Wheeler's automobile after the murder.

Chapter 1

Skin Against Stone

Of his kind, Roger Wheeler was not, perhaps the prototype but the classic form: an aggressive, hard-nosed, shrewd and tireless entrepreneur, with an instinct for making deals. He made them constantly; as other people are into yoga or cooking, Wheeler was into money. Like Gatsby, he was never quite still, oil, gas, real estate, computers, jai alai, refrigerators. The products were immaterial; it was the profit that counted. Getting and spending, his life was defined by numbers; annual revenue, interest rates, lines of credit, cash flows, personal worth. In ways not yet understood, Wheeler's death too – police believe – was ruled by numbers. Said a friend, who was not surprised by the murder, "He just stood up the wrong guy."[1]

The crime scene was unusual to say the least, this being the most exclusive country club in Oklahoma and one of the finest golf courses in the world. Wheeler's dark blue Cadillac sat, forlorn, next to a street lamp on the asphalt. The air pressure on the tires was low, but that mattered little to the detectives processing the scene.

Michael T. Huff, then the youngest-ever Tulsa homicide detective, was one of the officers who caught the case. Sgt. Roy Hunt, an old-style police sergeant who kept a bottle of whiskey in his desk, had said to Huff, "This is gonna change your life. Are you sure you wanna do this?" In the end, Huff said yes, but, according to his own account, his experience at that point was so limited that he only brought three things to the investigation: persistence, unrelenting energy, and purpose. He was willing to go anywhere, do anything, ask any question.

The first weeks of the Wheeler murder investigation were difficult, but things only got worse. Resources were not the issue. An eleven-man task force quickly was appointed to investigate the murder. Nor was there any mystery about what had happened. Wheeler had played golf on Wednesday for the past twenty years with other self-made men or the sons of such men. He had a regular foursome, consisting of Evans Dunn, who owned a drilling company; Robert Allen, who owned a charter bus company; and Thomas Gail Clark, board chairman of the local Beechcraft distributorship. Detective Huff and the other officers learned that their last game together on Wednesday, May 27, 1981, ended at about 4:30 p.m.

After a quick shower, Wheeler bounded down the hill and was getting into his car just west of the crowded swimming pool when the killer approached. He shot Wheeler once in the face at close range and dropped four unfired cartridges. A witness reported that Wheeler was found spread across the front seat of the Cadillac with his feet hanging outside. Flash burns later were found on his arm but not on his face, indicating that he was shot at close range. Witnesses reported that the shooter jumped into a late-model Pontiac or Ford, which some said had an Oklahoma tag with the initials ST or ZT followed by the number 510. At the time of his death, Wheeler had $996 and eight credit cards in the pocket of his blue pinstriped suit.

But what was the motive? No one was more shocked than the members of Wheeler's foursome. "Gail [Clark] and I were still in the locker," Evans Dunn reported. "Robert [Allen] had already gone and Roger had already left. All of a sudden a boy ran in and said someone had been shot." Dunn believed that Wheeler lived for about ten minutes after the shooting, but there was nothing to be done. Allen commented that "it was just like the pope, just like the president . . . Roger did a lot of good for people that he never talked about."[2]

The Roger Wheeler murder scene. (Courtesy Polaris Images)

Police didn't know which of the four Southern Hills exits the assailants took. One witness described the shooter as a Kenny Rogers "look-alike, but dark complexioned with hair over his ears and a full beard. His black hair is streaked with gray." Witnesses to Wheeler's murder remembered that as many as four men were in the car. The shooter was a white man about six feet tall weighing about 200 pounds. Wheeler's business associates didn't have a clue as to who might have killed him.

Telex general counsel Jack Bailey, who had worked with Wheeler for about sixteen years, said that the shooting "was a complete mystery." Bailey recalled, "He asked me to have some things ready for him at 4:30. I was waiting for him when I heard about it. I'd say shock is an understatement of my feelings."[3]

Wheeler's "employees and relatives thought he was a great man, but many businessmen he dealt with thought otherwise" related future sheriff Stanley Glanz, who described him as "a hard-nosed businessman."

Minutes before the shooting, Wheeler had been joking with the golf shop manager, George Matson. "He was very jovial," Matson said, "We were kidding about his golf scores." Among the eye witnesses was the young daughter of a member who watched the killing from the swimming pool diving board. Anonymous wags said that Wheeler enjoyed gambling, but according to one member of his foursome, their weekly golf games rarely involved more than a few dollars and scores weren't kept all that well.[4]

The homicide squad tried to find a local enemy or bad business deal that might have motivated someone to kill Wheeler, but almost from the start, Wheeler's connection to Miami-based World Jai Alai stood out as the leading prospect for solving the case. WJA Inc. was a privately owned corporation founded by Bostonians in the 1920s with operations in Connecticut and Florida. After seeing the sport in Havana, Cuba, the founders bankrolled the legislative campaign in Florida to legalize it.[5] WJA was the nation's largest such enterprise.

World Jai Alai: A Dangerous Game

The game jai alai resembles racket ball, but players use a long, funnel-like scoop to catch and then release a ball into play. The teams are professionals paid out of the betting proceeds, making the sport perpetually ripe for corruption. The ball, known as the *pelota,* is the hardest ball used in any sport and is roughly three-fourths the size of a baseball. The core is made from Brazilian rubber layered with nylon, on top of which two goat-skin covers are tightly pressed and stitched. Usually, the *pelota* has a shelf life of about twenty minutes, due to the high velocity at which jai alai is played. In addition, the ball travels with such dizzying speed that career-ending injuries are not unusual. At least four players have been killed playing jai alai since the 1920s.

The *Tulsa World* reported that Wheeler had acquired World Jai Alai in 1979 (a year later than the actual purchase) for $50 million. By 1981, World Jai Alai had revenues of $150 million and earnings of $12 million. Although Wheeler was reluctant to give interviews about his jai alai interests, in 1979, he wise-cracked to a *Miami Herald* reporter he brushed off, "I have enough golf buddies." He also related, "I feel comfortable surrounded with FBI types. We have six in the company here."[6] When briefly interviewed by a Miami reporter in 1980, he expressed fear that a lengthier interview might expose him to kidnapping and asked that the reporter note in his story that he employed several former FBI agents.[7]

Not long before he was killed, Wheeler had to appear before the Connecticut Gaming Division board because of concern about his potential partnership in a summer jai alai operation with an associate of prominent underworld figure Meyer Lansky, upon whom the *Godfather II* character Hyman Roth was based.[8] Although the Board approved Wheeler's application for a license, he quickly sold that interest to veteran jai alai careerist Stanley Berenson.[9]

While being vetted for a WJA fronton in Connecticut, Wheeler asked a state investigator, "Are these people I'm involved with, are they reputable people?" The investigator, Dan Twomey, was surprised by the question. "You didn't buy into a church, you bought into a gambling facility. If bad guys can buy into a facility, they will." Despite this, shortly before his death, Wheeler told someone that the New York Stock Exchange was a greater gamble than jai alai.[10]

Shortly after the murder, World Jai Alai officials John B. Callahan and H. Paul Rico, a retired FBI agent, became a person of interest to the Tulsa police. Rico became the most controversial suspect in the Wheeler murder. One wonders how Wheeler could not have known before he bought World Jai Alai that a 1978 Florida gaming official report described Callahan as "an associate of persons believed by the law enforcement community to be organized crime figures." Connecticut gaming officials were also suspicious. Still, this was 1978—the then-rudimentary Internet was a still an academic science project. The due diligence searches, now routinely conducted before corporate acquisitions, were rare and, when conducted at all, seldom more than perfunctory.

Even though the press had previously reported that Wheeler's jai alai interests were among the few in the country not controlled by organized crime interests, the *New York Times* reported eight days after the assassination that First National Bank of Boston, with whom both Telex Corporation and Wheeler himself had a relationship, engaged in "unusual arrangements and financing" for the Wheeler loan. Gaming regulators indicated that "the bank persuaded a reluctant Mr. Wheeler to buy the jai alai company because it was a real money making machine" but then structured the loan agreement to give itself a $1 million financial services fee, which Wheeler complained about but paid. Speculation ensued due to reports of Wheeler firing the three top WJA financial officers in 1980, despite the objections of former WJA president John Callahan.[11] Meanwhile, Wheeler's connection with First National Bank of Boston was both business and personal.

The commitment fee that Wheeler paid was split with Continental Illinois Bank of Chicago, which collapsed a year later for unrelated reasons having to do with Oklahoma oil investments. The loan also restricted Wheeler's flexibility, but he later managed to modify some of the restrictions. Wheeler was, according to the *Times,* caught between "the unorthodox finances of gambling [operations] and the vexing intrusions of FNBB."[12]

David McKown replaced Tom H. Lee, the original WJA account manager who handled the first WJA loan in 1973, at First National Bank of Boston. In 1976, WJA discussed a potential buyout with "two organized crime connected suitors," but the negotiations went nowhere.

As early as 1976, McKown approached Wheeler, who had been considering purchase of the Shenandoah Corporation, which owned two West Virginia racetracks. McKown, vice president of the FNBB energy division, began a lending relationship with Telex in 1971 and managed some of Wheeler's personal energy investments. Wheeler later testified that he purchased WJA despite his misgivings because of McKown's "ecstatic" view of WJA as a "real money making machine." McKown capped the deal by throwing in representation from FNBB legal counsel.

When the deal closed, Wheeler's WJA Realty bought Hartford Jai Alai and its parent WJA of Tampa. WJA Realty now owned four frontons in Florida and Connecticut operations at Bridgeport, Hartford, and Milford.

Three unusual restrictions were attached to the $33 million First National Bank line of credit, which enabled Wheeler's Oklahoma-based WJA Realty to close the deal. First, Wheeler had to keep Richard P. Donovan, the incumbent World Jai Alai president. Second, as a practical matter, Donovan could only be replaced by John B. Callahan, a 275-pound Yale graduate and CPA connected to organized crime.[13] Despite appearances, there is no evidence that the First National Bank of Boston knew then of the Callahan-Winter Hill gang relationship.[14] Third, FNBB loan documents prevented Wheeler from changing the nature of the business or any equity distribution. Thus, the *New York Times* theorized, Wheeler received significant tax sheltering opportunities from the deal, but little else.[15]

Florida, That Sunny Place for Shady People[16]

As time went on, more details about the private World Jai Alai emerged. In December 1974, a faction of the WJA board that wanted to expand operations had forced Pres. J. Stanley "Buddy" Berenson out of office and hired John B. Callahan to replace him. By early 1976, Callahan had applied to Connecticut authorities for permission to construct a fronton in Hartford.

When WJA applied for a Connecticut license in 1976, Gov. Ella Grasso was hardly enamored of the idea. She ordered a state prosecutor with experience investigating corrupt practices and a state police detective to meet with Callahan. Callahan unexpectedly walked out halfway through the meeting, claiming he had to catch a "shuttle back to Miami." The detective easily discovered that there was no such shuttle.

Instead, Callahan bee-lined to Boston, where he met Winter Hill associate Jimmy Martorano (Johnny Martorano's brother), and two wise-guy hangers-on at the Playboy Club. Within a few months, Connecticut law enforcement had conducted enough surveillance at the Playboy Club and Chandler's, the South End restaurant owned by Howie Winter, to disqualify Callahan as the president of WJA for Connecticut licensing purposes due to his association with underworld figures.

At the public hearing, H. Paul Rico, the World Jai Alai security chief and retired FBI agent, appeared in Callahan's stead to report that Callahan had resigned from WJA to "pursue other interests." Later, some suspected that sources within the Boston police department had alerted Callahan.[17] This presented Alan Trustman, the then-leader of the WJA board of directors, with a dilemma. Trustman was a highly successful practicing attorney who wrote movie scripts in his spare time—but this was not play acting, and Trustman had to find new talent, and quick, or face the prospect of losing the Hartford fronton. H. Paul Rico stepped into help.

The first candidate Rico found was Jack B. Cooper, whom the Florida courts had deemed "technically licensable" to operate frontons in that state. However, it didn't take Connecticut authorities long to discover Cooper's ties to Meyer Lanksy. After adverse publicity made the Cooper deal impossible, Bally Manufacturing Corp. made a bid but was likewise eliminated due to alleged organized crime ties.

The exasperated WJA board of directors turned to David McKown of the First National Bank of Boston. McKown knew that Roger Wheeler of Tulsa had $10 million in profit burning a hole in his pocket from a recent deal.

And so, Wheeler entered the picture as owner of World Jai Alai. According to Wheeler's son Larry, by early 1980, Roger Wheeler could see that WJA was not working out. Even though the total amounts bet at the south Florida frontons, called "the handle" in betting parlance, were rising, gross revenues were declining. In the face of this, his deal with First National Bank of Boston obligated Wheeler to retain Donovan and Rico, both of whom he suspected as being the source of the financial problems. Wheeler had discovered that someone was skimming $1 million per year from World Jai Alai. He planned to fire the top financial personnel, do a financial audit, and bring in state officials.[18]

Although Wheeler was initially confident that WJA security officer H. Paul Rico could keep organized crime out of the business, he felt the need for a proper audit.[19] Wheeler also quizzed Miami WJA cashier Peggy Westcoat about the finances. In December 1980, Westcoat and her live-in boyfriend were murdered in Dade County, Florida. Prompted by this and other concerns, Wheeler put the Hartford WJA fronton up for sale.

In 1980, Wheeler told the Rice University Alumni newspaper that he invested in World Jai Alai "simply to make money."[20] His friend Howard Upton agreed with this assessment, but another claimed that World Jai Alai was a tax write-off. He previously had attempted to acquire Shenandoah Corporation, which, according to a 1978 report, owned two horse racetracks and a hotel. At that time, Wheeler reportedly had little interest in jai alai and rarely visited the facilities.[21]

Naturally, Wheeler had kept his options open, and one option was a sale of WJA to outsiders. He told his sons Larry and David that he had a handshake deal with the then-prominent investment-banking firm Drexel Lambert to sell WJA for between $47 and $50 million. Yet, he told his sons, every time he moved towards closing, WJA revenues inexplicably nose dived. Of course Richard Donovan also wanted to buy the company, Larry Wheeler recalled, but Donovan only offered $16 million.[22] According to retired Tulsa homicide detective Mike Huff, shortly before his death, Roger Wheeler told his son David that if he could find Donovan, he would fire him. Shortly before his death, Wheeler reportedly asked Rico to take a polygraph test. Rico refused.[23]

Inquiries from Connecticut state investigators about possible organized-crime influence at Hartford prompted Roger Wheeler to install surveillance equipment on his Telex telephones in Tulsa. He even told one Connecticut investigator that he would authorize tapping Donovan's office phone in Florida. The investigator recalled that Wheeler seemed disappointed to learn that such a wiretap would be illegal.

In early 1981, Wheeler sold the Hartford fronton to former WJA president J. Stanley "Buddy" Berenson—the same man whom John B. Callahan had replaced in 1976. According to then-chief state attorney Austin McGuigan, Berenson soon discovered a big skimming operation. This was consistent with reports by a catering manager that financial statements at the Connecticut fronton showing profits were altered by WJA headquarters in Miami to show losses.[24]

By March, Wheeler was openly nervous. Although months earlier, when boarding his Learjet in Tulsa for trips to Miami, he wisecracked, "I hope they don't bomb my plane today," Wheeler had learned before his flight on March 2 that Rico had called asking about his schedule. Not only did he have his pilot Bill Baggett inspect the plane for bombs, but he also ordered Baggett to take the plane up to cruising altitude on a test flight before boarding with his wife and lawyer.

Earlier, Wheeler had assigned his son Larry, an accounting graduate of Rice University, to examine the WJA books and another son, David, to assess whether there had been a computer scam at WJA, perhaps involving kickbacks or overbilling. Years later, Larry recalled encountering surly employees during an initial anonymous visit to the Miami WJA fronton. He was served a thin, barely digestible steak and a brown salad in the fronton restaurant while H. Paul Rico, whom Larry recognized from photographs, feasted nearby on a thick, well-prepared sirloin with all the trimmings. During the week of Monday, May 18, 1981, about a week before he died, Roger met Larry and David Wheeler at the family ranch in Wyoming to assess the World Jai Alai investment. Wheeler told his sons that he planned to fire Rico and Donovan, who seemed to sense that "something was coming."[25]

The Murder Investigation Begins

The Telex Corporation board of directors met the Friday after the shooting and elected S. J. "Steve" Jatras to replace Wheeler as chairman. Four days after the murder, the *Tulsa World* reported "although newspapers and police in both Tulsa and Florida have connected jai alai with organized crime . . . investigations have failed to associate [Wheeler] with any known crime figures."[26] It was now apparent to all that the Wheeler murder would not be quickly solved.

That same day, a grand jury in Connecticut, which had recommended charges of game fixing two years earlier in late 1979, reconvened in light of the 1981 Wheeler murder. The 1979 Connecticut grand jury found WJA game-fixing had occurred in 1977, but a nine-month investigation revealed no connection between Roger Wheeler and organized crime.[27] In fact, Tulsa detective Roy Hunt quoted a Connecticut investigator as saying Roger Wheeler "was so clean, it scared him."[28]

A month after the murder, the *New Republic* reporter Nicholas Von Hoffman wrote that, in view of Wheeler's murder, the business community was asking itself exactly how good of a bet gambling was.[29]

Curious investigative reporters now began examining World Jai Alai. That June, *Sports Illustrated* reported that John B. Callahan had been ousted from WJA after Boston police tipped Connecticut authorities about his organized crime connections. Still, *Sports Illustrated* reported, Callahan continued to cast his shadow on the organization. *Sports Illustrated* also discovered that Richard P. Donovan had been Callahan's consulting firm partner. WJA sought a buyer but rejected buyout overtures by Callahan and Jack B. Cooper, who was often associated with Meyer Lansky. Cooper had been introduced to WJA officials by H. Paul Rico, Callahan's hand-picked security chief. WJA partnered with three Florida dog tracks, one of which Cooper owned in part.

While Wheeler's Connecticut license application was pending, WJA president Richard Donovan had described Wheeler as "a very wealthy, totally independent guy." But after Florida authorities adjudged Wheeler's moral character acceptable, they were displeased to be told that, as Donovan put it, "Roger would do the deal and he would be gone," implying that Wheeler would be an absentee owner. McKown later testified under oath at a deposition that if the bank named Donovan's successor, his first choice would be Callahan.

Despite misgivings about Callahan's links with Howie Winter of the Boston area Winter Hill gang (his last name was pure coincidence), the sale to Roger Wheeler in June 1978 was approved by Florida authorities, partially because of McKown's assurance that Callahan wouldn't be involved in WJA. Four months later, the Connecticut Commission on Special Revenue (later re-named the Gaming Policy Board) approved the Wheeler acquisition. There was one dissenter. Lester B. Snyder, a University of Connecticut law professor, questioned the role of FNBB in the deal as well as Callahan's influence. The Cooper connection, however, was judged too remote to deny Wheeler a license, especially since there were four companies that had established the summer jai alai operation in Miami, and Cooper was only a partner in one of them.

Wheeler himself claimed at the time of his acquisition that despite concerns about WJA's reputation, the sport was "clean as a hound's tooth." He later assured one reporter, "I've staked my reputation and money on it." Yet, shortly after the Wheeler purchase closed, a grand jury examined allegations of corruption at Hartford and the two other frontons. Ultimately, seven people were convicted of game fixing. Circumstances pointed to inside information being provided to professional gamblers with underworld connections. *Sports Illustrated* later noted that less than three weeks after Wheeler's death, Callahan and his protégé Richard Donovan had a falling out.[30]

Wheeler began focusing in depth on the WJA problems in early 1981. That March, he fired some ten WJA employees after selling the Hartford fronton to Stanley Berensen, a squeaky-clean Boy Scout type, who had complained to the FBI about Callahan and Donovan. First National Bank of Boston later claimed that its WJA dealings had been with people of "sound reputation," referring to the likes of Callahan. [31]

After Wheeler's death, Callahan denied "any involvement whatsoever with organized crime." Perhaps he'd forgotten about his friends in South Boston. The press found more information about the rotund accountant, initially hired by the descendants of the Bostonian founders on a two-year contract. After high school, he joined the Air Force, just as Whitey Bulger had done. Callahan briefly attended Yale in order to learn Chinese. He graduated with a degree in accounting from Bentley College and began working in his father's wholesale produce company in Charlestown, Massachusetts, which at that time had at least as many Irish mobsters as South Boston. Callahan went to work for major accounting firm Ernst & Ernst and then moved to an even bigger firm, Arthur Anderson. He became a partner but left in 1972 under a bit of a cloud. Co-workers commented that he came in late and was often disheveled. Callahan did not seem to have the degree of focus necessary to be a partner.

Two years into his own consulting practice, World Jai Alai hired him to find and recruit a new president capable of expanding company operations into other states. He eventually recommended himself. Of course, Callahan didn't tell the board about his connection to Winter Hill leaders James Joseph "Whitey" Bulger, his underboss Stephen Flemmi, their low-level associate Edward Brian Halloran, or the countless rounds of after-hour drinks he bought at Chandlers in the South End, one of the Winter Hill hangouts.

Callahan then recruited H. Paul Rico as World Jai Alai vice president in charge of security. Rico, who shared Callahan's fascination with organized crime, had retired from the FBI in 1974 and moved to Florida.

Callahan, and perhaps Rico, began the skim. As much as $1 million per year reportedly disappeared from the gross receipts for parking, concessions, and bets. When Callahan was forced out of World Jai Alai in 1976, he left both Rico and consulting partner Richard Donovan in place. Two months later, Callahan tried to buy the company for $35 million but was rebuffed.

One source theorizes that even after he left WJA, Callahan used his contacts to recruit Wheeler as a white knight to buy the company. This would kill three birds with one stone:

pacifying the board, distracting law-enforcement officials concerned about his mob connections, and preserving the skim operation.

David McKown, Callahan's contact at First National Bank of Boston, enticed Wheeler with publicly reported net profits of $5 million on $31 million in gross revenue. The majority interest in World Jai Alai would cost him $50 million, $33 million of which First National Bank of Boston would finance.[32]

After closing the deal, Wheeler immediately became curious when the cash flow did not meet expectations. According to one version of events, when Wheeler discovered the scheme, Callahan turned to an old South Boston buddy who owed him a favor.

The Black Rose

Two years earlier, in 1976, when John Martorano was indicted with other Winter Hill members for fixing horse races, it was Callahan who set him up with a place to hide in Florida, car and all. So Callahan pitched Martorano the first part of the deal: if Callahan bought World Jai Alai, he wanted Winter Hill to provide protection of the skim. According to Martorano, the problem was that if Wheeler, his sons, or accountants confirmed the skim, the complicity of H. Paul Rico and Callahan would be exposed, thus ending the skim and revealing everyone else. Martorano got the go-ahead on the $10,000 per week protection angle from Bulger and Flemmi.

Callahan discussed the rest of the deal personally with Bulger and Flemmi in the Black Rose, an Irish hangout next to Faneuil Hall Marketplace in the heart of Boston.

As Irish Republican Army ballads blared in the background, Callahan had to whisper the second part of the deal to Whitey and Steve. Roger Wheeler would have to be killed so that Callahan could buy World Jai Alai from his wife, Patricia Wheeler, on the cheap. Martorano had already agreed to do the assassination with Winter Hill wheelman Joe McDonald if Whitey and Steve sanctioned it.

But Whitey Bulger was underwhelmed.[33] He was especially put off by Callahan's drinking. Bulger thought that Callahan had some nerve to ask for a hit on a civilian unassociated with the crime business, but later, according to Flemmi, when H. Paul Rico assured Steve that this was a good business opportunity, Whitey began to weaken in his resolve to turn down Callahan's proposal.

Winter Hill gang boss Steve Flemmi wore Bulger down with the dubious claim that Martorano would murder Wheeler anyway, whether Whitey and Steve were in or out.

"I want you to be part of this," Rico had assured Steve later—or so Flemmi said. Whitey's qualms about killing a civilian were only exceeded by fear of the potential blowback. "The guy [Wheeler] is a zillionaire. His family's politically connected. We'll never survive it."[34] Even after giving in, Whitey, whose breath was so bad his associates didn't know whether to offer him gum or toilet paper, predicted the outcome: "We're all gonna go to jail. This will never go away, never."[35]

The Search for Suspects

Within days of Roger Wheeler's May 1981 assassination, Telex Corporation offered a sixty-day, $100,000 reward and launched a nationwide advertising campaign thirteen days later. Telex hired private detectives Jim Bearden and C. T. Burney from Dallas as well as Gary Glanz of Tulsa to solve the murder case. By July 2, Glanz was the only one left working the case.[36] In August, Telex extended the reward for another ninety days as they operated separate telephone banks from those of the Tulsa police department.

Meanwhile, the probate of Wheeler's estate started routinely enough. Roger Wheeler's will, executed on May 16, 1980, left his home and all his personal belongings to his wife. His daughter, Pamela Kendall Wheeler, and eldest son, Roger M. Wheeler, Jr., were appointed special administrators pending a June 12 hearing. The will directed that both the two children and Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Company serve as permanent administrators. The balance of his estate was left to be managed by Continental Illinois. Assets included the Wheeler Oil Company and WJA Realty, a limited partnership in Tulsa that owned World Jai Alai in Tampa, Florida, which in turn owned 25 percent of a summer fronton in Miami.[37]

Callahan did not succeed in his efforts to purchase WJA, despite what he had told Martorano, Flemmi, and Bulger.[38]

Authorities discovered that Wheeler controlled dozens of corporations across the country, from Massachusetts to Connecticut to Florida to Oklahoma to Nevada. Often, these were dormant organizations through which assets would be passed.[39]

Adding to the mystery was the baseless rumor that Wheeler had been murdered by Russians. Although the Licensintorg Trading Company of Russia claimed that the Roger Wheeler estate owed it $1 million, there was no evidence at all of criminality. Licensintorg claimed that Wheeler's American Magnesium Company and its partners were obligated to buy magnesium-processing technology for $1 million plus royalties, but the companies eventually resolved the dispute.

By the end of 1981, the *Daily Oklahoman* reported three leading theories for the murder: a botched kidnapping, a foiled robbery, or a hired killing.[40] Police speculated in June 1981 that Wheeler may have been shot in a kidnapping attempt; Oklahoma has a history of such cases.[41] During the Depression, Machine Gun Kelley and his wife kidnapped Charles Urschel, one of the richest men in Oklahoma. Only seven years before Wheeler was killed, Walt Helmerich, scion of a major Tulsa company, had been kidnapped for ransom money on his way to work.

Roger Wheeler had employed six retired FBI agents at WJA, but none of them acted as bodyguards, according to Richard Donovan, WJA president, who said, "I guess I've known Roger Wheeler for going on five years, and I've never known him to have a bodyguard." Wheeler, however bought a personal gun just months before his murder.[42]

As time went by, more details about Wheeler's reason for buying World Jai Alai emerged. Wheeler had been in the market for businesses that threw off cash—and lots of it. He had been told that WJA was all of that and more, spewing out about $6 million ($14 million value in 2013) more than operating expenses every year.

Acquaintances and family members opined years later that Wheeler may have known about connections between organized crime and WJA before he made the deal. After all, it was unlikely that such an astute businessman could have missed or ignored how close the Connecticut jai-alai operation was to several organized crime centers such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Other sources, principally newspaper and magazine accounts, reported years later that Wheeler did not understand or appreciate the risk of mob interference in WJA until it was too late, after he was on the hook for some $50 million. According to these accounts, it was only then that he discovered that his profits were being skimmed.

But in the mid-1970s, when Wheeler first looked at making the investment, jai alai was a bargain for the budget-minded bettor. "Two dollars will buy you fifteen minutes of jai alai, a bargain as compared with a two-minute dog or horse race," said WJA official L. Stanley "Buddy" Berenson, whose father had spearheaded Florida legalization of pari-mutuel betting in 1935.

By December 1976, according to later press reports, World Jai Alai had captured Wheeler's attention. His Oklahoma-based

Phoenix Resources, Inc., reportedly tried to acquire WJA for $54 million in 1976.[43]

The 1977 Bidding War

Seven months later, Wheeler was in a bidding war for World Jai Alai. On July 25, WJA Realty offered $54 per share for WJA, partially in cash, competing against XCor International, a pinball and vending machine manufacturer once known as Seeburg Industries, which had offered $83 million in securities. The main difference between the competitors was the governmental pre-approval of WJA Realty, which had already received licensing from the Florida Pari-Mutuel Wagering Office, following a five-month investigation of Roger Wheeler. Similar clearance from Connecticut gaming authorities was expected.

By the spring of 1980, trouble had emerged at World Jai Alai. During the week of June 4, a special prosecutor of the Connecticut chief state attorney's office obtained warrants to arrest a player and three gamblers on charges of rigging games two years earlier at Milford, Connecticut.

Roger Wheeler, who had a reputation for honesty, had purchased World Jai Alai two years earlier. *Sports Illustrated* reported that "Paul Rico, who was and is [WJA] vice-president in charge of security . . . also attempted to get Jack Cooper of Miami Beach, an associate of mob boss Meyer Lansky to buy World Jai Alai. A former [WJA] president, John Callahan, had underworld associates."

Florida authorities claimed that jai alai was the cleanest pari-mutuel in the country—until investigators discovered gambling "irregularities" in all ten Florida frontons. The potential for irregularities went well beyond Florida. ". . . When you have the same group operating in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Florida, there are all kinds of opportunities for fraud," the article noted. Reporters Nancy

Williamson and Robert Boyle opined that state officials had everything to gain in the way of tax revenues by looking the other way as betting irregularities flourished.

Fourteen hundred miles to the north, Lester Snyder, who once served on the Connecticut State Commission on Special Revenue, described the basic flaw in jai alai, saying, "the state [Connecticut] is in gambling to make money and therefore the state will never regulate it properly. Abuse will prevail." And so it did, until, at long last, law enforcement authorities challenged a gambling ring called the Miami Syndicate, which took in millions in rigged games at the Milford, Connecticut, fronton in 1977. The Connecticut commission pursued a quartet of alleged jai alai fixers and an aging Spanish player until they were all charged with game rigging and conspiracy to rig games. At the time, jai alai was legal in Florida, Rhode Island, and Nevada. Some fifteen states and two Canadian provinces were then considering adding it to their legalized gambling portfolios.

New Jersey state senator David Friedland then called for legalized betting. Friedland claimed that the state income from pari-mutuel betting would "be dedicated to helping the elderly and the medically and physically handicapped." Of course, the politicians did not match this clamor for funds with regulatory zeal.

Sports Illustrated reporters noted that in 1977 ". . . too many politicians who are at best idealistic and at worst crooked have been overseeing the game." In their view, "proper regulation of the game [was] almost unknown." In addition, the Connecticut gaming commission was invariably chaired by political functionaries of both major political parties, whose inspectors never visited a fronton without advance warnings.

Harvey Ziskis, a Hartford fronton employee who had watched the Miami Syndicate make millions, and Lester Snyder began raising uproar about jai alai at about the same time as *Hartford Courant* investigative reporter Theodore A. Driscoll began his series on the sport in Connecticut. Public reports suggested that there had been corruption since 1976, the first year of jai alai in Hartford and Milford. Jai alai in Bridgeport, Connecticut, began in 1977 in circumstances that hardly fostered confidence.

If the original owner of Bridgeport Jai Alai could be believed, it all began with a $250 bribe to John Bailey, former national chairman of the national Democratic Party. A judge cleared Bailey's name, but rumors persisted that the Miami Syndicate members were fronting bets for "richer and more sophisticated criminals."

"It's not just at one [fronton] and it's not just at two, it's at all of them" claimed Dan Bradley, then serving as a division director of the Florida Pari-Mutuel Commission, describing similar gambling irregularities attributable to the Miami Syndicate in Florida's ten frontons.

Harvey Ziskis discovered it all, or so it seemed. He became a food concession manager at the Hartford Fronton in 1976. Not long after starting, Ziskis noticed a quartet of thirty-something fronton flies who always wore sport shirts, running shoes, and jeans filled with jai alai cash; if these clowns could make this easy money, why couldn't he?

His time was largely his own once he set up the food concessions for each evening session, so he began to watch the so-called Miami Syndicate develop their skills. He watched them avoid betting on players (or pairs of players) who, during the eight-games-per-session evenings, tended to lose rather than win.

The Syndicate players learned never to bet on players six, seven or eight, or any combination of those numbers, simply because players (or pairs) bearing those numbers very seldom won.

Using this perfectly legal system, *Hartford Courant* reporter Ted Driscoll estimated the Syndicate turned the tables on the jai alai ownership who later sold out to Roger Wheeler, earning 12 percent or more on wagers made.

The Syndicate did even better after persuading certain employees to give them critical computer reports every ninety seconds. This accommodation "allowed Syndicate members to stay away from . . . heavily played numbers," increase their earnings on each bet and eventually even finagle the size of their earnings to avoid having the IRS withhold 20 percent.

It is no surprise that Syndicate members soon became Hartford regulars. Eventually, they were assigned their own cashier and ticket puncher. Not to be outdone by a rival, the Bridgeport fronton gave Syndicate members a private lounge, television monitor and, of course, the all-important computer printouts.

Before long, Milford fronton employees threw in all of this and more, according to allegations reported by *Sports Illustrated,* whose reporters claimed that the official Milford handicapper was bribed to omit Syndicate frontons from his tout sheet, thus potentially increasing Syndicate winnings.

Some of these Hartford, Bridgeport and Milford Fronton employees earned more from the Syndicate than from World Jai Alai.

Ziskis began to develop his own system derived from what he'd seen, but his $15,000 boodle was gone within a week. Just as he was watching the Syndicate players, they were probably watching him via the computer printouts he didn't have access to and considered him competition they didn't need. He somehow raised more money and won some bets, but three nights into his winning streak at Hartford, Ziskis was accused of trying to steal a $478 winning ticket and was barred from the fronton.

Maybe he was a sore loser, but after several unsuccessful efforts, Ziskis got a gaming commission hearing on his Syndicate allegations. The commission found his allegations were unfounded, but, in a dissent, Lester B. Snyder said on the record that the commission investigation hadn't gone far enough. Snyder also wondered about the millions of dollars the Syndicate members were betting and said so.

Two of the Syndicate members whom Ziskis identified, Paul Commonas and Rodney Woods, were cleared by the commission. However, Frederick Vines, the house handicapper at Milford, confessed later that Rodney Woods had bribed him to eliminate certain players from his tout sheet, drawing bribery convictions and fines for both of them.

By August 1978, Commissioner Snyder had enough, but, after resigning, he insisted that Connecticut Governor Grasso investigate legalized gambling, citing suspicious similarities between betting patterns Commonas followed in Milford, Connecticut and Dania, Florida frontons.

Not long after this, Florida frontons began to burn under suspicious circumstances. Naturally, this meant that the paper betting records were lost. Coincidentally, the fire insurance value on the West Palm Beach fronton (never owned by Wheeler) had been doubled to $8 million a few months before it burned.[44]

By late April 1980, some twenty-two months after Wheeler had purchased World Jai Alai, eleven Connecticut bettors and players had been arrested on game-fixing charges. Five pleaded guilty. Similar charges were then pending against some of the same individuals in Florida.

Yet, World Jai Alai president Richard P. Donovan argued that "for the one scandal in jai alai there has been a whole bunch in horse racing and dog racing." The *Washington Post* quoted unidentified witnesses as testifying that players were paid up to $150 ($400 in 2013 dollars) for each game thrown while other fronton employees allegedly sold information for $200 per week, enabling certain bettors to steer their own bets to the highest paying trifectas.

When Washington, DC, considered legalization of gambling on May 6, 1980, three different firms were vying for legalized jai alai, including World Jai Alai. A 1978 report prepared for Florida gaming authorities described him as "an associate of persons believed by the law enforcement community to be organized crime figures." When the *Washington Post* asked Callahan for comment on this description, he simply replied, "That's bull."

At that time, seven companies owned frontons across the United States, but they were loosely regulated. Florida, for example, received $17 million from jai alai taxes in 1976, but its entire enforcement force consisted of two unpaid auditors using a cheap old adding machine. This probably didn't matter anyway, since all critical elements to fix games, the players, computers, handicappers and managers were controlled by management.[45]

According to two *Boston Globe* reporters, Wheeler knew what he was getting into in purchasing WJA but was lured in by the potential return on investment. He eventually had second thoughts, but was reassured by having a number of former FBI agents on his payroll at World Jai Alai, notably H. Paul Rico, a native of Belmont, Massachusetts, and Boston College graduate.[46] This, of course, was the same H. Paul Rico who allegedly reported Wheeler's day-to-day activities to the men who eventually killed Roger Wheeler in Tulsa.

Killing Roger Wheeler at Southern Hills turned out to be quite easy.