



# Howard Hughes

## Howard Hughes



**Born** [September 24, 1905](#)  
 [Houston, Texas, USA](#)

**Died** [April 5, 1976](#) (aged 70)  
 [Houston, Texas, USA](#)

**Occupation** [Chairman, Hughes Aircraft](#);  
industrialist; aviator; engineer; film  
producer

**Net worth** [US\\$12.8 bn](#) (1958 [Forbes 400](#))

Ella Rice (1925-1929)

**Spouse** [Terry Moore](#) (1949-1976)  
[Jean Peters](#) (1957-1971)

*For the Welsh murderer, see [Howard Hughes \(murderer\)](#).*

**Howard Robard Hughes, Jr.** ([September 24, 1905](#) – [April 5, 1976](#)) was, in his time, an [aviator](#), [engineer](#), [industrialist](#), [film producer](#) and [director](#), a [palgrave](#), a [playboy](#), an [eccentric](#), and one of the [wealthiest people in the world](#). He is famous for setting multiple, world [air-speed records](#), building the [Hughes H-1 Racer](#) and [H-4 Hercules airplanes](#), producing the movies [Hell's Angels](#) and [The Outlaw](#), owning and expanding [TWA](#), his enormous intellect<sup>[1]</sup>, and for his debilitating eccentric behavior in later life.

## Early years

Hughes was born in [Houston, Texas](#), on [24 September](#) or [24 December 1905](#). Hughes claimed his birthday was [Christmas Eve](#), although some biographers debate his exact birth date, (according to [NNDB.com](#), it was most likely "the more mundane date of [September 24](#)"<sup>[2]</sup>). His parents were Allene Stone Gano Hughes (a descendant of [Catherine of Valois](#), Dowager Queen of England, by second husband [Owen Tudor](#))<sup>[3][4]</sup> and [Howard R. Hughes, Sr.](#), who patented the [tri-cone roller bit](#), which

allowed rotary drilling for oil in previously inaccessible places. Howard R. Hughes, Sr. founded [Hughes Tool Company](#) in 1909 to commercialize this invention.

Hughes grew up under the strong influence of his mother, who was obsessed with protecting her son from all germs and diseases. From his father, Hughes inherited an interest in all things mechanical. Showing great aptitude in [engineering](#) at an early age, Hughes erected Houston's first wireless broadcast system when he was 11 years old.<sup>[6]</sup> At age 12, Hughes was supposedly photographed in the local newspaper as being the first boy in Houston to have a 'motorized' bicycle, which he had built himself from parts taken from his father's steam engine.<sup>[6]</sup> He was an indifferent student with a liking for [mathematics](#) and flying, taking flying lessons at 14<sup>[7]</sup> and later auditing maths and engineering courses at [Caltech](#).<sup>[8]</sup>

Hughes' parents died within two years of each other, while he was still in his teens. Allene Hughes died at the age of 39, in March 1922, due to complications from an [ectopic pregnancy](#). Less than two years later in January 1924, Howard Hughes, Sr. died of a [heart attack](#). Their deaths apparently inspired 19-year-old Hughes to include the creation of a medical research laboratory in his 1925 [will](#). It is also believed that the research laboratory was conceived as a tax shelter.

Because Howard Sr.'s will had not been updated since Allene's death, young Hughes inherited 75 percent of his father's multi-million dollar fortune, which included the increasing amounts of cash flow generated from [oil](#) drilling royalties.<sup>[9]</sup> Hughes dropped out of [Rice University](#) shortly after his father's death. In June 1925, at age 19, Hughes married Ella Rice, and shortly thereafter they left Houston and moved to [Hollywood](#) where Hughes hoped to make a name for himself making movies.

## Hollywood

He was at first dismissed by Hollywood insiders as a rich man's son. However, his first film, released in 1927, *Everybody's Acting* and his second film, *Two Arabian Knights*, released in 1928, were financial successes, the latter winning an [Academy Award](#) for Best Director of a Comedy Picture. *The Racket* in 1928 and *The Front Page* in 1931 were nominated for [Academy Awards](#). Hughes spent a then-unheard-of \$3.8 million of his own money to make *Hell's Angels*, an epic flying film that ultimately became a smash hit after overcoming many obstacles, released in 1930. He produced another hit, *Scarface*, in 1932. One of his best-known films may be *The Outlaw* which made a star of [Jane Russell](#), for whom Hughes designed a special [bra](#) (although Russell decided against wearing the bra because of a mediocre fit). *Scarface* and *The Outlaw* both received considerable attention from industry censors; *Scarface* for its violence, *The Outlaw* due to Russell's revealing costumes.

Hughes kept his wife isolated at home for weeks at a time and, in 1929, she returned to Houston and filed for divorce. Hughes was a notorious ladies' man who spent time with many famous women, including [Billie Dove](#), [Katharine Hepburn](#), [Bette Davis](#), [Ava Gardner](#), [Olivia de Havilland](#) and [Gene Tierney](#). He also proposed to [Joan Fontaine](#) several times, according to her autobiography *No Bed of Roses*. [Bessie Love](#) was a mistress during his first marriage. [Jean Harlow](#) accompanied him to the premiere of *Hell's Angels*, but Hughes' longtime, right-hand man [Noah Dietrich](#) wrote many years later that the relationship was strictly professional—Hughes personally disliked Harlow. In his 1971 book, *Howard: The Amazing Mr. Hughes*, Dietrich also noted that Hughes genuinely liked and respected [Jane Russell](#) but never sought romantic involvement with her. According to Russell's autobiography, however, Hughes once tried to bed her after a party. Russell (who was married at the time) refused him and Hughes promised it would never happen again. The two maintained a professional and private friendship for many years.

On [July 11, 1936](#), a car driven by Hughes struck and killed a pedestrian named Gabriel Meyer at the corner of Third Street and Lorraine in [Los Angeles](#). Although Hughes was certified as sober at the hospital to which he was taken after the accident, a doctor there made a note that Hughes had been drinking. He was taken to jail and booked on "suspicion of [negligent homicide](#)." A witness to the accident told police that Hughes was driving erratically and too fast, and that Meyer had been standing in the safety zone of a streetcar stop. By the time of the coroner's inquiry, however, the witness had changed his story and claimed that Meyer had moved directly in front of Hughes' car. Hughes made the same claim to reporters outside the inquiry, saying, "I was driving slowly and a man stepped out of the darkness in front of me." The District Attorney recommended that Hughes be cleared of responsibility for Meyer's death.

In [1956](#), he released [The Conqueror](#), considered a tremendous flop and particularly infamous for what was considered a miscasting of [John Wayne](#) as [Genghis Khan](#).

On [January 12, 1957](#), Hughes married actress [Jean Peters](#), whom he had known in Hollywood for several years. His second marriage was troubled, however, with much of the contact between husband and wife conducted by phone.

### Aviator and engineer



The H-1 Racer as it looked in 1935

Hughes was a lifelong aircraft enthusiast, pilot, and self-taught aircraft engineer. He set many world records and designed and built several [aircraft](#) himself while heading [Hughes Aircraft](#). The most technologically important aircraft he designed was the [Hughes H-1 Racer](#). On [September 13, 1935](#), Hughes, flying the H-1, set the [airspeed record](#) of 352 mph (566 km/h) over his test course near [Santa Ana, California](#). (The previous record was 314 mph [505 km/h]). A year and a half later, ([January 19, 1937](#)), flying a somewhat re-designed H-1 Racer, Hughes set a new [transcontinental airspeed record](#) by flying non-stop from [Los Angeles](#) to [New York City](#) in 7 hours, 28 minutes and 25 seconds (beating his own previous record of 9 hours, 27 minutes). His average speed over the flight was 322 mph (518 km/h).<sup>[10]</sup>

The H-1 Racer featured a number of design innovations: it had retractable landing gear and all rivets and joints set flush into the body of the plane to reduce drag. The H-1 Racer is thought to have influenced the design of a number of World War II fighter airplanes such as the [Mitsubishi Zero](#), the [Focke-Wulf FW190](#) and the [F6F Hellcat](#),<sup>[11]</sup> although that has never been proven. The H-1 Racer was donated to the [Smithsonian](#) in 1975 and is on display at the [National Air and Space Museum](#).

On [July 10, 1938](#) Hughes set another record by completing a flight around the world in just 91 hours (3 days, 19 hours), beating the previous record by more than four days. For this flight he did not fly a plane of his own design but a [Lockheed Super Electra](#) (a twin-engine plane with a four-man crew) fitted with all of the latest radio and navigational equipment. Hughes wanted the flight to be a triumph of technology, illustrating that safe, long-distance air travel was possible. In 1938, the [William P.](#)

[Hobby Airport](#) in [Houston](#), Texas, known at the time as [Houston Municipal Airport](#), was re-named "[Howard Hughes Airport](#)," but the name was changed back after people objected to naming the airport after a living person.

Hughes received many awards as an aviator, including the [Harmon Trophy](#) in 1936 and 1938, the [Collier Trophy](#) in 1938, the [Octave Chanute Award](#) in 1940, and a special [Congressional Gold Medal](#) in 1939 "...in recognition of the achievements of Howard Hughes in advancing the science of aviation and thus bringing great credit to his country throughout the world." According to his obituary in the [New York Times](#), Hughes never bothered to come to Washington to pick up the [Congressional Gold Medal](#). It was eventually mailed to him by President [Harry S. Truman](#).

### Near-fatal crash of the XF-11



The second [XF-11](#) prototype (with conventional propellers).



Hughes checking the first XF-11 prototype (with the original twin propeller design).

Hughes was involved in a near-fatal aircraft accident on [July 7, 1946](#), while piloting the experimental [U.S. Army](#) spy plane [XF-11](#) over [Los Angeles](#). An oil leak caused one of the counter-rotating propellers to reverse its pitch, making the plane yaw sharply. Hughes tried to save the craft by landing it on the [Los Angeles Country Club golf course](#) (incorrectly stated as the Wilshire Country Club in the 2004 movie), but seconds before he reached his attempted destination the plane started dropping dramatically and crashed in the [Beverly Hills](#) neighborhood surrounding the country club.<sup>[12]</sup>

When the XF-11 finally skidded to a halt after mowing down three houses, the fuel tanks exploded, setting fire to the aircraft and a nearby home. Hughes lay seriously injured beside the burning airplane until he was rescued by [Marine Master Sergeant William L. Durkin](#), who happened to be in the area visiting friends. Hughes sustained significant injuries in the crash; including a crushed [collar bone](#), twenty-four broken [ribs](#)<sup>[13]</sup> and numerous third-degree [burns](#).

However, Hughes was proud of the fact that his mind was still working. Also, as he lay in his hospital bed, he noted that he did not like the design of his bed. He called in plant engineers to design a

"tailor-made" bed, equipped with hot and cold running water, built in six sections, and operated by 30 electric motors, with push-button adjustments <sup>[14]</sup>

Many attribute his long-term addiction to [opiates](#) to his use of [morphine](#) as a painkiller during his convalescence. The trademark [moustache](#) he wore afterwards was meant to cover a scar on his upper lip resulting from the accident.

## Hughes H-4 Hercules ("Spruce Goose")

Main article: [Hughes H-4 Hercules](#)



The [H-4 Hercules](#) with Hughes at the controls

Possibly his most famous aircraft project was the H-4 Hercules, nicknamed the "Spruce Goose" (to Hughes' consternation, since its frame was built of [birch](#), not [spruce](#)). The plane was originally contracted by the U.S. government for use in [World War II](#), as a viable way to transport troops and equipment across the Atlantic instead of sea going troop transports that were liable to the threat of German [U-Boats](#). In 1947, it was the largest aircraft ever built, weighing 190 tons and not completed until just after the end of [World War II](#). The Hercules flew only once for a mile (1.6 km) (with Hughes at the controls) on [November 2, 1947](#).

Confusion still exists as to whether or not the Hercules is in fact the world's largest aircraft. To say it is the *largest aircraft* ever built is slightly inaccurate. An aircraft's size can be judged by length, weight, or wingspan. The Hercules is certainly not the longest aircraft ever built. Indeed, several airships have surpassed 800 ft. Also, despite its immense size, the Hercules weighs much less than many commercial jet liners. Measured by wingspan, however, the Hercules is greater than anything built before or since. It is the only airplane ever built with a wingspan in excess of 300 feet, the next largest wingspan being over 50 feet shorter.

Hughes was summoned to testify before the [Senate War Investigating Committee](#) to explain why the plane had not been delivered to the [United States Army Air Forces](#) during the war, but the committee disbanded without releasing a final report. Because the contract required the aircraft to be built of "non-strategic materials," Hughes built the plane largely from birch (rather than aluminum) in his [Westchester](#), California facility to fulfill his contract. The plane was on display alongside the [RMS Queen Mary](#) in [Long Beach, California](#) for many years before being moved to [McMinnville, Oregon](#), where it is now part of the [Evergreen Aviation Museum](#).

## Hughes Aircraft

Main article: [Hughes Aircraft](#)



Hughes Aircraft Company, a division of Hughes Tool Company, was originally founded by Hughes in 1932, in a rented corner of a Lockheed Aircraft Corporation hangar in Burbank, California, to carry out the expensive conversion of a military plane into the H-1 racer. During and after World War II, Hughes fashioned his company into a major defense contractor. The [Hughes Helicopters](#) division started in 1947 when [helicopter](#) manufacturer Kellett sold their latest design to Hughes for production.



In 1948, Hughes created a new division of the company, the [Hughes Aerospace](#) Group. The Hughes Space and Communications Group and the Hughes Space Systems Division were later spun off in 1948 to form their own divisions and ultimately became the [Hughes Space and Communications Company](#) in 1961. In 1953, Howard Hughes gave all his stock in the Hughes Aircraft Company to the newly formed Howard Hughes Medical Institute, thereby turning the aerospace and defense contractor into a tax-exempt charity. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute sold Hughes Aircraft in 1985 to General Motors for \$5.2 billion. In 1997 General Motors sold Hughes Aircraft to Raytheon and in 2000 sold Hughes Space & Communications to Boeing. Boeing, GM, and Raytheon acquired the [Hughes Research Laboratories](#).

## Airlines

In 1939, at the urging of Jack Frye, president of [TWA](#), Hughes quietly purchased a majority share of TWA stock for nearly \$7 million and took control of the airline. Upon assuming ownership of TWA, Hughes was prohibited by federal law from building his own airplanes. Seeking an airplane that would perform better than TWA's fleet of [Boeing 307 Stratoliners](#), Hughes approached Boeing's competitor, [Lockheed](#). Hughes already had a good relationship with Lockheed since they had built the plane he used in his record flight around the world in 1938. Lockheed agreed to Hughes' demand that the new plane be built in absolute secrecy. The result was the revolutionary [Constellation](#) and TWA purchased the first 40 of the new planes off the production line.



Lockheed Constellation

Hughes' ownership of and plans for TWA may have been the real reason he was investigated by the Senate following the war. [Pan American World Airways](#) chief [Juan Trippe](#) sought to monopolize international air travel and had influenced powerful [Maine](#) Senator [Owen Brewster](#) to propose legislation securing Pan Am as the sole American airline allowed to fly overseas at a time when Hughes planned TWA service to Europe with the Constellation. Dietrich wrote of the investigation that Hughes beat the Senate committee by turning the hearings into an attack on Brewster. Hughes successfully exposed Brewster's dealings with Pan Am and later helped defeat his re-election bid by pouring considerable funds into the campaign of his opponent, [Frederick Payne](#).

In 1956, Hughes placed an order for 63 [Convair 880s](#) for TWA at a cost of \$400 million. Although Hughes was extremely wealthy at this time, outside creditors demanded that Hughes relinquish control of TWA in return for providing the money. In 1960, Hughes was ultimately forced out of TWA, although he still owned 78 percent of the company and battled to regain control.

Before Hughes' ouster, the TWA jet financing issue precipitated the end of Hughes' relationship with Noah Dietrich. Dietrich remembered Hughes developing a plan by which Hughes Tool Company profits were to be inflated in order to sell the company for a windfall that would pay the bills for the 880s. Dietrich agreed to go to Texas to implement the plan on the condition that Hughes agreed to a capital gains arrangement he had long promised Dietrich. When Hughes balked, Dietrich resigned immediately. "Noah," Dietrich quoted Hughes as replying, "I cannot exist without you!" Dietrich stood

firm and eventually had to sue to retrieve personal possessions from his office after Hughes ordered it locked.

In 1966, he was forced by a U.S. federal court to sell his shares in TWA due to concerns over conflict of interest between his ownership of both TWA and Hughes Aircraft. The sale of his TWA shares netted him a profit of \$547 million. During the 1970s, Hughes went back into the airline business, buying the airline Air West and renaming it [Hughes Airwest](#).

## RKO



The classic logo of RKO Radio Pictures.

*Main article:* [RKO Pictures](#)

In 1948, Hughes gained control of [RKO](#), a struggling major Hollywood studio, by acquiring 25% of the outstanding stock. During his tenure, RKO suffered as a result of his management style. Within weeks of taking control, he dismissed three-quarters of the work force and production was shut down for six months in 1949 while he undertook the investigation of the politics of all remaining studio employees. Completed pictures would be sent back for reshooting if he felt his star (especially female) was not properly presented, or if a film's [anti-communist](#) politics were not sufficiently clear. An aborted sale in 1952 to a [Chicago](#)-based group with no experience in the industry disrupted studio operations even further.

Hughes let go of the RKO theaters in 1953 as settlement of the [United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. antitrust](#) case. With the sale of the profitable theaters, the shaky status of the film studio became increasingly apparent. A steady stream of lawsuits from RKO's minority shareholders, charging him with financial misconduct and corporate mismanagement, became an increasing nuisance, especially because Hughes wanted to focus on his aircraft-manufacturing and TWA holdings during the [Korean War](#) years. Eager to be rid of the distraction, Hughes offered to buy out all other stockholders.

By the end of 1954, at a cost of nearly \$24 million, he had gained near total control of RKO, becoming the closest thing to a sole owner of a studio that Hollywood had seen in more than three decades. Six months later, Hughes sold the studio to the [General Tire and Rubber Company](#) for \$25 million. Hughes retained the rights to pictures he had personally produced, including those made at RKO. He also retained Jane Russell's contract. For Howard Hughes, this was the virtual end of his 25-year involvement in motion pictures; though he had all but destroyed a major Hollywood studio, his reputation as a financial wizard emerged unscathed. He reportedly walked away from RKO having made \$6.5 million in personal profit. <sup>[15]</sup>

General Tire was interested mainly in exploiting the value of the RKO library for television programming, though it made some attempts to continue producing films. After a year and a half of mixed success, General Tire shut down film production at RKO for good at the end of January 1957. The studio lots in [Hollywood](#) and [Culver City](#) were sold to [Desilu Productions](#) later that year for \$6.15 million.

## Howard Hughes Medical Institute

### Howard Hughes Medical Institute



<b><u>Founder</u></b>	Howard Hughes
<b><u>Founded</u></b>	<u>1953</u>
<b><u>Headquarters</u></b>	<u>Chevy Chase, Maryland</u> , United States
<b><u>Focus</u></b>	Biological and Medical research
<b><u>Method</u></b>	Laboratories, Funding
<b><u>Endowment</u></b>	\$16.3 billion <u>USD</u>
<b><u>Website</u></b>	<u><a href="http://www.hhmi.org">http://www.hhmi.org</a></u>

In 1953, Hughes launched the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Maryland, formed with the express goal of basic biomedical research including trying to understand, in Hughes' words, the "genesis of life itself." Hughes' first will, that he signed in 1925 at the age of 19, stipulated that a portion of his estate should be used to create a medical institute bearing his name (Brown and Boeske 34). Hughes gave all his stock of the Hughes Aircraft Company to the institute, thereby turning the aerospace and defense contractor into a tax-exempt charity. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute's new Board of Trustees sold Hughes Aircraft in 1985 to General Motors for \$5.2 billion. This caused the institute to grow dramatically.

The deal was the topic of a protracted legal battle between Hughes and the Internal Revenue Service, which Hughes ultimately won. After his death in 1976, many thought that the balance of Hughes' estate would go to the institute, although it ultimately was divided among his cousins and other heirs, given the lack of a will to the contrary. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute is America's second largest private foundation and the largest devoted to biological and medical research with an endowment of \$16.3 billion as of June 2007.

### **[edit]** Watergate Scandal

Shortly before the 1960 Presidential election, Richard Nixon was harmed by revelations of a \$205,000 loan from Hughes to Nixon's brother Donald. It has long been speculated that Nixon's drive to learn what the Democrats were planning in 1972 was based in part on his belief that if the Democrats knew about a bribe that his friend Bebe Rebozo had received from Hughes it could be politically ruinous, and Nixon's desire to cover up the event led to the Watergate break-ins.<sup>[16]</sup>

### Glomar Explorer

*Main article:* [USNS Glomar Explorer \(T-AG-193\)](#)

In 1972, Hughes was approached by the CIA to help secretly recover Soviet submarine K-129 which had sunk near Hawaii four years earlier. He agreed. Thus the *Glomar Explorer*, a special-purpose salvage vessel, was born. Hughes' involvement provided the CIA with a plausible cover story, having



to do with civilian marine research at extreme depths and the mining of undersea [manganese nodules](#). In the summer of 1974, *Glomar Explorer* attempted to raise the Soviet vessel.

However, during the recovery a mechanical failure in the ship's grapple caused half of the submarine to break off and fall to the ocean floor. This section is believed to have held many of the most sought after items, including its code book and nuclear missiles. Two nuclear-tipped torpedoes and some cryptographic machines were recovered, along with the bodies of six Soviet [submariners](#) who were subsequently given formal burial at sea in a filmed ceremony. The operation, known as [Project Jennifer](#), became public in February 1975 because burglars had obtained secret documents from Hughes' headquarters in June 1974.

## Mental and physical illness

By the late 1950s Hughes had developed debilitating symptoms of social avoidance behavior and [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#) (OCD), which manifested itself in various ways. Much of this behavior can be traced back to Hughes' very early childhood. His aversion to germs likely originated with his overprotective mother. Allene Hughes was often overly concerned about germs, and coddled and spoiled her only child. In the film [The Aviator](#) (2004), the film opens with Howard as a young child, being bathed by his mother as she lectures him about the danger of germs and the necessity for quarantine. <sup>[17]</sup> It was Hughes' mother who first provided her young son with a means of escaping social situations and pressures by using the excuse of illness. As a young boy, when Howard wanted to attend summer camp (during a time the public feared the spread of polio), his parents wanted assurances that their son was protected. When this assurance was not forthcoming, his mother decided it was better to keep him home. Subsequently after attending camp one summer, Hughes avoided another year at camp by complaining about headaches and bad dreams when he returned home. Later, on the verge of adolescence, young Howard became ill and was kept out of school for most of the year. He developed a form of paralysis that was never diagnosed and which disappeared after several months. <sup>[18]</sup>

In the 1930s, close friends reported he was obsessed with the size of peas, one of his favorite foods, and used a special fork to sort them by size before he ate. While producing [The Outlaw](#), Hughes became obsessed by a minor flaw in one of Jane Russell's blouses, claiming that the fabric bunched up along a seam and gave the appearance of two nipples on each of Russell's breasts. He was reportedly so concerned by the matter as to write a detailed memorandum to the film crew on how to fix the problem.

[Richard Fleischer](#), who directed [His Kind of Woman](#) with Hughes as executive producer, wrote at length in his autobiography about the difficulty of dealing with the famed tycoon. In this book, *Just Tell Me When to Cry*, published in 1993, Fleischer explained that Hughes was fixated on trivial details and was alternately indecisive and obstinate. He went on to say that Hughes' unpredictable [mood swings](#) made him wonder at times if the film would ever be completed.

As an adult—at one time one of the most visible men in America—Hughes ultimately vanished from public view altogether, although the tabloids continued to follow rumors regarding his behavior and whereabouts. At various times, the media reported him to be terminally ill, mentally unstable, or possibly dead. Hughes eventually became a complete recluse, locking himself in darkened rooms in a medication-induced daze. Though he always kept a barber on call, Hughes only had his hair cut and nails trimmed about once a year. Several doctors were kept in the house on a substantial salary, but Hughes rarely saw them and usually refused to follow their advice. Toward the end of his life, his inner circle was largely composed of [Mormons](#) because he considered them trustworthy even though Hughes himself was not a member of their [church](#).



Hughes equipped this 1954 [Chrysler New Yorker](#) with an aircraft-grade air filtration system which took up the entire trunk

Hughes by this time had become severely addicted to [codeine](#), [valium](#), and a number of other prescription drugs and was becoming increasingly frail. He insisted on using paper towels to pick up objects, so that he could insulate himself from germs. It has also been said that he watched the 1968 film [Ice Station Zebra](#) some 150 times. <sup>[19]</sup>

In a bout of obsession with his home state of Texas, Hughes began purchasing all restaurant chains and four star hotels that had been founded within Texan borders. This included, if for only a short period, many unknown franchises currently out of business. Ownership of the restaurants was placed in the hands of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and all licenses were re-sold shortly after.

Hughes had contracted [syphilis](#) as a young man and much of the strange behavior at the end of his life, his well-documented aversion to handshaking, for example, has been attributed by modern biographers to the tertiary stage of that disease. The condition first manifested itself in the form of tiny blisters that erupted on his hands. After receiving medical treatment for his symptoms, Hughes was warned by his doctor not to shake hands for some time, so he avoided doing so for the rest of his life.

His syphilis was also indirectly responsible for a bizarre episode in which Hughes burned all his clothes. In the film [The Aviator](#), this incident is depicted as his response to his breakup with Katharine Hepburn. In reality, it was an overreaction by Hughes to the syphilis diagnosis; fearful of the germs which might be lingering on his clothing, he torched his entire wardrobe, as well as every piece of linen in his house.

## **Managing the financial empire**

As his empire grew, Hughes used every trick conceivable to avoid paying taxes to the government. In the early years of Hughes Aircraft, Hughes attempted to move his company from Southern California to Nevada in an effort to take advantage of Nevada's low tax rates. Ultimately, Hughes donated all his stock in Hughes Aircraft to the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, thereby turning the military contractor into a tax-exempt charity. In addition to avoiding income taxes, this had the effect of silencing the upper management in Hughes Aircraft, who for many years had clamored for stock in the company as part of their compensation.

Hughes was able to keep and maintain highly qualified managers in his companies by promising them large sums of money at the end of their careers. In order to be able to give them the most money without taxation, Hughes would make an arrangement whereby he would publicly criticize a certain manager that had recently left his company. Then, the manager would sue Hughes in court for public defamation. A settlement was given to this manager in court which was not subject to taxes. This happened with Noah Dietrich, Robert Maheu, and others. For example, Robert Maheu was awarded \$2.2 million in a defamation lawsuit shortly after leaving Hughes' employ.

Although Hughes lived in his own home in California for many years, he later came up with the idea of living in hotels as this enabled him to not have a legally declared residence in any state which would require him to pay personal income taxes. Shortly after Hughes began living in hotels with no state as his official residence, legislation was passed that any person living in a state 180 days or longer was subject to personal income tax during that time period in that state. Then, Hughes would live in a given hotel for just under 180 days, before moving to another hotel for just under 180 days, and so on. His extremely creative efforts to avoid taxes were successful; even after his death, the states of California and Texas were unable to collect inheritance taxes since it could not be proven that he was a legal resident of either state.

## Las Vegas baron and recluse

The wealthy and aging Howard Hughes, accompanied by his entourage of personal aides, moved from one hotel to another, always taking up residence in the top floor penthouse. During the last ten years of his life, from 1966 to 1976, Hughes lived in hotels in [Beverly Hills](#); [Boston](#); [Las Vegas](#); the [Bahamas](#); Vancouver, Canada;<sup>[20]</sup> [London](#); [Managua, Nicaragua](#); [Acapulco, Mexico](#); and, others.

On [November 27, 1966](#), Hughes arrived in Las Vegas by railroad car and moved into the [Desert Inn](#). Refusing to leave the hotel and to avoid further conflicts with the owners of the hotel, Hughes bought the Desert Inn in early 1967. The hotel's eighth floor became the nerve center of his empire and the ninth-floor penthouse became Hughes' personal residence. Between 1966 and 1968, Hughes bought several other hotels/casinos ([Castaways](#), [New Frontier](#), [The Landmark Hotel and Casino](#), [Sands](#), and [Silver Slipper](#)) from the [Mafia](#).

Hughes wanted to change the image of Las Vegas from its [mobsters](#) in gaudy silk suits and thousand-dollar-a-night [call girls](#) to something more glamorous. As Hughes wrote in a memo to an aide, "I like to think of Las Vegas in terms of a well-dressed man in a dinner jacket and a beautifully jeweled and furred female getting out of an expensive car." A chronic [insomniac](#), Hughes bought several local [television stations](#) (including [KLAS-TV](#)) so that there would always be something for him to watch in the early hours of the morning.

Hughes' considerable business holdings were overseen by a small panel unofficially dubbed "The Mormon Mafia" because of the many Latter-day Saints on the committee.<sup>[21]</sup> In addition to supervising day-to-day business operations and Hughes' health, they also went to great pains to satisfy Hughes' every whim. Hughes once became fond of [Baskin Robbins](#)' Banana Nut [ice cream](#) so his aides sought to secure a bulk shipment for him—only to discover that Baskin-Robbins had discontinued the flavor. They put in a request for the smallest amount the company could provide for a special order, 350 gallons (1,300 l), and had it shipped from [Los Angeles](#) to Las Vegas. A few days after the order arrived, Hughes announced he was tired of Banana Nut and wanted only French Vanilla ice cream. The Desert Inn ended up distributing free Banana Nut ice cream to casino customers for a year, until the 350 gallons (1,300 l) were gone.<sup>[22]</sup>

As an owner of several major businesses in Las Vegas, Hughes wielded enormous political and economic power in Nevada and was often able to influence the outcome of elections there and elsewhere. A marked obsession that affected Hughes throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s was the underground nuclear testing that was then occurring in Nevada. Hughes was afraid of the risk posed by the residual [nuclear radiation](#) from the tests. Hughes stayed up for days and nights on end, managing his assets to try to halt the nuclear tests. When they finally went through despite Hughes' efforts, the detonations were powerful enough that the entire hotel in which he was staying trembled with the [shock wave](#). In two separate last-ditch maneuvers, Hughes instructed his representatives to offer million-dollar bribes to both presidents [Lyndon Johnson](#) and [Richard Nixon](#). His aides never

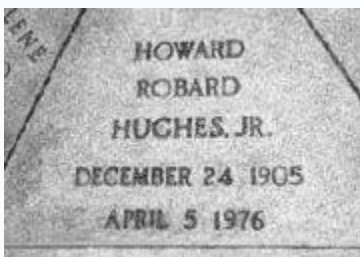
offered the bribes, reporting to Hughes that Johnson declined the offer and they were unable to contact Nixon. Hughes' personal correspondence makes it clear that the Nevada nuclear testing issue was the last straw leading to his self-imposed exile from the United States, which was to end only with his death.

In 1971, Jean Peters filed for divorce; the two had not lived together for many years. Peters requested a lifetime [alimony](#) payment of \$70,000 a year, adjusted for [inflation](#), and waived all claims to Hughes' estate. Hughes offered her a settlement of over a million dollars, but she declined it. Hughes did not insist upon a [confidentiality agreement](#) from Peters as a condition of the divorce; aides reported that Hughes never spoke ill of her. She refused to discuss her life with Hughes and declined several lucrative offers from big-name publishers and biographers. Peters would state only that she had not seen Hughes for several years before their divorce, because his psychological problems forced him to stay in a separate room, talking with her only by phone.

Hughes was living in the Intercontinental Hotel near [Lake Managua](#) in [Nicaragua](#) where he sought privacy and security.<sup>[23]</sup> However, a powerful 6.5 earthquake damaged [Managua](#) in December 1972. On the pretext of possible assassination and intrusive press photographers, his aides insisted the windows be blacked out. He took precautions and stayed in the [Nicaraguan National Palace](#) with former dictator [Anastasio Somoza](#) before leaving for [Florida](#) on a private jet the following day.<sup>[24]</sup>

In 1972, author [Clifford Irving](#) created a media sensation when he claimed to have co-written an authorized [autobiography](#) of Hughes. Hughes was such a reclusive figure that he did not immediately publicly refute Irving's statement, leading many people to believe Irving's book was a genuine autobiography. Before the book's publication, however, Hughes finally denounced Irving in a teleconference and the entire project was eventually exposed as a hoax. Irving was later convicted of [fraud](#) and spent 17 months in prison. The 2007 film [The Hoax](#), starring [Richard Gere](#), is based on these events.

## Death and burial



Howard Hughes' gravestone



Hughes Family Gravesite at [Glenwood Cemetery](#)

Hughes died on [April 5, 1976](#), while on an airplane owned by Robert Graf, en route from his penthouse in [Acapulco, Mexico](#) to [The Methodist Hospital](#) in Houston. It has also been argued that he died before leaving Mexico. His reclusive activities and drug use had made him practically unrecognizable; his hair, beard, [fingernails](#), and [toenails](#) had grown grossly long, his once-strapping



6'4" (193 cm) frame now weighed barely 90 lbs (41 kg), and the [FBI](#) had to resort to [fingerprints](#) to identify the body. <sup>[25]</sup>

A subsequent [autopsy](#) noted [kidney failure](#) as the cause of death. Hughes was in extremely poor physical condition at the time of his death; X-rays revealed broken-off hypodermic needles still embedded in his arms and severe [malnutrition](#). While his kidneys were damaged, his other internal organs were deemed perfectly healthy.

Hughes is buried in the [Glenwood Cemetery](#) in [Houston](#).

## Estate

Approximately three weeks after Hughes' death, a [holographic, or handwritten, will](#) was found on the desk of an official of [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) in [Salt Lake City, Utah](#). The so-called "[Mormon Will](#)" gave \$1.56 billion to various charities (including \$625 million to the [Howard Hughes Medical Institute](#)); nearly \$470 million to the upper-management in Hughes' companies and to his aides; \$156 million to first cousin William Lummis; \$156 million split equally between his two ex-wives Ella Rice and Jean Peters; and \$156 million to a gas-station owner named [Melvin Dummar](#). Dummar initially denied any knowledge about the will but changed his story when his fingerprints were found on the envelope containing the will.

Dummar claimed to reporters that late one evening in December 1967, he found a disheveled and dirty man lying along [U.S. Highway 95](#), 150 miles (250 km) south of [Las Vegas](#). The man asked for a ride to Las Vegas. Dropping him off at the [Sands Hotel](#), Dummar said the man told him he was Hughes. Dummar then claimed that days after Hughes' death, a "mysterious man" appeared at his gas station, leaving an envelope containing the will on his desk. Unsure if the will was genuine, and unsure of what to do, Dummar left the will at the LDS Church office. In a trial lasting seven months, the Mormon will was eventually rejected by the [Nevada](#) court in June 1978 as a forgery. The court declared that Hughes had died [intestate](#).

Hughes' \$2.5 billion estate was eventually split in 1983 among 22 cousins, including William Lummis who serves as a trustee of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Dummar was largely discounted by the public as a phony and an opportunist. [Jonathan Demme](#)'s film [Melvin and Howard](#) (starring [Jason Robards](#) and [Paul Le Mat](#)), was based on Dummar's tale.

The [U.S. Supreme Court](#) ruled that Hughes Aircraft was owned by the [Howard Hughes Medical Institute](#), who sold it to [General Motors](#) in 1985 for \$5.2 billion. Suits brought by the states of California and Texas claiming they were owed inheritance tax were both rejected by the court. In 1984, Hughes' estate paid an undisclosed amount to [Terry Moore](#), who claimed to have been secretly married to Hughes on a yacht in international waters off [Mexico](#) in 1949 and never divorced. Although Moore never produced proof of a marriage, her book, *The Beauty and the Billionaire*, became a best-seller.

## Portrayals in popular culture

### Movies





[Leonardo DiCaprio](#) (right) as Howard Hughes and [John C. Reilly](#) (left) as [Noah Dietrich](#) in [The Aviator](#)

- [The Amazing Howard Hughes](#) (1977), directed by [William A. Graham](#). [Tommy Lee Jones](#) stars as Howard Hughes.
- [Melvin and Howard](#) (1980), directed by [Jonathan Demme](#) and starring [Jason Robards](#) (a distant cousin) as Howard Hughes and Paul Le Mat as Melvin Dummar. The film won [Academy Awards](#) for Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actress ([Mary Steenburgen](#)). The film focuses on Melvin Dummar's claims of meeting Hughes in the Nevada desert and subsequent estate battles over his inclusion in Hughes' will. Critic Pauline Kael called the film "an almost flawless act of sympathetic imagination." <sup>[26]</sup>
- [The Aviator](#) (2004), directed by [Martin Scorsese](#) and starring [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) as Hughes. Nominated for 11 [Academy Awards](#), and winning five, the acclaimed film takes the usual biopic liberties (Ella Rice is not seen or mentioned although Hughes was married to her during the making of *Hell's Angels*). The film focuses primarily on Hughes' achievements in aviation and in the movies and on the increasing handicaps imposed on him by his obsessive-compulsive behavior.
- Before *The Aviator*, there were several attempts to create a biopic based on the life of Hughes. For years, director-actor [Warren Beatty](#) wanted to play Hughes and direct a big-screen film of the mogul. It was to be released alongside Beatty's film [Reds](#), but due to the lack of the right script, the project was abandoned. In the 1990s, producers with [Touchstone Pictures](#) wanted to do it with [John Malkovich](#), [Edward Norton](#), or [Johnny Depp](#) as Hughes, but, due to climbing costs, that venture was abandoned. [Castle Rock Entertainment](#) also tried to develop a biopic called *Mr. Hughes* with [Jim Carrey](#) starring and with [Christopher Nolan](#) directing and re-writing a script originated by [David Koepp](#) and [Brian De Palma](#). When *The Aviator* began production, the idea was scrapped, and Nolan went on to direct [Batman Begins](#).
- [The Hoax](#) (2007) directed by [Lasse Hallström](#), and starring [Richard Gere](#) as [Clifford Irving](#). The focus is on the story of the fake autobiography of Hughes in 1971 and how Irving was found guilty of defrauding the publishers [McGraw-Hill](#) by making up the whole story. Irving's hoax made worldwide headlines at the time.

## Fictional media inspirations

The following [fictional characters](#) appear to have been, at least in part, patterned after Hughes:

- [Willard Whyte](#) of the [James Bond](#) film [Diamonds Are Forever](#).
- Tony Stark, a wealthy inventor and industrialist who becomes Marvel Comics's [Iron Man](#).
- In [J.G. Ballard](#)'s novel [Hello America](#), set 100 years in the future, a character modeled after Hughes rules a depopulated United States from a climate-controlled penthouse in Las Vegas, launching [nuclear weapons](#) at American cities to assuage his fear of "contamination."
- [The Simpsons](#) episode "[\\$pringfield](#)" in which [Montgomery Burns](#), obsessing over his earnings from his casino, exhibits Hughes' OCD, including wearing tissue boxes on his feet, moving into a hotel penthouse, storing urine in jars, allowing his hair and nails to grow untrimmed, and creating a model aircraft called the "[Spruce Moose](#)."

- In [The Disney Afternoon's TaleSpin](#), the characters join a group of businessmen for a dinner on the main deck of the moosehead-shaped seaplane, the "[Spruce Moose](#)", built by a reclusive hippopotamus named Howard Huge with Hughes' characteristic mannerisms. Hughes himself appears in a later episode, living on an island in the "Bermuda Trapazoid," kidnapping pilots and forcing them to build an aircraft even larger than the Spruce Moose, which he dubs the "Titanium Turkey."
- Hughes was not portrayed, but alluded to, in a few 1969-70 episodes of [Beverly Hillbillies](#) when Jed Clampett announces he will go into business with someone named Howard Hughes. This news excites Mr. Drysdale until, ultimately, he discovers the "Howard Hughes" in question is a regular farmer from Hooterville and his last name is spelled H-E-W-E-S, not H-U-G-H-E-S. The Howard Hughes is really Howard Hewes!
- Hughes was portrayed by [Terry O'Quinn](#) in [Disney's The Rocketeer](#) (1991), substituting for the "mystery inventor" ([Doc Savage](#)) in the original [comic book](#) version. In the film, Hughes had designed the rocket for use by soldiers, regretted the project, and declined to manufacture any more rockets. In the first scene with Hughes, he is arguing with two War Department people about his decision.
- [Steven Carter](#)'s novel *I was Howard Hughes* is a "picture of a Hughes who might have been."
- In [William Gibson](#)'s science fiction novel [Count Zero](#) the key villain, industrialist Josef Virek, is identified with Hughes with respect to his wealth and reclusive nature. One character (Andrea) likens Hughes to "a proto-Virek."
- The character of Horace Derwent in [Stephen King's The Shining](#) is partially based on Hughes. The fictional Derwent was a millionaire aviator and producer during the 1930s and 1940s, and even takes credit for the design of a strapless bra worn in one of his movies.
- In [Norman Partridge](#)'s story *Undead Origami*, Hughes is portrayed as a vampire, having become so during filming of *Dracula in New Orleans*. In the story, Hughes uses a look-alike for public appearances and feeds on convalescent home patients, using his considerable influence to make police look the other way.
- Horace Riddle Hind, portrayed in *Death of a Politician*, by Richard Condon, is a character almost identical to Howard Hughes. In the novel, he is supposed to have died in the early '60s, and secretly replaced by Nudey Danzig (a character based on Meyer Lansky) and Walter Slurrie (a Richard Nixon character) with an impostor, to steal Hind's fortune. The Secret Police (the CIA) also helps.
- Herbert Horatio Blackwell, or "Poppy" in David Grand's novel *Louse*.
- On the [Nickelodeon](#) cartoon [Invader Zim](#) episode named "Germs" , [Zim](#) becomes obsessed in fighting off germs and soon resorts to wearing tissue-boxes as shoes in a germ free room, much like the rumored behavior of Howard Hughes.

## Music

- On his TV [variety show](#) (1965-1974), [Dean Martin](#), who would sing parody verses of popular songs, sang lines of "[Young at Heart](#)" thus: "Fairy tales can come true/It can happen to you/If you're Howard Hughes..."
- Rick Nelson alludes to Hughes in his 1972 hit "Garden Party": "Mr. Hughes hid in [Dylan](#)'s shoes wearing his disguise".
- John Hartford's 1972 album *Morning Bugle* includes the song "Howard Hughes Blues" which describes his solitary life of "poor old Howard Hughes and all of his blues".
- [Jim Croce](#)'s 1973 song "Workin' at the Car Wash Blues" hints at the singer's hidden genius with the lyrics "for workin at this end of Niagara Falls is an undiscovered Howard Hughes."
- The soul trio [Hues Corporation](#), whose biggest hit was "Rock the Boat", originally called themselves "Children of Howard Hughes", but changed their name after 1973 for fear of a lawsuit.

- The British [progressive rock](#) band [Genesis](#) has the lyric, "There's Howard Hughes in blue suede shoes; Smiling at the majorettes, smoking Winston cigarettes" in their song "Fly On A Windshield", part of the album [The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway](#) (1974).
- [10cc](#) mentions Hughes in the hit song "Wall Street Shuffle"(1974), with the line "Oh, Howard Hughes, did your money make you better?"
- "Ain't No Fun (Waiting Round To Be A Millionaire)" (1976) by [AC/DC](#) contains lyrics at the end "Hey Howard, get your f\*ckin' jumbo jet off my airport!"
- [The Boomtown Rats](#) released the song "Me And Howard Hughes" on their record *Tonic For The Troops* in 1978.
- The [British punk rock](#) band [The Tights](#) wrote a song "Howard Hughes" which was the title track of their "Howard Hughes" single (1978).
- [Gary Numan](#) said the suited visage he used for the "Dance" (1981) and "I, Assassin" albums were patterned in part after Howard Hughes, whom he identified as one of his heroes.
- [Stan Ridgway](#)'s 1991 song "I Wanna Be a Boss" contains a reference to Howard Hughes as a role model for those who aspire to be eccentric, reclusive billionaires.
- The British [shoegazer](#) band [Ride](#) mentioned Howard Hughes in their song "Castle on the Hill"<sup>[1]</sup> In addition, they have a song titled "Howard Hughes" on their 1992 CD single *Twisterella*.
- [Alice in Chains](#) guitarist [Jerry Cantrell](#) wrote a song called "Bargain Basement Howard Hughes" included in his [Degradation Trip](#) solo album (2002).
- [Leadbelly](#) composed a [folksong](#), "Howard Hughes", which accompanies the final credits of the film *The Aviator*.
- Cello trio, Rasputina have a song entitled "Howard Hughes".