

Jack Anderson's Washington Merry-go-round

—With Les Whitten

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WASHINGTON — From the tight, secretive, little circle around the late Howard Hughes, we have been given a description of his final years as a penthouse hermit.

Until now, no member of the inner circle has broken the absolute silence he imposed on them. The circumstances surrounding his death, however, have persuaded a few to speak reluctantly about life in Hughes' inner sanctum. They agreed to talk to us on condition that we not identify them.

The nation's richest citizen died the death of a pauper — emaciated, shriveled, dehydrated, with bed sores and a bleeding tumor. Dr. Victor Manuel Montemayor Martinez, who was called in to administer to Hughes, concluded: "The patient had been seriously neglected."

A strikingly similar description of Hughes was submitted to the sheriff's office by Dr. Harold L. Feikes shortly after the billionaire vanished from Las Vegas more than five years ago. Other witnesses have described Hughes as a wasted invalid, with unkempt, straggly hair and whiskers.

Customs inspector Harold Sawyer, who boarded Hughes' chartered plane in December 1972, told us the recluse had collar-length hair, a full beard and a black hat pulled down over his head. He spoke in a muffled voice.

Yet we spoke to a half a dozen other witnesses who have seen Hughes during the past six years. They described him

as a tall, thin, distinguished man with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard. They said he was cordial, alert, even talkative, with an uncanny memory of past details.

We have concluded there were two Howard Hughes, either the same man in different states, or two different persons. Significantly, we discovered that in the 1960s a movie actor named Brooks Randall had been hired occasionally to impersonate Hughes.

The billionaire's intimates now tell us that the two conflicting descriptions fit the real Howard Hughes at different periods. He had a barber on 24-hour call; sometimes he would submit to regular haircuts and have his beard trimmed into a neat Van Dyke. But other times, he refused to let the barber near him for prolonged spells.

Hughes began to behave strangely in the early 1960s when he still lived in Bel Air, Calif. He developed a hysterical fear of microbes. Sometimes, he would call his doctor half a dozen times a day to complain about his health.

But when the doctor arrived to examine Hughes, the eccentric billionaire sometimes wouldn't allow the doctor to touch him. From across the bedroom, Hughes would ask questions and have the physician write down the answers. Hughes was so afraid of germs that he wouldn't allow his doctor to open his mouth to give verbal answers in his presence.

The aides who attended Hughes received huge salaries, as much as \$75,000 a year, to cater to his whims. He liked to be babied, and they pampered him outrageously, they tell us.

When he chose not to eat, they didn't press him. When he was ready to eat, they would make sure his favorite cookies and beef stroganoff were prepared to his exact specifications.

His body became stiff and brittle from living in a confined space. The aides urged him to move around until a hip injury in London four years ago kept him largely bedridden for the rest of his life.

Aides erected a special antennae in the Bahamas so Hughes could watch U.S. television on a large screen. A Hughes plane would also fly as many as two dozen movies to his retreats each week. Sometimes he would watch movies for 18 hours at a time, viewing them from the perspective of a Hollywood producer-director, one intimate told us.

In the adjoining room, his aides could hear the reverberating sounds of the recluse's favorite Westerns. The volume was always high because he was hard of hearing.

The "Old Man," as his aides called Hughes, regarded them as his adopted family. When it came their turn to leave him for a week to visit their own families, he would invent excuses to keep them near him. One member of his circle complained that he had missed the gradation of all of his children because of his devotion to the Old Man.

There were times that Hughes seemed to want to come out of his self-imposed exile. He walked into the lobby of Vancouver's Baysshore Inn under his own power, for example, pausing only to the drawstring on his pajama bottom. The hotel guests and a Japanese window washer didn't seem to notice him.

For a time, Hughes enjoyed staring across his balcony to watch the planes at a nearby airport. But an aide suggested that an enterprising photographer with a telephoto lens might be able to snap a picture of Hughes from another building. The curtains were drawn, and Hughes never again looked out of his window.

Why did his devoted aides neglect him in the end? The only explanation they can offer is that they were strictly obedient. When he issued instructions not to send him to a hospital, it didn't occur to them to disregard the instructions when he lapsed into his periodic stupors. Perhaps the only real decision they ever made, one insider conceded, was to fly the dying Hughes back to the U.S.

In a way, Hughes may have ordered his own death by not allowing his closest aides to help him. But U.S. authorities aren't satisfied with this explanation. They want to know whether the quirky Hughes was competent to run his \$2 billion empire, why a guardian wasn't appointed, and who made the multimillion-dollar financial decisions.