

*Jack Anderson and Les Whitten*

## The Phantom of the Penthouse

For close to two decades, the tight circle around Howard R. Hughes concealed a dreadful secret from the world. Under their care, the billionaire had turned into a shaggy wraith, the phantom of the penthouse, unsound of mind and body.

Their terrible secret is documented in detailed, daily logs they kept of his activities. He closeted himself in darkened penthouses, letting his hair, beard and nails grow, sometimes for years, without trimming. No one was allowed to clean his room, so the filth accumulated. Yet he demanded that his chair and utensils be insulated with Kleenix to protect him from germs.

He followed an erratic schedule, with no sense of day or night, sometimes remaining awake around the clock. He was finicky about food, staying on the same, simple diet for weeks and taking hours to complete a meager meal. He occupied most of his time watching movies; he would run his favorites over and over as many as 30 times. The logs even record his bowel movements. His aides sometimes reckoned time by the billionaire's enemas.

But the darkest of Hughes' secrets were contained in a large, metal box that held what he called his "medication" — drugs that his doctors reluctantly provided. It is clear from his private records that Hughes was a drug addict, that he was often in a narcotic daze and that his "medication" included unidentified but illegal drugs.

The records also show that his attendants pampered him outrageously and carried out his most bizarre instructions. Yet U.S. agents have concluded from his papers that the rich recluse wasn't competent to run his \$2 billion empire. They want to know

why a guardian wasn't appointed, who made the multimillion-dollar financial decisions and whether any aides took advantage of his condition to enrich themselves.

We were the first to question Hughes' competency. We learned from insiders about his deterioration and published the information on Dec. 9, 1970. It was a story that the Hughes organization heatedly denied.

Members of his inner circle now tell us that they sought merely to protect him from his competitors and other financial predators. The daily logs show that, in order to conceal the truth about Hughes, they played a strange game of international hide-and-seek.

For four years they ensconced him in a darkened penthouse atop the Desert Inn in Las Vegas until the Internal Revenue Service began to get too curious. On Thanksgiving Eve, 1970, they whisked him off to the sunny Bahamas. He spent the next 15 months in sunless isolation atop the Britannia Beach Hotel.

But on Feb. 15, 1972, minutes ahead of immigration officials, Hughes was forced to flee again by stretcher and van to a waiting boat. Bob Rehak, the skipper of the Cygnus, was the first outsider in years to see Hughes. Rehak confirmed our description of him.

To dispel this grotesque image, Hughes decided to grant a request of his new host, Nicaragua's dictator Anastasia Somoza, for an audience. The daily logs show that it took four hours to groom the shaggy recluse. His barber-attendant, Mel Stewart, began at 11 p.m. on March 11, 1972.

The log notes tersely: "Mel (sic) in to trim hair, beard, and toenails." He finished the job at 3 the following morn-

ing; then Hughes ducked into the shower and emerged a new man. He met the Nicaraguan dictator and U.S. Ambassador Turner Shelton aboard his private plane at 10:45 p.m. on March 13.

According to the logs, the billionaire flew from Managua, Nicaragua, to Vancouver, British Columbia, with a refueling stop at Los Angeles. Then for the first time since he began his seclusion, the barbered Hughes walked boldly into the Bayshore Inn. He was wearing his cheap bathrobe, and he paused once to tie his pajama bottoms. But the hotel guests and a Japanese window washer didn't seem to notice.

Once inside the penthouse, Hughes paused to watch a seaplane land in Vancouver harbor and then disappeared for six months into his darkened bedroom.

The following September, he returned to Nicaragua, where he completed the sale of the Hughes Tool Co. — a deal that raised questions about his financial judgment. Two New York brokers, Julius Sedlmayr and Courtney Ivey, flew to Nicaragua to make sure Hughes personally approved the transaction.

The logs show that Stewart was called at 8:45 a.m., Sept. 25, 1972, to trim the billionaire's beard.

At 5:40 a.m., according to the logs, "Mr. D. Sedlmayr & J. C. Ivey in for signature." For the second time, two visitors went away with the impression that the legendary billionaire was quite normal.

The logs, however, contained his new instruction: "He doesn't want to be permitted to sleep in the bathroom anymore."