Then – according to Johnson’s telling – he got a phone call. <phone ring sfx> The guy was a little mysterious. He told Johnson that they had a mutual friend who suggested they talk. He also told Johnson that he knew how to tap telephones. And that was something Johnson might need. Again, this is Johnson’s version of the story. The Funks denied doing anything that suggested Johnson wiretap anybody.

Here’s Brad Funk himself saying that.

Mr Funk: As far as I know there was never any wiretapping.

RICHARD RUELAS: According to Johnson, he paid that stranger to put taps on the phones of several people. The head of the racing commission. A county supervisor. A member of Rep. Steiger’s staff. Steiger himself. And the home of Don Bolles.

After a while, Johnson said he realized that there was no conspiracy against the Funks.

Nothing in the bank records, phone records or wiretaps suggested any payments from Vegas types. Nothing suggested anything but a reporter and Congressman trying to do their jobs. Johnson realized that the Funks weren’t out to prove a conspiracy. They just wanted any dirt he could dig up. This wasn’t about righting a wrong. To Johnson, this was about the Funks and Emprise taking down some good people.

Johnson: And that was the big fight I had with those bastards was that I told them that the only thing we’re going to get was if there’s a conspiracy. And so, I’d listened to stuff and well at that time, Jesus Christ, we were going nine million different ways. And I just let a lot of that stuff go in one ear and out the other ‘cause I was looking for the one thing.

RICHARD RUELAS: He was looking for a conspiracy. He didn’t find it. He didn’t want to be a part of it anymore. And told that to the Funks.

And then he decided to make a radical move: He would switch sides. He would tell Steiger and Bolles what the Funks were up to. He would help them go after the Funks.

Johnson would later on talk about this time in a phone call with Bolles. Again, he is saying this off the record. But it became evidence in a court trial. So we’re using it.

MR. JOHNSON: My big fight with them was that I wanted assurances, and at that point I wanted it in writing, that, you know, we were looking into people’s lives.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah.

MR. JOHNSON: And by that time I realized that because, you know, when we first got into it -- and I’m not trying to whitewash myself, now.

MR. BOLLES: Mm-hum.

MR. JOHNSON: But, you know, I really thought Sam Steiger was the worst guy in the world and this conspiracy was going.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah, I know. They tell a convincing story.

MR. JOHNSON: So I figured, why, you know, this is wrong, but at least we're going to catch the bad guy out of it, you know.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah.

MR. JOHNSON: Well, when I got to the bottom of it, all we had was a lot of juicy political stuff, and they could have killed him with it.

RICHARD RUELAS: So Johnson told what he knew to Steiger.

And Steiger arranged for Bolles to find out. At that meeting in the motel parking lot in Globe.

The day after that Globe meeting, Johnson agreed to meet again with Bolles. This time, they met at a cocktail lounge in Phoenix. And Bolles wasn't alone. He brought along another reporter. His name was Dom Frasca.

Dom, short for Dominic.

Operator: And who's calling?

Frasca: It's Mr. Dom Frasca from Phoenix, Arizona.

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. Frasca was new to Arizona and still trying to make sense of its politics.

Frasca: You know, you know I've been out here for about a year, and I've begun wondering: Is Arizona part of the United States? It's God Damn unbelievable. I've never seen anything like it.

RICHARD RUELAS: And it's probably fair to say, he didn't have the highest opinion of Arizonans.

Frasca: You would not believe what they perpetrate out here. I mean just unbelievable. They think people, they just lie and disguise the facts with the people and uh a lot of people living in arizona are not all that sophisticated.

RICHARD RUELAS: But he also was a seasoned investigative reporter who worked for the Journal American in New York until it closed.

Frasca: I was with the old Journal American for 14 years in New York, and a number of other papers back east. I couldn't believe the uh corruption in government here and yet no one does a damn thing about it!

RICHARD RUELAS: After that paper closed, Frasca sent his resumes out to several papers around the country. He had his wife visited Phoenix and really liked it. And the newspaper liked him.

After Frasca started at the Arizona Republic, he was assigned to work alongside Bolles. Bolles had spent months investigating how organized crime was infiltrating Arizona. Frasca had written a book on mafia figures. He seemed a natural reporting partner for Bolles on that organized crime project.

At times, it seemed there was a bit of a good cop / bad cop routine with Bolles and Frasca. Bolles could play the heavy, accusing people of having mafia ties because they were seen meeting with them or having a meal.

Frasca was more understanding. He would sympathize with the people they were interviewing, saying that he understood that a conversation or meeting or a hello didn't automatically make someone suspect.

Here's Bolles and Frasca talking with the owner of a chain of coffee shops called Hobo Joe's.

Bolles asks the owner about reports he's been seen with a noted mob figure named Pete Licavoli. The coffee shop owner admits they are childhood friends who both happened to move to Arizona. He is saying he doesn't see anything wrong with saying hello to his friend.

Applegate: Just because I know that man doesn't mean I'm involved. What am I going to do? Ignore him? What would you do?

Bolles: yes

Applegate: You would ignore him? When you all of a sudden bump into him here or bump into him there? You turn around and walk away. You know better than that

Bolles: The only question is it creates the problem that we're talking about here

Applegate: That's ridiculous. You can write about a lot of people if you want to write about them. Knowing Opel in that category

Frasca: I agree with Herb on that

Applegate: Jesus Christ. You can't bury me for that

Bolles: We're not intending on burying you

Applegate: I don't go out to nightclubs with him and get drunk. He doesn't drink anyhow

Bolles: The FBI information on your meeting with him... and that's why we're here...

Applegate: They tailed him. I'm sure. What am I going to do see him say hello to him and then turn around and walk away?

Frasca: There was a report too herb and I couldn't agree more you're a friend of the man don't mean no harm

Applegate: Are you kidding I can't do that

Frasca: No, I agree

RICHARD RUELAS: It's not clear that this was worked out in advance. Or just the way the two men felt. Either way, that was the tenor of some of their interviews. And, Bolles, in at least one conversation with a reader, seemed tickled that he was working on the mafia series with an Italian man.

Don Bolles: Hello Joe, Don Bolles here.

Joe Capalby: Don, what the hell ever happened to you?!

Don Bolles: Well I'm still in one piece!

Joe Capalby: I bet you were anti-Italian or something like that.

Don Bolles: No sir, why would that... Why would I be anti-Italian?

Joe Capalby: Well I haven't seen you around or anything else, I haven't read anything. You know, and wondering if you were on a long trip or something.

Don Bolles: No, as a matter of fact, I'm working with an Italian, Dom Frasca.

Joe Capalby: You lucky son of a gun!

Don Bolles: Yeah! How lucky can you get..

Joe Capalby: No kidding.

RICHARD RUELAS: Frasca had his own style of reporting. He would, for example, sometimes pretend to be someone else.

Frasca: Hello

Caller: Is this Mr. Russo?

Frasca: Oh, yes, speaking, yes.

RICHARD RUELAS: He would also sometimes have his sources make phone calls on his behalf. Like, let's say there was a whistleblower saying that so-and-so was doing something bad. Frasca would have that whistleblower call so-and-so and get them to talk about the bad stuff they were doing. That way Frasca would have a recorded phone call of so-and-so admitting they were doing bad stuff.

Toma: You remember the Thatcher deal?

Mancini: No I don't quite remember

Toma: You remember when Jimmy and (marlin?) and you and I talked? About the health spa?

Mancini: Yes, yes

Frasca: The conversation you just heard was recorded June 12....

RICHARD RUELAS: Oh, that's another technique Frasca used. He recorded his phone calls. It was something Frasca noticed wasn't being done at the Republic when he got there. Soon, reporters started doing it. Including Bolles.

So that's Frasca, Bolles's new reporting buddy.

Neither Frasca nor Bolles taped their meeting with Johnson. Or, if they did, it wasn't among the recordings we found in the filing cabinet. But we know how it went.

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. For Bolles, it was Johnson describing a phone call he listened to. It was one Bolles had with a racing commissioner in Alabama. It was a call Bolles made from his home phone. But he didn't dial directly. This was 1970. Long distance was expensive.

To make the call, Bolles dialed the Republic switchboard.

Then, the operator patched him through. There would have been no record of the call in Bolles's phone bill. The only way Johnson could have known about it is if he were somehow listening in.

Here's Don Bolles telling a friend about it:

Bolles: This is very interesting because this is the first real evidence that I've had of a deep (inaudible) knowing a detailed conversation. The reason I was convinced that uh Johnson was telling a true story earlier was that he said that I had had a conversation with a former racing commissioner in Arkansas and he didn't tell me much and that's all that he could remember of it. Well, I knew that I placed that call through the R&G switchboard so that there was no possibility that it could have shown on a bill, which they somehow intercepted. I said it had to be a tap.

RICHARD RUELAS: Johnson also mentioned something that made Frasca believe the wiretaps actually happened. Johnson heard something about a 20 thousand dollar payoff to a county official named Stark. That detail gelled with a story Frasca was working on. It was a story about the county buying new voting machines. Frasca had a tip that someone paid a county official 20 thousand dollars. Here's Frasca, talking to a U.S. attorney about the matter...

MR. FRASCA: But the allegation here, according to Johnson, was that he also had installed a tap on Stark's phone, and one of the conversations that he claims was picked up on the wire tap was a \$20,000 payoff to Stark. Are you with me?

RICHARD RUELAS: But here's the thing. Frasca hadn't reported on any of that. Yet, here was Johnson mentioning the same figure. The reporter in him told him to be wary, but it was hard not to believe it.

MR. FRASCA: See. Now, Johnson repeated this conversation. It's something he pulled out of left field as a case from California to Arizona. And it made me -- you see, I was very apprehensive of this man at first and figured, aw, maybe it's some kind of political stunt.

MR. MARINAS: Mm-hum.

MR. FRASCA: But he went into great detail about this Stark matter, and besides, you know, the Bolles matter and Steiger.

MR. MARINAS: Mm-hum.

MR. FRASCA: And it made me wonder, you know, well, maybe he does know what he's talking about.

RICHARD RUELAS: But there were also problems with the story. First, Johnson did not have tapes of the wiretapped conversations. And the reason he didn't have them was somewhat convoluted. He said he had kept the tapes at his office at the greyhound park. But then one day Funk told him to take them home and work on them there. And on that day -- a day Funk knew that tapes were at Johnson's apartment -- his apartment was burglarized. And the tapes were stolen. Johnson figured the tapes were in Funk's possession. But he couldn't prove it.

MR. JOHNSON: Yeah. But, I know that, you know, they got some material in their possession.

MR. BOLLES: Mm-hum. Who does?

MR. JOHNSON: I -- huh?

MR. BOLLES: Who does?

MR. JOHNSON: Well, the Funks and Lewis, Roca.

MR. BOLLES: Oh. Mm-hum.

MR. JOHNSON: And I'm sure that they are the ones that broke in my apartment.

RICHARD RUELAS: And Johnson wouldn't name the person who did the wiretapping. That mysterious stranger who had suggested that he had skills Johnson might need.

Johnson said he wanted to first strike a deal with prosecutors. He knew that what he had done was very likely illegal. And he didn't want to face charges. He would trade information if he could get that promise.

At this point, Bolles and Frasca weren't looking to do a newspaper story about all this. They were trying to get officials involved. They wanted Johnson to cooperate with law enforcement. To tell his story to them.

Here's how Bolles explained it, talking to a racing commissioner who also reportedly had his phone tapped.

MR. BOLLES: Well, we have -- there are certain steps that we have to follow. We don't want to just rush into print with a story which is going to blow the case out of the water.

MR. GOODMAN: Oh , no.

MR. BOLLES: So we are cooperating fully with the various people. So, you know, we'll -- we'll go with it when it's -- it's ready. That's about all I can tell you.

RICHARD RUELAS: Frasca and Bolles told Johnson they would work to get him an immunity deal. They also started looking into his background and his story. They were doing what they called "spade work" on Johnson.

Bolles: We've been doing some spade work on our own, running down telephone numbers for associates who appear on his working papers, of which you have the originals and we have copies. That's kind of interesting. One guy checks out to be a house ... what was the (muffled) ... window washer in Cave Creek. And I'm sure that's one of the ways they must've gotten into various places that they were trying to drag stuff out of.

RICHARD RUELAS: Bolles talked with the FBI agent about those records.

MR. BOLLES: Actually I formerly had an account at the Pioneer Bank, but my account is now located in the Arizona Bank.

MR. BOLLES: Dom Frasca says -- says they were very disappointed to find out it wasn't in the four figures. It's not even in two figures. (laughs)

RICHARD RUELAS: At one point, Frasca suggested to an FBI agent that he pose as a newspaper editor and interview Johnson alongside the reporters.

Frasca: Well see, there is one suggestion, I mentioned it to Don. Now he was uh, last night he was not at all reluctant to speak with me. And he never met me before. And here he poured out this whole story. Now, my thinking -- and I don't know what the legal restrictions are on your people -- but I would that anyone of your agents could come along as one of our editors.

RICHARD RUELAS: But the FBI promptly refused that invitation.

Reger: No, we couldn't do that.

Frasca: Right.

Reger: We got a man here that might be party to a crime and he has to be advised of his rights before we could even talk to him.

Frasca: Right, right, I see.

Reger: No, that would be impossible. We couldn't do that.

Frasca: Alright, let me give you back to Don Bolles, he has that phone number. Nice speaking to you.

Reger: Good talking to you.

RICHARD RUELAS: Bolles was frustrated. He told one lawmaker that he was trying to stay calm, but well... here he is in his own words.

MR. BOLLES: I'm just really ready to climb the wall about it.

RICHARD RUELAS: In a talk with the FBI, Bolles admitted to being in a unique position. He wasn't so much a reporter here as he was trying to solve a crime. One in which he was the victim.

MR. BOLLES: We are just -- you know, we are in a kind of different position

MR. MARINAS: Oh, yeah.

MR. BOLLES: -- on this one. We're not a news-gathering agency. We're wanting to cooperate -

MR. MARINAS: Of course.

MR. BOLLES: in the discovery of a felony, and so anything that we can do that helps --

RICHARD RUELAS: The next day, Frasca called Johnson at his home. And over the course of about a half hour, tried to convince Johnson to cough up the name of the wiretapper

Frasca: The only missing ingredient here to negotiate, to try to do something worthy and constructive, is the name of the wire tapper.

MR. JOHNSON: Dom, you know, I -- I told Sam, and I told you people, and, you know, that was the one thing ...

RICHARD RUELAS: During the call, Frasca lied to Johnson. He told him that he was traveling to Washington D.C. and would meet with high ranking Justice Department officials. Maybe he could work on an immunity deal for Johnson. It would help if Johnson gave him the name of the wiretapper. But Johnson would still not give Frasca the name. No matter how often Frasca persisted.

FRASCA: But it still, you know, goes without saying, that I think you are making a mistake by at least not telling one of us, be it me or Bolles.

MR. JOHNSON: Dom.

MR. FRASCA: Yeah.

MR. JOHNSON: Respect me on this one point, please.

MR. FRASCA: All right.

RICHARD RUELAS: Johnson didn't like being pushed. And he complained about the call to Congressman Steiger. Steiger, in turn, called Bolles. He told him to keep Frasca away from Johnson. In his own colorful way.

STEIGER: Just keep that son of a gun out of sight, that's all I can

BOLLES: Yeah. Okay.

STEIGER: All right.

BOLLES: Bye.

STEIGER: Thank you.

RICHARD RUELAS: Johnson would eventually give up the name of the wiretapper. But doing so wouldn't help his credibility. The man Johnson named could not vouch for Johnson's story. Because he was dead.

The man Johnson said he hired to do the wiretapping was the head of a Phoenix printing company.

And in August 1970, around the time that Johnson decided to stop working for the Funks. Around the time he decided to go to Steiger. Around the time he claimed the tapes he had in his apartment were stolen. Around that time -- the supposed wiretapper died.

He was with his wife and another couple in a private plane. They were heading back from Baja California and stopped in Nogales briefly to show their paperwork to immigration officers. They were only on the ground for a few minutes. Then they took off again.

Witnesses said the plane appeared to quickly lose power after takeoff. It crashed into a grove of trees. Newspaper stories from the time don't show that there was much of an investigation into how the plane crash happened.

Johnson never told the name of the wiretapper directly to Bolles. Bolles found out eventually from other sources.

And maybe it's a good thing Johnson didn't tell Bolles the name of the wiretapper. And how he died.

Bolles already had enough to deal with.

He was trying to prove that he was wronged. That people he wrote about were rooting around in his personal life for dirt. And now his reporting partner had gone ahead and upset the one man who held all the information.

RICHARD RUELAS: Sometime in early September, the editors at the Republic made a decision. It was the first of many that would prove fateful.

They decided that the allegations of wiretapping deserved public airing. This was going to be a newspaper story.

Bolles couldn't write it. He was part of it. So, editors assigned it to Frasca. He started making calls. Official ones as a reporter. Not the informal ones he was making before alongside Bolles. And that meant he wasn't getting nearly as much information.

He called the F-B-I

FRASCA: My managing editor, Ed Murray, asked that I, you know, call you and find out, you know, what direction, if any, this matter involving the allegation by George Johnson has taken in regard to the wire tapping of some phones.

MR. MARINAS: Mm-hum. Dom, I'm going to have to refer you over to the u. S. Attorney's office

MR. FRASCA: All right.

Richard: He called the U-S Attorney

Burke: Hello?

Frasca: Hi, Mr. Burke.

Burke: Yes?

Frasca: Dom Frasca at the Arizona Republic.

(at the same time): How are you?

Frasca: Fine, thank you. Now look, my editors asked me to call you. If you can give us officially or unofficially some sense of direction on this matter involving the allegations made by George Johnson in regard to a possible wiretaps ...

Burke: No can talk.

(both laugh)

RICHARD RUELAS: Frasca also called the attorney for Emprise -- the racing company that Johnson said wanted Bolles and Steiger investigated. The Emprise attorney warned Frasca that Johnson was untrustworthy.

Cheifetz: Yeah. Look before you take up my time why don't you look into George Johnson? I have memos on this man because some of the things the man told us about you or your paper were so outlandish you know and about information he claims he had was so irresponsible that we carefully documented it and refused to talk to him or deal with him.

Dom Frasca: Let me see if I understand you because actually I would like more enlightenment on that point.

Cheifetz: Yeah I'm just telling you be careful in dealing with this man. I mean that's my judgment.

RICHARD RUELAS: Frasca also called a racing commissioner whose phone had been tapped. That commissioner was confused. He had already told Bolles what he knew. He didn't understand why another reporter was calling him and asking him about it.

Frasca: Let me just clarify that for you don bolles, who I can have call you. I was here the day he called you. The status in regard to the newspaper's view of this matter has changed they're looking at it now as a news story in the light of did or did it not happen is there any truthfulness to the allegation or is it false; we don't know

Goodman: Nor do I

RICHARD RUELAS: Finally, Frasca called Funk. He was the man Johnson said set up the whole investigation. Johnson said that Funk supposedly ordered the wiretaps. Which is what Frasca told Funk.

MR. FRASCA: And he flatly states that he did wire tapping. And he has been interrogated by an investigator for the County Attorney's office and also by the FBI.

MR. FUNK: Mm-hum.

MR. FRASCA: And he's also been interviewed by two of our reporters.

MR. FUNK: Mm-hum.

MR. FRASCA: And so it seems to be a rather, you know, serious charge. I was wondering in view of that, you know, we thought we -- in the spirit of fair play we should call you.

MR. FUNK: Well, I think you -- I would very seriously caution you to tell -- to be a little skeptical of Mr. Johnson, because he turned out to me -- See, George and I went -- were boyhood pals.

MR. FRASCA: Mm-hum.

MR. FUNK: And it turned out that Mr. Johnson seems to be rather than an old friend, a very treacherous person, and I would be very careful of anything in any business dealings or faith you put in anything he says. I have got to, you know, in all honesty advise you of that, because I put a lot of faith and confidence in the man and it turned out that he is a -- works both sides of the street. So what he has to say about wiretapping something, that's -- that's what he has to say. We, of course, have our own ideas about what's going on, so I don't have anything to say, Dom, in that regard

MR. FRASCA: Right.

RICHARD RUELAS: Frasca let Funk know that he was only investigating. He still wasn't sure whether the paper would print the story.

FRASCA: I'm only, you know, assigned to the story. It's not my decision as to whether they go with it or not.

RICHARD RUELAS: That choice would lie with the editors. And they made a preliminary plan. Frasca's story about the possible wiretaps would run on the front page on a Sunday -- the day the newspaper had its highest readership. Then Bolles would be ready with a follow up. His

story would run Monday. It would deal with tapes Johnson had that showed possible corruption in the racing commission.

RICHARD RUELAS: For that story, Bolles called Brad Funk himself. He wasn't calling to discuss how he personally was wiretapped. And who got into his bank account. But it came up.

BOLLES: Number one, I want to get some comment from you as to the validity of these tape recordings.

MR. FUNK: Well, Don, I don't -- I don't know. I guess you are going to start in again like you did last year, going to paint us black again. don't --

MR. BOLLES: Absolutely not trying to paint you black. But I tell you very frankly that I am extremely upset about this wire tapping of my telephone, and I intend to find out who did it, why, and file suit against the persons responsible.

MR. FUNK: If you -- do you have a reason to believe that your telephone was tapped?

MR. BOLLES: I certainly do.

RICHARD RUELAS: You can hear Bolles restraining himself there. He believes his phone was tapped. And he was on the phone with the person he thought ordered it.

Days before the stories were set to publish, there was a problem. Frasca didn't think the information was solid enough to go with. Too many unanswered questions.

The paper's managing editor called a meeting. It would be over lunch. At the restaurant atop the big glass Valley National Bank tower a block away from the Republic. Bolles would be there. So would Frasca. And the city editor, Tom Sanford. Each made their case.

For Bolles, the story was solid. It was coming from not only Johnson, but a Congressman.

Yes, Johnson had a rough past. Maybe some credibility issues. And - yes -- he hadn't produced any actual tapes of the wire taps. And, Bolles just sincerely believed Johnson was telling the truth. The man was risking his neck. He was turning the tables on his long time friend. All because he believed that Bolles was the victim of a dirty trick.

RICHARD RUELAS: For Frasca, the story was shaky. The whole story was based on Johnson's word. He had no recordings of the wiretapped conversations. He still hadn't named the wiretapper. He wasn't telling everything he knew to authorities.

Maybe Johnson was telling the truth. But Frasca said it wasn't solid enough to go with in the newspaper. Not yet.

At the end of the lunch, the managing editor said he was leaning towards going with the story. Frasca was told to write up a rough draft. Give it his best effort. They would look at the story and see if it was good enough to run.

Frasca did what he was told. He wrote up the story. And again told his editors about his doubts. How he didn't think it was good enough to print.

Meanwhile, Bolles started having doubts of his own. But not about the story. About his co-worker. He had heard whispers about Frasca's past and potential connections to the mafia. Bolles quietly raised these concerns with his city editor, Tom Sanford.

Bolles told him his suspicion. As far fetched as it may have seemed.

Maybe Frasca was part of the mob, too. Maybe, as one of Bolles's best friends on the staff, Paul Dean, speculated, Frasca was sent out by the mob to get hired at the Republic and inform on Bolles.

Bolles: I always thought it curious a big shot like him would want to work on a piddly paper in Phoenix. That was Paul Dean's suspicions right from the start. They sent that son of b*#^h out here. I know it.

RICHARD RUELAS: It was a wild allegation. But it was coming from the paper's star reporter. The city editor said he'd look into it.

Meanwhile, there was a decision to make. Would the paper go with this story? Would the editors ignore the fundamental concerns raised by the actual reporter on the story? The reporter with no axe to grind? The man winner who had taken a dispassionate look at the facts and decided the story wasn't there yet?

Or would the paper take the side of Bolles, who had an obvious bias? Who wanted to take revenge on those who he felt wronged him? And who now had this slightly paranoid theory that his reporting partner was a mob figure? Was the paper really going to take the side of Bolles here and print this story that had essentially only one source?

It would be up to editors to decide whether to trust Bolles intuition. Deadline was approaching.

Richard Ruelas: Next time on Rediscovering Don Bolles, a murdered journalist ...

Richard Ruelas: Bolles was still working to do his job: exposing corruption in the racing industry. That story showed his dedication to it. But he was also shaken about what happened to him personally while doing so.

Cavanaugh: And I'm very concerned that you are questioning Mr. Nikolai for the purpose of putting information into this article, "The Menace Within." And it has come to my attention, Mr. Bolles, that you are less than completely objective about this matter of mafia, Cosa Nostra. And

I'm afraid that we have reason to question your willingness or ability to be completely fair, impartial honest men writing with integrity.

Rademacher: And the thing that's got me is one day I drove by the newspaper you had your car parked across the street on the Second Ave, uh Second Street. And you were looking at your tires and looking around your car and just the way you're looking at it. You know I had been in there sometime before that. I know you're spooked.

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.