

Last days of Howard

Hughes

By Michael Sneed
Chicago Tribune

ACAPULCO — He had always picked the time and place for everything and he had come here to die.

Howard Hughes, the eccentric billionaire with a passion for privacy, chose the pinnacle of a pyramid-shaped hotel to spend his final days. And he spent those days in great pain.

"Sometimes he would scream in agony," said a police source. "He would then be given medicine to make the pain go away."

"Hughes knew he was going to die. So he came here. He had been sick for some time and was bed-ridden most of the time. I do not know exactly why he chose this place except that Daniel Ludwig, who is immensely wealthy, is supposedly his friend and owns this hotel as well as others in which Hughes stayed."

The final chapter of the Hughes saga began about 5 a.m. Feb. 11 when a bearded, elderly man arrived by plane with a tourist card that allowed him to stay 180 days.

The signature on the tourist card read Howard Robard Hughes.

The frail figure of a man identified as Hughes being escorted down the airport tarmac startled immigration officials.

"He looked like a skeleton," one said.

"He had a long white beard and thin hair, which seemed well tended. It was such a disappointment. One expected to see a strong man like his old photographs, but he was only the picture of a former man. His eyes, they seemed very strong still. But he didn't say a word."

Driven to the Acapulco Princess Hotel 10 miles south of the city, Hughes was pushed through the hotel lobby in a wheelchair, loaded onto a service elevator and taken to the penthouse, which occupies the entire top floor.

Ernesto Gonzales, 23, a bellboy, was near the lobby desk when Hughes arrived and was one of the few people to see him.

"It all happened in a matter of seconds," Gonzales said.

"He was taken from the car and put in a

—Turn to Page 13, Col. 1

—From Page 1

wheelchair. He was just a thin, old man who was wheeled about in much haste."

As soon as the billionaire was ensconced in his suite, the light went out on the elevator button for the 20th floor.

Hughes aides made adjustments so they alone could control the elevator from the 20th floor. No one not a member of the Hughes entourage was permitted there.

Hughes, tucked inside a single suite, didn't use the elevator again until the day he died.

He never visited the hotel grounds, which are covered with lush bougainvillea, nor the tumbling fresh-water swimming area. He refused to use the hotel's kitchen facilities. He even refused the assistance of bellboys and cleaning women and would not use the hotel's beds.

Instead, Hughes used a special hospital bed he had designed. He had his food and water flown in from the United States. His meals were prepared by a personal chef in his private penthouse kitchen.

"Mr. Hughes had an obsession with cleanliness and was particular about food," a source said. "The chef would sample the food to make sure it was agreeable, and I think his room was cleaned quite often."

The hotel's head maid tried to unlock the door to the Hughes penthouse the day after his arrival.

"She was in quite a flap when she discovered the door locked to the 20th floor and she couldn't get in," a hotel source said. "The management never had told its personnel of Hughes' presence."

Not only did the Hughes entourage rent the entire 20th floor, which included board rooms and suites, it rented additional rooms on the 18th and 19th floors.

The hotel management refuses to disclose how much Hughes paid, but one source pegged the bill at about \$20,000 a week.

Hughes never left his suite, a police source said. There were times when he was pushed about his suite in a wheelchair, but he never visited any of the other rooms on his floor.

Several days after his arrival, Hughes sent for a

*'It was very painful
... sometimes he
would scream in agony'*

team of doctors from the United States. The doctors ignored the hotel's medical facilities.

"It was strange because every doctor that accompanies a large group visiting the hotel always visits us to check out our medical facilities," Mario Duran, a medical service spokesman, said.

"No one ever came to see us about Hughes."

The Hughes penthouse was staffed by servants, the chef, three doctors, business aides and a security force.

"How would you say ... he was a man alone," police source said.

"I don't think he was very happy. He was a man who had built his reputation on being colorful and in control — and he was no longer in control of his sickness."

There was one overt break, however, in the Hughes routine. Sometime late in February, a chef from Hawaii reportedly was flown in to bake a special cake at Hughes' request. The chef brought his ingredients with him. The cake was prepared in the penthouse kitchen and then the cook was sent back to Honolulu.

Last Monday at 8:30 a.m., an ambulance was called to the Princess Hotel.

While it waited to drive its mysterious patient to the airport, Lidio Sandoval, 27, a mechanic, was atop one of the hotel elevators making repairs. Suddenly it began moving up.

Aware that the elevator had been adjusted not to

reach the penthouse floor, Sandoval was shocked when he discovered that that was where he was going.

He peered down through the elevator ceiling and saw seven men, one of them on a stretcher, in the 7-by-7 foot car.

"The man on the stretcher was very old and very tall," Sandoval said through an interpreter. "I couldn't see him well because he was covered in a yellowish sheet and his face was half hidden by an oxygen mask. But I did see that his hair was white and thinning and he was being fed through a needle in his veins. The other men in the elevator were talking but I don't understand English."

Hughes, lying on a wheeled stretcher, was taken through the lobby. He was then placed in the ambulance attended by Jaime Quevedo and Jose Olivera.

"The old man didn't speak at all," Quevedo said. "I think he was unconscious."

The ambulance drove to the private-aircraft terminal and stopped beside a private ambulance plane, which had been waiting for three hours since its arrival from Ft. Lauderdale. Its destination was Houston.

The billionaire's tourist card was handed to Miquel Manzanilla, an immigration official, who stamped it and watched while Hughes was placed on the plane.

It still had 136 days before it expired.

A question has arisen as to the time he died.

Mexican immigration officials reportedly did not verify the fact that Hughes was still alive when the plane took off. Aides aboard Hughes' plane reported that he died in flight at approximately 1:27 p.m. April 5.

The day after Hughes died, three aides left behind to guard the Acapulco suite were "detained" by Mexican authorities and questioned about the time of his death.

Federal police then searched the penthouse and reportedly found reams of shredded paper. A large shipment of boxes containing Hughes' effects reportedly was sent to the United States several hours after Hughes had left the country and a day before authorities sealed off his room.
