



Rudolf Walter Wanderone, the charming, slick-talking pool hustler who laboured mostly in obscurity until he reinvented himself in the 1960s by claiming to be Minnesota Fats, died at his home in Nashville. He was 82, or perhaps 95. With Fats, who insisted he was the prototype of the fictional character portrayed by Jackie Gleason in the movie "The Hustler," the only certainty was that you could never know for sure.

In a career in which he may or may not have sailed around the world six times, survived two shipwrecks and hobnobbed, as he claimed, with the likes of Clark Gable, Arnold Rothstein, Damon Runyon and Al Capone, his age was as slippery as his moves around a pool table.

Although he had made his living since the 1920s crisscrossing the country taking on all comers, until "The Hustler" came out in 1961, nobody beyond the small coterie of pool hustlers and their eager marks had heard of him.

However, Mr Wanderone, a New York native whose various nicknames had included New York Fats, knew an opportunity when he saw one. He simply adopted the name, Minnesota Fats, claiming that the character portrayed by Gleason in the 1961 movie had been based on his life. It was an index of Mr Wanderone's grasp of human psychology and his own impish appeal that he realised that it did not make any

difference whether he had been Minnesota Fats before the 1960s.

Within months after he decided to cash in on his borrowed fame, Mr Wanderone, or Minnesota Fats, was a celebrity, appearing on television, making nationwide tours and passing out stamped autograph cards proclaiming himself the greatest pool player ever.

He certainly looked like a Minnesota Fats, or at least some Fats. At 5 feet 10 inches, Mr Wanderone had weighed as much as 300 pounds.

Mr Wanderone, who did not drink but was famous for his love of ice cream, pies or anything sweet, never apologised for his appetite.

As he told it in his 1966 biography, "The Bank Shot and Other Great Robberies," by Tom Fox, "I have been eating like a sultan since I was two days old. I had a mother and three sisters who worshipped me, and when I was two years old, they used to plop me in a bed with a jillion satin pillows and spray me with exotic perfumes and lilac water and then they would shoot me the grapes."

The early pampering perhaps explains why Mr. Wanderone, who once said he never picked up anything more substantial than a silver dollar, grew up with a fierce aversion to physical labour, so much so that on their cross-country trips his wife was expected to do all the driving, carry all the luggage and even change the flat tires.

"Change a tire?" Mr Wanderone once exclaimed. "I'd rather change cars."

Although his frequent claim that he had never lost a game "when the cheese was on the table," was more fabrication than exaggeration, according to his first wife, Mr Wanderone was a master hustler who tended to be just as good as he needed to be when he needed to be.

"He knew how to manage money," she said, insisting that while the late Willie Mosconi, the perennial professional champion, may have been correct in claiming to have won the vast majority of their games, "Fats always left with the money."

During their years together, she said, "We lived like kings."

Mr Wanderone, who had a weakness for Cadillacs and other expensive cars were also known as a natural touch, one who never said no to a loan and who was so fond of animals he adopted dozens of them.

He also had an acknowledged weakness for women, or "the tomatoes," as he called them.

According to both of his wives, Mr Wanderone was a courtly man of the old school, one who, for example, would inevitably remind his opponents to watch their language whenever he would escort his first wife into some dingy pool hall.

He also knew how to take care of himself, the first Mrs Wanderone said, recalling how she would sometimes be waiting in a convertible outside a backstreet pool room when her husband, having cleaned out the customers inside, would be forced to fight his way out.

"In his hands, a pool cue was as good a weapon like a knife," she said.

He traced his interest in the sport to an uncle who used to take him to saloons and plop him down on the pool table when he was 2. "The pool table was my crib," he said.

Dropping out of school in the eighth grade, he accompanied his father to Europe on several trips, once studying with a Swiss pool champion.

However, he learned the game. He learned it well enough to support himself without having to take an actual job, although he would have been far better off, his first wife said, had he been able to stay away from gambling at the dice tables.

Curiously, after he became Minnesota Fats, his new persona led to an actual job, something he had studiously avoided. He went to work for a pool equipment company, spending so much time making personal appearances across the country and coming home so grumpy, his first wife said, that she finally divorced him in 1985.

Mr Wanderone then settled in Nashville, settling in a subsidised celebrity suite at the Hermitage Hotel, where he spent his days feeding bread crumbs to the pigeons in a nearby park and his evenings stamping autographs in Music City honky-tonks.

Mr Wanderone, whose nonstop braggadocio banter had made generations

Of pool hall denizens laugh, was as charming as ever. In 1992, when he expressed fear of being declared incompetent and becoming a ward of the state, he married 27-year-old Theresa Bell. She nursed him around the clock except, she said yesterday when she would stay at home while her husband and her boyfriend went bar-hopping.

She is his only survivor.