

The Rouse House Revisited:

Unraveling the Enigma of Murder, Police Corruption, and Organized Crime

by Terry M. Mors, Ph.D.

The author is an Assistant professor with the Department of Law Enforcement and Justice Administration at Western Illinois University. Dr. Mors is a former instructor for the Criminal Justice Institute of Lake County, Illinois and a former police commander. Professor Mors can be reached at Terry_Mors@ccmail.wiu.edu

Many organized crime articles and textbooks have made reference to the Rouse Casino or the Rouse House. However, those publications did not fully explain the Rouse Casino. It was more than the typical back room parlor. The Rouse mansion was a classic case of organized crime co-existing with police corruption. Crooked police officials and organized crime figures cashed in on a family tragedy. This article explains the history of the Rouse Casino and how organized crime gained a foothold in Libertyville, Illinois.

Libertyville is a sleepy little bedroom community located in the heart of Lake County, Illinois. One of the most affluent counties in Illinois, Lake County is located in the northeast corner of the state. Residents of the tiny town of Libertyville are not accustomed to violent crime. So when the brutal murder of two of their most prominent residents occurred, it sent shock waves through the community. As shocking as the double murders were, no one expected what else was about to be uncovered.

Bruce Rouse, age 44 at the time of his death, was a self-made millionaire. He earned his money through the ownership of four gasoline service stations, numerous real estate transactions, and part ownership in a cable television company. He lived in a mansion on the north side of unincorporated Libertyville with his wife Darlene, age 38 at the time of her death, and their three children. The oldest child was a son, Kurt, age 20. Kurt resided in a coach house located behind the main house. Their daughter, Robin age 16, and son, Billy age 15, lived in the main house. Their bedrooms were on the second floor of the mansion.

At 8:30 on the morning of June 6, 1980, Robin answered the ringing telephone. It was the manager of one

of her father's gas stations. He was calling to get the combination to the safe, as Bruce Rouse had not shown up for work. Robin entered her parents' bedroom only to find a grisly murder scene. Bruce and Darlene had each been shot in the face at close range with a shotgun. Bruce had also been bludgeoned about the head and repeatedly stabbed in the chest. Robin immediately got her brother, Billy, who telephoned police.

On the night their parents were brutally murdered, Kurt claimed to have been with his girlfriend in the coach house. Robin was at a party in Lake Forest, and claimed to have returned home around midnight. Billy was allegedly home all night watching television in a downstairs room. The coroner established the time of death as being around 2:30 in the morning. Despite being home at the time of their parents' death, none of the children claimed to have heard the gunshots. Attorneys for the children were quick to point out that a thunderstorm that night explained why the children didn't hear the gunshots. The Lake County Sheriff's Police Department was called in to conduct the homicide investigation. Police stated there were no signs of forced entry, and no murder weapons were found at the scene. A 16-gauge shotgun and several knives were missing from Mr. Rouse's personal gun collection. Police suspected the missing 16-gauge shotgun was the murder weapon. Robbery was ruled out as a motive, because the murder(s) took nothing with them, except for the shotgun and knives. In fact, Bruce Rouse's wallet still contained \$300 in cash. Lake County Sheriff, Tom Brown, was quoted as saying the murders were "an act of hatred".

A coroner's inquest ruled that the deaths were a result of homicide, and ordered the Rouse mansion sealed. Lake County Sheriff's deputies provided around the clock security for the crime scene while the investigation proceeded. Several theories for the murders emerged, including organized crime being responsible. However, the Sheriff's Department began to focus on the Rouse children. The three children invoked their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination at the inquest, refusing to answer questions. They also refused to take a lie detector test offered by the Sheriff's Police. The Sheriff's Police had searched nearby fields, ponds, gravel pits, and the Des Plaines

River for the murder weapons with no luck. With no new leads, the investigation bogged down to a standstill. Private security replaced the Sheriff's department, who had been keeping a steady vigil over the crime scene.

Gloss Guard and Investigative Services, Incorporated of Waukegan was hired by the Rouse estate to provide security. Security guard Richard Vogel, 18, was allegedly attacked one Tuesday about 10:40 at night. Vogel was struck over the head from behind with a blunt object. He lost consciousness temporarily. He was taken to Condell Hospital for observation and treatment of head wounds. The attack was never solved, and it remains unknown if it was directly related to the Rouse murders. With the investigation going nowhere, the Coroner's Office ordered the crime scene could be released. The private security was withdrawn.

Tom Brown was the Sheriff in Lake County from 1978 to 1982. Deputies under Brown described him as a narcissistic, power-hungry leader, who had a high opinion of himself. The Rouse investigation was his administration's responsibility. Sergeant Willie Smith was in charge of the Criminal Investigations Division (CID). Sources inside the Sheriff's Department claimed that not many crimes were being solved under Smith. In fact, they claimed it was a party atmosphere in CID. There were several unsolved homicides. Sergeant Robert Schroeder was the sole organized crime detective. He was also a close personal friend with Sergeant Smith. Schroeder was alleged to be a party animal away from the job, who hob-knobbed with the County's elite.

Organized crime in Lake County was running rampant under Brown's administration. Traditional to organized crime, gambling and prostitution were the main money-makers for the "outfit". Illegal card and dice games were frequently occurring in the back rooms of Lake County taverns and restaurants. Betting on sports games and horse races occurred through secret wire rooms and out of taverns. According to sources inside the Sheriff's Department, prostitution was occurring mainly at three places of business. The first was a topless strip club in unincorporated Lincolnshire called the Roman House. The second was a topless strip club in Half Day called The Cheetah. The third location was an adult bookstore in Mundelein called Businessmen's Consultants.

Joseph Ferriola was the boss of the Taylor Street Crew and ruled the cities of Chicago and Cicero. His underboss was Rocco Infelise. Infelise went on to replace Ferriola as the boss of the Taylor Street Crew. Infelise decided to expand the outfit's business into Lake County. There were already independent bookmakers operating in Lake

County. Infelise organized a massive effort to extort money from the independents in Lake County. He assigned the notorious outfit enforcer Salvatore DeLaurentis (Solly D) to run the Lake County operation. Outfit heavy William (B.J.) Jahoda was DeLaurentis' right hand man.

Vince Lombardi once said, "Luck is when preparation meets opportunity". The opportunity for the Chicago outfit came when Tom Brown became Sheriff in Lake County. Brown was closely associated with Ferriola. In addition, CID Sergeant Willie Smith and Salvatore DeLaurentis were brother-in-laws. The situation was ripe for corruption. DeLaurentis was concerned about local law enforcement in Lake County. Ferriola told him not to worry, because he had an record with the police in Lake County. That "in" was Sheriff Tom Brown. Brown was paid \$1,500 a month by the Infelise crew to warn the outfit of pending raids on gambling and prostitution operations. Ferriola had a separate "hot line" set up to Brown's office. Anytime police planned to raid an organized crime operation; Brown gave them a warning.

Pick-ups of Brown's payoffs were made by Brown himself and two other Lake County Sheriff's Police deputies. A former Sheriff's employee, wishing to remain anonymous, stated Chief Deputy Mike Mustell and Corporal Jerry Pankauskus were seen on numerous occasions collecting payola from taverns and restaurants for Brown. The Gages Lake Inn was but one establishment in which payoffs were routinely paid to Brown through Mustell and Pankauskus. Pankauskus was allegedly Brown's personal chauffeur when driving to meet with organized crime members. Interestingly enough, Mustell was also married to Brown's sister.

After the security had been lifted from the Rouse House, CID Sergeant Willie Smith actually moved into the mansion making it his personal residence. During that time, Smith threw outrageous parties. Numerous deputies told tales from Smith's "Rouse house parties" One deputy, wishing to remain anonymous, described a Halloween party Smith threw at the mansion. "It was a Halloween costume party, and it was meant to make fun of the fact that a murder happened there. All of the people came dressed in some sort of theme depicting the Rouse murders". That same deputy claimed Sheriff's Department personnel used to bring their girlfriends there to cheat on their wives. It lived up to its nickname of a party palace. Excessive drinking, gambling, fornication, and prostitution were common place. It was a house of sin operated by the police. The party came to an end when the "Waukegan News Sun" reported the on-goings of Sheriff's personnel in the Rouse mansion.

With the heat on, Smith moved out. Yet that wasn't the end of the mayhem at the "murder mansion". The Chicago outfit purchased the property, and sank \$50,000 into turning the second story into a casino. DeLaurentis oversaw the operation. When asked if the Sheriff's Department knew of the organized crime casino, one anonymous deputy stated "Knew about it? They were there!". He claimed that it was not only illegal gambling was taking place at the Rouse mansion. He described the inside of the house as follows. "There were massage tables all over and private showers. Then there was the pool". Prostitution and gambling continued for two weeks.

Robert Plumber of unincorporated Libertyville was an independent bookmaker turned "revenue collector" for the outfit. In May of 1982, Rocco Infelise ordered Plumber's murder. Infelise ordered Jahoda to bring Plumber to the Rouse casino. Jahoda's orders were to bring Plumber to the upstairs casino, and "just keep going". Jahoda stated at the trial of Infelise that he did as he was told. Plumber followed Jahoda upstairs. At the top of the stairs, Plumber was grabbed and beaten to death. Jahoda told in court of the horrible cries from Plumber as he met his demise. Plumber's body was dumped in the trunk of his car. His car was driven to the Holiday Inn hotel in neighboring Mundelein. Plumber's wife reported his disappearance to police. Plumber's decomposing body was found eight days later. To date that homicide has not been solved. Insiders at the Sheriff's Department claimed Smith was in a position to slowdown a murder investigation, or even abandon it. In addition the Sheriff's organized crime detective, Sergeant Schroeder, was in cahoots with Brown and Smith. Needless to say, it was easy for organized crime to go unsolved.

With the heat on from Plumber's murder, the outfit shut down the Rouse operation. Reports on how much the outfit made in those 14 days varies. Estimates range from \$400,000 to just under \$500,000. Unfortunately for the outfit, Sheriff Tom Brown was defeated in April of 1982 by Coroner Robert "Mickey" Babcox. Babcox vowed to clean up the Sheriff's Police. In conjunction with the Illinois State Police, Sheriff Babcox orchestrated a series of successful prostitution raids on the former Businessman's Consultant's, now called Cheri's Studio. Without the protection of the Sheriff's department, the outfit was forced to stop their prostitution business.

The outfit went back to Willie Smith, who was still with the Sheriff's Department. They attempted to continue their "business arrangement" through Smith. But Smith was now under federal investigation. Jahoda had turned informant for the government. During the Rouse operation, Jahoda had been wired. Smith was now in a bind.

Babcox saw an opportunity to make lemonade from lemons. Smith agreed to wear a wire, and work as an informant, in exchange for not being prosecuted. Sheriff Babcox used the wiring of Smith as a chance for a public relations stunt. Instead of telling the public that Smith was working off potential criminal charges, he told reporters that the wiring of Smith was the Sheriff's Department's effort to work with federal investigators in cleaning up organized crime in Lake County. Smith became known as "Willie the wire" by his co-workers. Smith maintained his innocence. As one former Sheriff's Department detective stated, "Would the mob deal with someone they knew was a cop, unless they knew that cop was dirty?" As one organized crime figure noted, there is never a shortage of police officers willing to look the other way in exchange for money. In fact, he claimed he never personally approached police officers about being paid to allow illegal activity to continue. He said the police always came to him.

Smith was not fired for his part with the Infelise crew. Many inside the Sheriff's Department speculate that Sheriff Babcox didn't want to bring anymore negative attention to the Department. Smith was actually promoted to the position of undersheriff during his career. Ironically, Smith ran unsuccessfully for Sheriff in Lake County in 1998. Babcox eventually retired, and was replaced by Sheriff Clinton Grinell. Grinell was the police chief in Libertyville at the time of the Rouse and Plumber murders. Today Sheriff Gary del Re is in charge of the Lake County Sheriff's Police.

As for the murder of Bruce and Darlene Rouse that started this saga of murder and mayhem, it was finally solved. In 1996, Billy Rouse confessed to the murder of his parents. The motive was anger and profit. As Sheriff Tom Brown had speculated, the murder was propagated by hatred. The life insurance money was a secondary motive. Rocco Infelise and Salvatore DeLaurentis went to prison on federal charges thanks to Jahoda's testimony. None of the personnel from the Sheriff's Department were ever indicted or charged. Smith and Mustell retired and quietly disappeared. Schroeder is reportedly still working in private security, and Jerry Pankauskus recently passed away from a heart attack. As for Sheriff Tom Brown? He is living the good life in Fort Myers, Florida.

Professor Mors can be reached at Terry_Mors@cmail.wiu.edu