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Keeping the Hughes secret

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WASHINGTON — For close to two decades, the tight little circle around Howard Hughes concealed a dreadful secret from the outside world. Under their care, the late billionaire had turned into a shaggy wraith, the phantom of the penthouse, unsound of mind and body.

Their terrible secret is documented in the detailed, daily logs they kept of his activities. He closeted himself in darkened penthouses, letting his hair, beard and nails grow sometimes for years without trimming. No one was allowed to clean his room, so the filth accumulated until it became nauseating. Yet he demanded that his chair and utensils be insulated with Kleenex to protect him from germs.

He followed an erratic schedule, with no sense of day or night, sometimes remaining awake around the clock. He was finicky about food, staying on the same simple diet for weeks at a time and taking hours to complete a meager meal. He occupied most of his time watching movies; he would run his favorites over and over as many as 30 times. The logs even record his bowel movements; the main event in his life was "the big E," which apparently referred to an enema. His aides sometimes reckoned time by the billionaire's enemas.

But the darkest of Howard Hughes' secrets were contained in a large metal box. This held what he called his "medication" — drugs that his doctors reluctantly provided. It is clear from his private records that Hughes was a drug addict, that he was often in a narcotic daze and that his "medication" included unidentified but illegal drugs.

The records also show that his attendants pampered him outrageously and carried out his most bizarre instructions to the letter. Yet U.S. agents have concluded from his papers that the rich recluse wasn't competent to run his \$2 billion empire. They want to know (1) why a guardian wasn't appointed; (2) who made the multimillion-dollar financial decisions; and (3) whether any aides took advantage of his condition to enrich themselves.

We were the first to question Hughes' competency. We learned from insiders about his deterioration and published the particulars on Dec. 9, 1970, including his startling description — complete with the stringy, unkempt hair and beard to the yellowed, curling toenails. It was a story that the Hughes organization heatedly denied.

Members of his inner circle now tell us that they sought merely to protect him from his competitors and other financial predators. The daily logs show that, in order to conceal the awful truth about Hughes, they played a strange game of international hide-and-seek.

For four years, they ensconced him in a darkened penthouse atop the Desert Inn in Las Vegas until the Internal Revenue Service began to get too curious. Then on Thanksgiving eve, 1970, they whisked him off to the sunny Bahamas. He spent the next 15 months in sunless isolation atop the Britannia Beach Hotel.

But on Feb. 15, 1972, just minutes ahead of immigration officials, Hughes was forced to flee again by stretcher and van to a waiting boat. The skipper of the Cygnus, Bob Rehak, was the first outsider in years to see Hughes. Rehak confirmed our description of him.

To dispel this grotesque image, Hughes decided to grant a request of his new host, Nicaragua's dictator Anastasia Somoza, for an audience. The

daily logs show that it took four hours to groom the shaggy recluse. His barber-attendant, Mell Stewart, began the great rehabilitation at 11 p.m., March 11, 1972.

The log notes tersely: "Mel (sic) in to trim hair, beard, and toenails." He finished the job at 3 o'clock the following morning; then Hughes ducked into the shower and emerged a new man. He met the Nicaraguan dictator and U.S. Ambassador Turner Shelton aboard his private plane at 10:45 p.m. on March 13.

Shelton described Hughes afterward, according to an official document, as "six feet, three inches tall, very thin, weighing from 140 to 150 pounds, graying hair and wearing a neatly trimmed Van Dyke type beard." The ambassador also said Hughes "was wearing old, beat-up slippers and an old robe. All in all, (the) entire outfit would have gone at a bargain basement for about 80 cents."

According to the logs, the billionaire flew from Managua, Nicaragua, to Vancouver, Canada, with a refueling stop at Los Angeles. Then for the first time since he began his seclusion, the barbered Hughes walked boldly into the Bayshore Inn under his own power. He was wearing his cheap bathrobe, and he paused once to tie the drawstring on his pajama bottom. But the hotel guests and a Japanese window washer didn't seem to notice.

Once inside the penthouse, Hughes paused for a few minutes to watch a seaplane land in Vancouver harbor and then disappeared for six months into his darkened bedroom.

The following September, he returned to Nicaragua where he completed the sale of the Hughes Tool Company — a deal that raised questions about his financial judgment. Two New York brokers, Julius Sedlmayr and Courtney Ivey, flew to Nicaragua to make sure Hughes personally approved the transaction.

The logs show that Mell Stewart called in at 3:45 a.m., Sept. 25, 1972, to trim the billionaire's beard. This time the civilization process was less drastic; Stewart finished his barbering in only one hour, 45 minutes.

At 5:40 a.m., according to the logs, "Mr. D. (sic) Sedlmayr and J.C. Ivey in for signature." For the second time, two visitors went away with the impression that the legendary billionaire was quite normal. They had scarcely gotten outside the door before he settled back into the same bizarre routine.

The logs, however, contained this new instruction: "He doesn't want to be permitted to sleep in the bathroom anymore."

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