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Were There 2 Hugheses?

The aura of mystery, which surrounded Howard Hughes while he was alive, still lingers after his death.

We have determined that the famous recluse, rich beyond comprehension, died of the symptoms of a neglected pauper.

He commanded a \$2 billion financial empire. Yet he refused to let aides attend him, shunned human contact, neglected his own physical needs. Most of the time, he was in a catatonic stupor.

Last week, he turned up in Houston, a "shriveled" and "emaciated" corpse. Sources privy to his condition say his frail, 90-pound body was dehydrated and covered with sores.

The Internal Revenue Service has started an investigation to determine whether this shrunken hulk of a man controlled his own affairs. There is evidence that he may have been incompetent and incapacitated.

In an attempt to unravel the Howard Hughes mystery, we have sent reporters to Acapulco, Houston and Los Angeles. We have spoken to every source we could find who might have had contact with Hughes.

We have pieced together the portraits, strangely, of two quite different Howard Hugheses.

The first Howard Hughes began to emerge in the 1960s. Most of the time, he was rational, even brilliant. But he had irrational periods, which began to last longer and longer. He also developed a strange phobia against microbes.

By 1964, his aides already had started to worry about his mental and physical deterioration. Sometimes, they couldn't get him to sign papers that were vital to his own interests. In a sworn statement, former aide Robert Maheu has told about discussing the problem with Hughes' chief of staff, Frank W. Gay, at Los Angeles' Bel Air Hotel.

"Frank W. Gay discussed with attorney Edward Morgan of Washington, D.C., and myself the advisability of initiating a plan whereby effectual control of the Hughes Tool Company might be worked out by a very selective

group of a few individuals," Maheu attests, "in the event certain physical or mental problems should arise insofar as Mr. Hughes was concerned."

Not long afterward, the eccentric billionaire disappeared into a Las Vegas penthouse. He would permit no one to come near him nor to clean his immediate surroundings. Thus the man who feared germs was soon wallowing in his own filth.

Witnesses report that Hughes became "an emaciated invalid with white hair down to his shoulder, shaggy eyebrows, a straggly beard and grotesquely long fingernails and toenails."

Dr. Harold L. Feikes, who was summoned to the penthouse to give Hughes blood transfusions in October, 1974, reported to the sheriff that Hughes was in a catatonic state with a dangerously low hemoglobin count.

On Feb. 17, 1972, Hughes was hauled aboard a boat in the Bahamas in a stretcher-like wheelchair. The skipper, Bob Rehak, said Hughes had hair down to his shoulders, a stringy beard and yellowed, curling toenails about two inches long. Other witnesses have given similar descriptions.

Yet astonishingly, a different Howard Hughes was seen by reputable witnesses during this same period. U.S. Ambassador Turner Shelton, invited to meet Hughes aboard his executive jet, described him as "about 6 feet, 3 inches tall, very thin, weighing from 140 to 150 pounds, graying hair and neatly trimmed Van Dyke-type beard."

Apparently, the same trim, distinguished man with the Van Dyke beard was seen in London by Nevada's Gov. Mike O'Callaghan and Gaming Board Chairman Phil Hanniflin.

This second Hughes was clean, alert, affable. He shook hands firmly, with no apparent fear of human contact.

We have established this much. In the 1960s, a movie actor named Brooks Randall was hired occasionally to impersonate Hughes. This began as a ruse to deceive process servers. We have been unable, however, to locate Randall who was last reported in Colorado.