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Clearing Up the Hughes Mystery

The secret files of the late Howard R. Hughes strip him of the mystery he used to hide behind. Yet these fascinating files, now in the custody of the Internal Revenue Service, raise some startling new questions.

The improbable Hughes was deeply involved with the Central Intelligence Agency in some of its darkest operations, including attempts on the life of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. And Hughes' man in Washington, Robert Bennett, worked closely with the Watergate plotters.

Yet the files portray Hughes as a pathetic, if eccentric, old man who slowly wasted away—a dope addict, of uncertain sanity, who measured time by enemas. A staff memo, for instance, called his attention to a statement he had made "several enemas ago."

He spent his last years confined in an asylum of his own creation, alternately making multimillion-dollar decisions and issuing elaborate instructions on the disposal of his penthouse waste.

He died of sheer neglect although he was surrounded by doctors and servants in a luxurious Acapulco hotel. The last doctor who examined Hughes reported to the Mexican authorities that "it wasn't a matter of a fatal illness but a patient who had been neglected."

Our curiosity was aroused by the billionaire's mysterious midnight departure from Las Vegas on Thanksgiving eve, 1970. We picked up whispers that there was something dreadfully wrong with Hughes. By Dec. 9, 1970, we were able to report that he was subject to long lapses, albeit with "flashes of his old brilliance."

We also described him as "an ema-

ciated invalid with white hair down to his shoulders, shaggy eyebrows, a straggly beard and grotesquely long fingernails and toenails."

This was a terrible secret that the Hughes empire labored mightily to dispel. Associates were produced to deny passionately the world's richest man had degenerated into such a scraggly hermit. Finally he appeared before a few selected visitors who duly reported that Hughes was amiable and alert, his Van Dyke beard and nails in the best tonsorial taste.

Yet we continued to hear that Hughes had become the phantom of the penthouse, with a wild, unkempt look. Last April, we persuaded the Mexican authorities to assist with our investigation. They arrived at his Acapulco penthouse too late to save him from his death flight to Houston but in time to expropriate his files, minus several documents that had been shredded.

Later, we made arrangements with the Mexican authorities to turn the files over to the IRS, which has been investigating the Hughes operation.

These files have now cleared up the mystery of the disparate Howard Hugheses. The disheveled Hughes and the other with the Van Dyke beard were the same man. For his rare visits with outsiders, according to the files, Hughes submitted to a cosmetic overhaul.

It is also clear from the files that the secluded billionaire followed an erratic schedule, sometimes staying awake for two or three days and then collapsing, say, for 30 hours of sleep. He also began taking sedatives until the combined effect of the drugs and

physical deterioration changed the sleep into a stupor.

The drugs began to worry his doctors, who sent him warning notes. They were careful not to identify the drugs, except as "the item" or "bombers." Hughes was advised in one note that the doctors wanted "your staff to be in the position" of knowing nothing about the drugs.

It was explained that this would prevent any "possible testimony which we might sometime be required to give. With doctors, it is privileged information and they cannot be forced to testify unless it is in a criminal case."

The doctors warned Hughes on April 12, 1974, that "heavy usage of the item" had left him in no "condition, either physically or mentally in any 24-hour period to enjoy the day or make any business decisions. One day runs into the next without proper nutrition."

The following May 8, the doctors wrote that an aide had not taken Hughes' "bombers" away from him. "Of course," they wrote, "no one wants you to take any but we don't try to keep them away."

Another note urged the recluse to sleep seven or eight hours daily. "If you decide to stay awake for 2-3-4 days (which you have done frequently), this will throw all your daily routines off schedule," the note warns.

The IRS meanwhile, is trying to determine whether Hughes was competent to manage his \$2 billion empire during his last years and whether his aides took advantage of his condition to enrich themselves. A spokesman for the Hughes empire told us this allegation was "hogwash."