

nUGGET

OCTOBER 1957

EGOTIST'S PEAK:

a candid look into howard hughes

*It's a moot point whether he'll land in
heaven or hell, but he will be remembered*



by Stanley Phillips

BEFORE writing this article, I asked a Hollywood reporter to substantiate two widely-publicized reports—that Jean Peters married Howard Hughes; that Hughes is preparing to return to movie-making via the purchase of Twentieth Century Fox. The answer was by telegram: *Believe both reports true. But attempts to authenticate lead to stone walls.*

If the walls were built by Howard Hughes, do not look for gold bricks and silver cement; look for excellent construction. For the key to understanding Hughes lies in knowing that he is a perfectionist, as fussy with details as a fluttery bride picking a trousseau.

Although born on a Christmas Eve, Hughes is the world's unlikeliest Santa Claus. Not because of his reedy frame and unjolly mien, but because it simply is not in Hughes' makeup to play any role other than himself, and that would be a combination of *many* roles, each in contradiction to the other.

Hughes professes to dislike publicity about himself, and yet he has poured more sweat than money (and the total amount runs into heavy millions), into a project which, if successful, will eclipse all his previous exploits. And Hughes has been accorded a ticker-tape reception up Broadway which rivaled that bestowed on Lindbergh and General MacArthur. That was for his famous round-the-world hop. What Hughes now dreams of is to successfully pilot his much-abused huge plywood flying ship non-stop around the world.

2 howard hughes

Must *he* be the one to fly it? Or, for that matter, test fly the leviathan of the air? Inasmuch as there is never a guarantee that *any* flight will not result in disaster, why does Hughes, the one-man custodian of a half-billion dollars, risk his valuable neck? There is no clear answer—there never is about anything pertaining to the Imperfect Perfectionist—save that Hughes will not delegate tasks to others which he is capable of handling. And he is egotist enough to feel that he could always do a thing just a bit better than anyone else.

The symbolism of that ancient divinity Janus survived because there is a latent tendency in most people towards ambivalence. We like and dislike at the same time. We simultaneously want to travel both east and west. In Hughes this universal duality is more pronounced because he has to a greater degree than most that insatiable will to achieve.

If successful finally, the world's largest plane will revolutionize air travel, narrow the ocean to a veritable pond. When ready for the history-making hop, Hughes will be at the controls. Where a vital part of his life is concerned—aviation—Hughes will not sit quietly in the background.

To achieve a goal of such magnitude is no easy task, but Hughes likes to undertake—and lick—difficult experiments. He works as Edison worked—hard. Indeed, Hughes possesses much of Edison's inventive genius. In the public eye it is Hughes' Casanova role which stands out, but if Hughes were only a rich collector of escapades, he would no more merit serious examination than would Tommy Manville, and this would apply even if the asbestos inheritance were as large. Hughes compels attention on several levels; as an astute businessman, daring aviator, profligate movie producer, genius of the guided missile, escort of as many beautiful women as most men can only *dream* of squiring. At each level, the focal point is always Hughes' burning urge to shine and excel—traits which manifested themselves at a very early age.

The late novelist Rupert Hughes, Howard's uncle, once commented when asked why he would not talk to his famous nephew: "When I get down on my knees I can talk to God, but not to Howard Hughes."

They first clashed when Howard found himself an orphan at 18. An immensely rich orphan, but an orphan nonetheless. What lay at the core of their conflict was money. A great deal of money.

Howard's father and Rupert's brother, "Dad" Hughes, was a graduate of Harvard Law School, which would imply striped pants and State Department manners. "Dad" Hughes could be gracious; but, more than a barrister, he was at heart an adventurer, a plunger, a man given to daring, dashing living. He did for a while practice law in Joplin, Missouri, but there was too much of the buccaneer in him to be content with so tame an occupation as drawing up legal briefs, especially when adventures and quite frequently fortune beckoned in the booming oil fields of Oklahoma and Texas.

Oddly, it was his inventing a fish-tail bit that could cut through rock which started the prosperous Hughes Tool Company. When "Dad" Hughes died, a hassle over the estate was perhaps inevitable. An unsigned will left everything to Howard, an only son, but the clan considered him far too young to take over the administration of the fabulously successful firm. The way out was pointed by Judge Hume, who had been a Professor at Fessenden School which Howard attended. Judge Hume told the boy, "You can keep the estate open for a year, until you are 19. Then you can apply to the Court for authorization to control the estate without supervision."

The comfortable Hughes home was an outstanding Houston showplace. But there was the constant carping and maneuvering, so Howard decided on a trip to Paris until the year was up.

Whatever his ultimate status, Hughes' fame will rest on

howard hughes

several outstanding things, one of which will surely be the galaxy of glamorous women who at one time or another illuminated his private firmament.

It could correctly be said that the native scion started his swivet of affairs during an earlier trip abroad, at 14. Tall for his age, he looked older than he was, and acted as though he were still older. Old enough then to shake hands with Eros, and what more fitting background could there be? At 18, when he returned to the Aphrodite of cities, he returned to familiar scenes and scents.

Paris! Mecca of the erotic-bent. Can-can rhythms and do-do pulsations. Paris! Citadel of the ogle and bastion of the embrace. Oolala! The boy's grief was genuine, but there were the sensations of the Montparnasse, the tingles to subdue, or satisfy.

Seeking diversion, the mourning youth made the rounds of the clubs, preferring those most likely to appeal to a rakish American whose standards in entertainment were not nearly as high as his scholarship.

To one "cave" he returned several times to watch Josette Dulac, a comely miss who was drawing patrons by her erudite lectures on the beauty and the biological function of the female bosom. One major point was illustrated graphically. Stripping, Mlle. Dulac balanced two demi-tasse cups and saucers on her breasts as she strolled among the admiring patrons. One night young Hughes mustered the courage to lift one of the cups and saucers on the belief that they were held in place by some unseen device. Learning that Josette used no tricks, Hughes became another of her ardent admirers.

This "bosom friendship" was chronicled for posterity by Adele Rogers St. John in *Pictorial Review*, and by an article in *Princeton Alumni*. It is even on record in the Congressional file on Howard Hughes, which grew out of Hughes' famous tussle with Senator Owen Brewster in the 1940's.

Josette's companionship, and the company of other girls, enabled Hughes to slough off a good deal of his despondency. (Reminiscently, he looks back upon that stay with nostalgic delight.) Paris was responsible for another lasting impression—the cinema. French motion pictures were exploiting sex far more realistically than anything Hughes had seen in the States, and recollections of these films, no doubt, influenced his later movie-making.

By early December, 1923, with his 19th birthday only a short time off, the Texas wanderer threw a farewell party for his new friends, mostly girls. Return passage had already been booked. Back home, his Christmas present might have been enough cash to build a highway to Jupiter, but Hughes was not impressed.

"We're not asking you to do very much, my boy," Uncle Rupert said. "All we want you to do is sign over your interest in the firm to us; we'll give you \$7,500,000 . . . and you can go out and do anything you want to do. All the headaches will be ours, we'll take all the risks. We're older and know more about running a business than you do. Now, don't you think this is the sensible thing for . . ."

For most young men it *would* have been the sensible thing to compromise. Seven-and-a-half million! On the interest alone one could live the fabled life. But even as a boy Hughes was not like the usual heir. He seemed *singularly* determined to be top man. Almost angrily he cut his uncle short: "I refuse even to consider your proposal."

Hughes celebrated Christmas and his 19th birthday by dining at the Rice Hotel in Houston, and on Wednesday morning, December 26, 1923, Judge Hume ruled that under Texas law Howard could manage his inheritance as he saw fit. After much bargaining he paid his contesting relatives \$250,000 each (a price Howard considered excessive). But having seen the Hughes Tool Company grow into a gigantic enterprise, Rupert Hughes regretted the low settlement.

Rich, highly eligible, it was inevitable that the young in-

4 howard hughes

dustrialist be swamped with sundry invitations. Dedicated to business, and yet liking to mix, Hughes attended a good number of dinner parties, at one of which he met the attractive Ella Rice.

At the time, Ella recalled later, "Howard was full of ideas. The things he was going to do . . . and he spoke with such freedom and vigor that I wanted nothing more than to sit and listen to him dream. And yet he told me very little of himself. I don't think I ever knew what he was like inside."

Even after they had been married Ella might have said the identical thing, for there are facets of Hughes' life that no one could share. He himself once commented, "Few, very few people in the world can understand me. I don't pride myself on my peculiarities, but I know that I have them."

Of those courtship days, Ella had this to say: "Sometimes he irked me by being late for our dates, or by changing plans at the last minute." One evening she donned a beautiful new gown exclusively tailored for her by a swank New York shop. Howard was expected to take her to a fancy dress ball, a highlight of the Houston social season. Howard showed up very late, his hands and arms covered with grease stains, and he wore dirty jeans and a grimy shirt. He had been working at the tool shed.

Even when Hughes did not tinker with machinery, which he loved, he invariably wore old trousers, shirts that needed laundering and a sweater. The unmistakable effect he gave was that he was above following rules.

Shortly before "Dad" Hughes died, he said to Howard, "When I die you'll have money, son, and if you know how to handle it and spread it, you can do *anything*." Hughes did do just about "anything" save, perhaps, delight Brooks Brothers. Sartorially, Hughes remains just about the most indifferent rich man in America. That night Ella exploded.

"Howard!"

"Let's go boating tonight instead," he said blandly.

Though hurt, Ella changed clothes. She was a girl in love, but the experience was a portent she had to reckon with.

The Rice family had founded Rice Institute, built the Rice Hotel. They were not only a wealthy family, but outstanding leaders in the development of Houston. Ella was popular, and had many suitors, but it was the strange Howard whom she loved. Loved and brooded about.

Sports-minded, she loved a fighter, and admired the way he had successfully waged his court battle. She did not like his *too* unconventional behavior and may have wondered if he loved her sufficiently to change, or if he would put himself out to win her. The opportunity for a decisive test presented itself when Ella traded the scorching heat of Texas for the cool mountain air of New Hampshire.

She was on vacation, and among friends, but only one thought concerned Ella—would Howard be too engrossed in his newly-acquired empire to follow her? Days went by with no news from him. ("I felt bitterly enraged at my own foolishness," she admitted. "To believe that I was important enough in his life to make him want to keep in touch appeared to have been a stupid mistake on my part.") Ella went through an excruciating time, but before long she answered a knock at the door of the house where she was staying. There he stood, in his hands a big bundle of roses and a book on mechanical engineering. He tossed both on a chair to embrace her. "He kissed me," Ella remembered, "in a way that would never pass the movie censors, but it made my heart beat fast."

The wedding was held early in 1925, soon after Howard's twenty-first birthday, and it was sufficiently gala to fit the merger of two great Texas dynasties. Then it was New York for the newlyweds.

Honeymoon! And everything posh. Everything on a grand scale. Glamor floating on caviar clouds. But frictions were not long in developing.

Even on a picnic Ella would wear just the right casuals,

howard hughes

but then it did not matter if Howard wore a suit that looked as though it needed pressing. It mattered when he wanted to wear the same suit to a fashionable night club.

Hughes dislikes to have his hair cut, and Ella insisted that he keep his hair well-groomed. Trivia? Most domestic discords are rooted in seemingly insignificant details. What counted was that Ella's pride was hurt. Clearly, he made an insufficient effort to be *nice*, and on grounds where no principles were involved. *Her* grounds. Even there Hughes had to be *himself*, (which meant being true to only one standard, his own). When he did get into a tux, Hughes offended his bride by inviting showgirls to join them at their table.

For him it was Paris all over again, only now there was a major adjustment to be made, and he could not successfully make it. There was that imposed need to *share*, which he found difficult. Ella's early misgivings returned, sharpened.

She began to suffer from nervous headaches, and stayed home nights while Howard did not. Save for her faith that in due time he would "grow up," she would have returned home alone then. But they went back together, to take up residence at the Hughes family home.

At the Hughes Tool Company the young owner was treated with respect, but it was clearly the respect due a founder's son. Then, too, the business was so solidly grounded, it could practically run itself. Hughes' decision to quit Houston a few months after his marriage was motivated by a consuming ambition to do something on his own. On the domestic side he feared that he was failing as a husband, and he headed back for New York—alone. But soon he was headed west again. After taking inventory of what a young man might do with a bundle of millions to invest, nothing appealed to him so much as California and the motion picture business. He brought Ella to Hollywood. Although she was not happy about leaving her friends in Houston, she did want to make a fresh start on what seemed on the surface a disappointing marriage thus far.

Ella loved their new home on the grounds of the Wilshire Country Club, but she had strong reservations about the film-folk that came to the parties Hughes arranged. One night, after the guests had departed, Ella spoke out with characteristic frankness: "They are coming to our parties solely out of curiosity, and curiosity that's not very pleasant or flattering. Can't you see all they want is to find out what makes you tick and hope that they'll catch you in some blunder so they can go away and laugh at you behind your back?"

Hughes did not care if it was true or not. He was too engrossed in developing his mushrooming movie interests. His first production, *Swell Hogan*, was so bad, the picture was never released. His second, *Two Arabian Knights*, won an award, and became a box office success. The tyro was learning.

Hollywood! Sunday school on the outside, school for scandal within. Hollywood! Mozart garnished with G-string overtones, Pharoah come to life on a celluloid strip.

Hughes soon found his level and gave in to the temptations. Reports of his escapades made racy copy for the gossip columnists, and Ella could not help but be grieved by what she read. She was also aware that there had never been a divorce in the Rice clan.

Aware of what was happening to the Hughes marriage, the late Ernst Lubitsch once tried to cram some of his own sense of domestic responsibility into Hughes. It happened at a party to which the producer brought someone other than Ella. Hughes listened attentively, and then said, "You know how much I love my wife. You know how wonderful Ella is and how much I adore her. I mean to be true to her, I do. Inside I am true to her; but, well, there's something in the California air . . . the palm trees . . . the tropical breezes . . . it just sweeps me off my feet. I'm helpless. I can't account for it. Sir Isaac Newton explained it: the force of attraction varies inversely with the square of the distance.

howard hughes

Right now, Ella is out on Wilshire, 40 miles from where we are, at Malibu. I have a pretty actress here, and 40 squared is 1600."

Lubitsch was not the only one who stared speechless, astonished that Hughes should make such an elaborate and outspoken explanation.

Ella presently returned to Houston, and engaged a lawyer. The divorce proceedings were conducted behind closed doors, and there was no announcement of it in the local papers. Ella soon remarried and settled down to the serious business of raising a family. For Hughes there were eight roisterous years of affairs and film-making before he turned seriously to aviation and then back to movie-producing.

Today, at 52, Hughes remains a strange American phenomenon—the multi multi-millionaire who often looks shabby enough to have been influenced by the late Collyer brothers; the playboy who is usually too busy to play, and who drives himself relentlessly even when he seems to be indulging in a game, as movie-making seemed to be for him, and may be again if he acquires Twentieth Century Fox.

It is a moot point whether Howard Hughes will eventually land in heaven or hell. Or in some limbo he will charter for his private use. What is assured is that he will be remembered. Remembered and cursed. Remembered and revered. Remembered and written about. If he has been a Lucifer, he has also been a benefactor. Even should there be an heir, or heirs, a substantial part of his fortune will go towards perpetuating the Hughes Medical Center, which he has already started. Hughes is medically-minded because for years his hearing has been badly impaired. It does not stop him from climbing Egotist's Peak. □ □ □

nUGGET

OldMagazineArticles.com