

## PROBATE ATTORNEY FOLLOWS MONEY TRAIL OF "HOBO JOE" FOR 11 YEARS

BY MARIA LOCKWOOD  
COPYRIGHT © 2005 THE DAILY TELEGRAM

LAST UPDATED: MONDAY, AUGUST 22ND, 2005 01:00:54 PM  
<[http://www.superiorwi.com/placed/index.php?story\\_id=207203&view=text](http://www.superiorwi.com/placed/index.php?story_id=207203&view=text)>

Steve Ledin doesn't look like a bloodhound, but he has the instincts of one. The Superior, Wisconsin, attorney, who works at the law firm of Maki, Durst, Ledin & Bick, recently closed an 11-year case with more twists and turns than a detective novel.

"It's been fascinating," Ledin said.

The estate case for the family of a man known affectionately as "Hobo Joe" began with the death of Joe Wachowski following a car accident in Michigan in 1994. Wachowski, 87, had no Social Security number, no tax history, no wife, no children, no job, no will and, it was assumed, no money.

"The only profession I have is wild blueberry picker during the summer months," he wrote to the government when they tried to assign him a Social Security number.

He did have a parcel of land on the Wiehie Road in Poplar and a phone number in his truck for brother-in-law Carl Russell.

"We didn't know where it was going to go," Ledin said of the case.

The attorney contacted Russell, then started his 11-year search by delving into hundreds of boxes of papers and junk crammed into outbuildings on the Poplar property.

"Most estate cases are fairly straightforward," Ledin said. "The family members know what they have. You can usually go back on their tax returns."

# Improbable Probate Stories™

*Courtesy of*  
THE LAW OFFICE OF  
**JOANN JACKSON KALAMA**  
*www.kalamalaw.com*

All Ledin had to follow were family recollections and the bulging boxes. Wachowski's family knew he had spent much of his time crisscrossing the country buying tax-delinquent property and reselling it at a profit. They assumed, however, that he was impoverished because he had been forced to pay more than \$400,000 in back taxes to the government in 1976 following a land sale in Michigan.

Following that incident, Wachowski began filing lawsuits against the government protesting his treatment at their hands. He wrote long rants against the government and even wrote the governor of California to request a list of death row inmates. With the Poplar property as his home base, Wachowski roamed the country with his dogs, occasionally visiting relatives.

Poor and a bit eccentric, that was their perception of Wachowski.

In reality, he had left behind more than \$1.6 million worth of property – stocks and land. Many of the holdings weren't even under his own name. His Poplar property, for example, was listed under the name of Fred Maras. Other aliases included William Johnson, Nick Maras, Joe McCabe, Michael Joe McCabe and Frank Larson. "He used about 20 different aliases that I knew through the years," Russell told the Ohio Department of Commerce during a hearing to prove Wachowski was the legal owner of some stocks. "In fact, it got to be a joke between my wife and he: Joe, what name are you using today?"

The key to the fortune lay in those heaps of papers – Standard & Poor's listings, shop flyers and even fast-food wrappers.

"I feel like I got to know him pretty well," Ledin said of Wachowski. "He just had his own lifestyle; he marched to the beat of his own drummer."

It was up to Ledin to put together the pieces of the man's puzzling finances.

"It's certainly a lesson in perseverance," he said. "You just shake your head every time you find out more about this guy."

The first clue that Wachowski was more than he seemed was a sheet of paper with a reference to Hawaiian Airlines. It mentioned transferring shares of stock

*Following the Money Trail of "Hobo Joe" | Page 2 of 3 Pages*

NEWS PRESENTED COURTESY OF THE LAW OFFICE OF JOANN JACKSON KALAMA  
150 EAST MEDA AVENUE, SUITE 220, GLENDORA, CALIFORNIA 91741-2624 | (626) 335-4755

# Improbable Probate Stories™

*Courtesy of*  
THE LAW OFFICE OF  
**JOANN JACKSON KALAMA**  
*www.kalamalaw.com*

into cash. A few calls and a little research later, Ledin found that Hawaiian Airlines had been privatized as Aloha Airlines, Inc. A call to the company uncovered \$300,000 worth of stock in Wachowski's name.

More financial information showed up:

- Scrawling print on a McDonald's French fry wrapper mentioned seven checks from Union Commerce in three trees in Brookston, \$5,000 cash and shares of Ryder stocks.
- On the back of a store sign advertising the special of the week – a baker's dozen of pumpkin donuts – Wachowski had listed stock in Aloha Airlines, Union Commerce and Madison Gas and Electric Company.
- A notebook crammed with real estate information came to light.
- Various papers spoke of cash buried in a small red box in a hole in Duluth, in a jar by the Ironwood railroad tracks or beneath certain trees on a friend's back 40. Piece by piece, Ledin uncovered more than \$800,000 in unclaimed property – land and stocks.

It took until this spring to win his biggest victory in the case. He proved to the Ohio Department of Commerce that Wachowski was William Johnson, the owner of \$800,000 worth of Union Commerce shares (now Huntington Corporation stock).

"I'm sure it's the most unique probate case Douglas County has seen," Ledin said. All from a unique individual.

"I don't know what the moral of the story is," the attorney said. Maybe it is that looks can be deceiving.

The pictures of Wachowski from the court files are grainy and blurred. Memories of him are, too. The Douglas County Register of Deeds office was a frequent visiting spot for Wachowski as he shopped for properties. He is vaguely remembered there as a little, old man who told hard-to-believe stories and didn't look rich.

*Following the Money Trail of "Hobo Joe" | Page 3 of 3 Pages*

NEWS PRESENTED COURTESY OF THE LAW OFFICE OF JOANN JACKSON KALAMA  
150 EAST MEDA AVENUE, SUITE 220, GLENDORA, CALIFORNIA 91741-2624 | (626) 335-4755