

Jack Anderson and Les Whitten **Hughes-Romantic Spy**

The late Howard Hughes, once one of Hollywood's most publicized playboys, consorted with women of rare beauty and international reputation. Yet he was really a cautious lover, secretly shy, who conducted elaborate surveillance before making romantic advances.

The incredible details have been hidden for a quarter of a century behind the tight screen he drew around himself. We have partially unmasked the rich recluse as part of a larger investigation into his tangled financial-military-CIA ties.

We discovered that in the '40s and '50s he turned his social life into a multi-million-dollar operation. He would go after a woman with the same methods that he might seek to take over a corporation.

At least 100 women who struck his fancy were brought under electronic and physical surveillance. Among them were some of the world's most glamorous women, including Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren, Ava Gardner and Janet Leigh.

The billionaire hired a private detective named Gerald Chouinard to spy on the lovelies. Because Hughes was hard of hearing, he couldn't get Chouinard's name straight. So the detective finally adopted the name Mike Conrad.

For 18 years, Conrad handled secret projects for Hughes, including the romantic espionage. The billionaire followed the surveillance reports closely. Once, he suggested that Conrad keep a closer watch on actress Elizabeth Taylor in her second-floor Hollywood apartment by setting up an observation post on a telephone pole across the street.

Another time, Hughes was eager to date actress Janet Leigh and had her followed wherever she went. The surveillance reports enabled Hughes to surprise her with opportune visits. It happened so often she told us, that she finally realized it "wasn't a coincidence anymore."

A number of famous actresses had Hughes' watchdogs on their trail. He arranged for Ava Gardner to be followed

to a bullfight in Tijuana; Anne Bancroft was tailed for a brief period; Hughes even planted a spy aboard a fishing yacht to observe Jean Peters and her husband Stuart Cramer on their honeymoon. Later, the actress divorced Cramer and married Hughes.

The tall, lean, heavy-lidded billionaire would also take a sudden fancy to an unknown girl whom he might spot in a car or whose picture he might see in a magazine.

Perhaps Hughes' most extravagant romantic escapade occurred following a Miss Universe contest. He was captivated by so many of the beauties that he set up a special company called Black Gold Productions to arrange dates for him with a dozen finalists.

He kept a photographer on 24-hour call to photograph the women who stirred his interest. Hughes always wanted close-ups of the girls without makeup. If he liked what he saw, he might offer the girl a movie contract. Sometimes, he had a career in mind for her; other times, he had more personal designs.

She would be flown to Hollywood with her family, her belongings and sometimes her furniture. While waiting to meet Hughes, she would be rushed through a round of acting, singing and dancing lessons and beauty appointments.

Each woman had a chauffeur-driven car to whisk her around Hollywood and to escort her to lavish dinners at the best night spots. All the while, Conrad and his investigators would check out the women carefully.

When Hughes got around to it, sometimes after several months had passed, he would call the girl.

He would promise a visit but would not appear. He used other little tricks to win over a romantic prospect. On occasion, for example, he would buy her a dog and arrange for the dog to be stolen. Then he would find the dog and return it to her.

But slowly, Hughes began to shun the women he once pursued. The last decade of his life was spent, ironically, as a celibate.