The Weird World of Howard Hughes

For 50 years, Howard Hughes lived the American dream. He set up businesses that made huge amounts of money. He designed airplanes that set new flying records. He dated movie stars and got to know famous politicians. But if Hughes’ early years were a dream, his later years were a nightmare.

Howard Robard Hughes was born the day before Christmas in 1905. He grew up in Texas. His father worked in the oil fields there. Young Howard did not like school. He dropped out at age 17. He did not have a talent for math, though. And he liked to invent things. When his parents would not buy him a motorcycle, Hughes built his own. He also found a way to get his pilot’s license. He used his allowance money to pay for flying lessons.

As a young man, Hughes used his talents to succeed in business. His father died in 1924 and left his share of the Hughes Tool Company to his son. Howard Hughes built the company into a $150-million business. At age 21, Hughes also began producing movies. He had his first hit, Hell’s Angels, in 1930.

His golden touch didn’t end there. In 1936 he took a chance on a new airline. The result was TWA, a $500-million company. Hughes designed an airplane called the H-1 racer. It flew across the country so fast it set a new speed record. Hughes bought some hotels in Las Vegas. As the casino business there grew, Hughes’s fortune soared to more than $1 billion.

Every now and then, Hughes did have a failure. He suffered through several plane crashes. One almost killed him. He also saw the flop of his Spruce Goose. This was a plane Hughes designed. It was the biggest plane ever built. Measuring 320 feet long, it was 60% longer than a Boeing 747! Hughes managed to get the Spruce Goose in the air, but just barely. In a test run, it rose only 70 feet.

Despite these setbacks, Hughes was wildly successful. By the age of 45, he had it made. He was one of the richest men in the world. He could have lived in the greatest luxury. He could have had the finest meals, the nicest clothes, the best parties. But Howard Hughes didn’t want any of that. Instead, he turned his back on the world. He became more and more secretive. Before long, he was living the life of a strange, sad hermit.

Hughes began to pull out of the public spotlight in the late 1940s. He was angry because some government leaders questioned his honesty. He was also weakened by his latest plane crash. So Hughes started to go out less. He trusted fewer and fewer people. Soon he was spending all his time in a dark hotel room. He went for days without getting out of bed. He rang a bell to summon aides when he needed something. As Hughes lost touch with people, he also lost his grip on reality. He became a man obsessed.

His obsession centered on germs. Hughes became convinced that deadly germs were everywhere. He was terrified of getting them on his body. So he tried never to touch another person. He made his aides wear gloves. Hughes also refused to hold anything in his bare hands. He used a Kleenex tissue as “insulation.”

Gordon Margulis was one of Hughes’s aides. He is quoted in the book Howard Hughes: The Hidden Years by James Phelan. Said Margulis, “When you were going to bring [Hughes] a spoon… the spoon handle had to be wrapped in Kleenex and Scotch-taped. Then you would take another piece of Kleenex to hold the Kleenex
wrapping, so the wrapping wouldn’t get contaminated. [Hughes] would lift the wrapped spoon off the piece of Kleenex."

Hughes’s fear of germs spread to clothes. He couldn’t stand to have buttons, zippers, or snaps brush against his skin. In fact, he hated to wear clothes at all. Sometimes he put on a loose-fitting pair of underwear. But much of the time he simply went naked. Before he lay down, his bed had to be lined with paper towels.

Hughes couldn’t stand air conditioning. He was sure it spread germs. Even on the hottest days, he wouldn’t let his aides turn it on. In addition, Hughes would eat only certain foods. He felt he could trust the Campbell Soup Company. If Campbell’s soup was heated to exactly the right temperature, he decided, it was safe to eat. And so for months, he ate nothing but Campbell’s chicken soup. When he finally grew tired of it, he switched to vegetable soup.

Hughes needed glasses but refused to wear them. After all, they would have touched his skin. Instead, he used a magnifying glass. That he could hold in his hand—after covering his hand with a tissue, of course. As he got older, Hughes lost his hearing. But he wouldn’t wear hearing aides, either.

Although Hughes was afraid of germs, he lived in filth. He went years without a haircut. It was reported that his fingernails grew so long they curled like corkscrews. His room was never dusted, never vacuumed.

Hughes had one more dirty little secret. By the late 1960s, he was a drug addict. For a while, he took pain pills and sleeping pills. Then he moved up to stronger drugs. He began injecting himself with what he called “medication.” Hughes paid doctors to get the drugs for him. Once a doctor refused. Hughes flew into a rage, firing the man on the spot. Still, Hughes kept sending the doctor money. That kept him from going to the police or to the newspapers with his story.

By 1972 the drugs and the poor diet had taken their toll. Hughes’s mind was fuzzy. He couldn’t always remember what he wanted to say. He was also deathly thin. At six feet four inches tall, he should have weighed close to 200 pounds. Instead, Hughes weighed just 120 pounds.

That year, Hughes broke his leg while on the way to the shower. Although doctors set the bone, Hughes refused to walk again. According to one source, the doctors “pleaded with him, begged him, tried everything they could to get him to walk. He refused to budge.”

And so, in the end, Howard Hughes even gave up the freedom to walk around his room. This man who had been such a success had turned into a prisoner in his own private prison. When he died in 1976, he was worth almost $2 billion. But only 16 people came to see him buried in an unmarked grave. Not one of them shed any tears.