

Secret U.S. Report SF Examiner

NOV 18 1971

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Hughes Alive and Kicking

By Art Petacque
Chicago Sun-Times

A year-long Justice Department investigation into the status of Howard Hughes has turned up evidence that he is in reasonably good health and mentally competent, it was learned today.

One federal source rejected as "hokum" reports that Hughes might be dead and that he had fingernails and toenails six to eight inches

long when he left Las Vegas for the Bahamas late last year.

The federal investigation was undertaken following persistent reports that the wealthy recluse had been "kidnaped" from Las Vegas and was being held against his will in a hotel in Nassau, the Bahamas.

These reports also are untrue, the federal sleuths say.

It was learned that a report in Justice Department

files in Washington states that the best information uncovered by investigators is that Hughes not only is alive but in good enough condition — mentally and physically — to take an active role in the operation of his far-flung financial empire.

The report says Hughes carries on his business affairs through four secretaries

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and that he often works seven days a week.

He is said to make his own decisions, relying on advice gained by phone and mail from a few legal and technical advisers. The Hughes secretaries handle these communications.

Federal investigators do not discount most of the well-publicized Hughes eccentricities. He is said to have personal contact with no more than a half dozen persons, including the trusted secretaries.

He avoids sunlight with the same passion that he avoids photographers and other would-be Hughes watchers. But a federal source says he takes an occasional nocturnal walk on his apartment patio.

Hughes, a 66 year old billionaire, lives in a penthouse on the nine - floor Britannia Beach Hotel. The hotel manager, Eugene E. Barrett, denies that he has so much as caught a glance of his celebrated guest.

The Justice Department's continuing investigation of the status of Hughes has never been acknowledged publicly.

It is believed the Justice Department's findings were kept secret because the department didn't want to become involved in the complex legal battle that erupted among Hughes forces at the time Hughes made his move to Nassau. That legal battle is continuing.

Just how federal investigators were able to obtain regular reports on Hughes remains a secret.

It is not known if the Justice Department actually infiltrated Hughes' inner cadre or whether it planted investigators in or near the Hughes hotel.