

Jack Anderson and Les Whitten**Hughes: Pauper's Death**

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

Yet we spoke to 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 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 star 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.

But when the doctor arrived to examine Hughes, the eccentric billionaire sometimes wouldn't let himself be touched. From across the bedroom, Hughes would ask questions and have the physician write down the answers; he was so afraid of germs that he wouldn't let the doctor open his mouth to reply.

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 antenna 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; one intimate told us.

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.

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 United States.

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 multi-million-dollar financial decisions.