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Chapter

Before Las Vegas: *A Howard Hughes primer*

Howard Robard Hughes was born in 1905, the same year Las Vegas became a town. But a whole lot would happen to both of them before his life intersected with the city.

Howard Hughes was the son of Howard Robard “Bo” Hughes and Allene Gano. His father was a wildcat oilman who, in 1903, founded Texas Fuel Oil Company, a struggling little outfit that eventually grew into the corporate giant Texaco. His mother was a Dallas heiress, described by Charles Higham in *Howard Hughes: The Secret Life*, as “darkly pretty” and “high-strung, a hypochondriac.” The Hughes-Gano marriage — on May 24, 1904, in Dallas — was important enough to be chronicled in the city’s society pages. The young couple settled in Houston, but moved a year later to Humble, a small town northeast of the city, where Howard Jr. was born on Christmas Eve.

In 1907, the family moved to Oil City, Louisiana, outside Shreveport, where Bo Hughes served as postmaster and deputy sheriff while chasing his oil dreams. But a year later Hughes pursued the invention that would make him rich. He purchased two patents for drill bits, one for \$2,500, the other for \$9,000. Working with partner Walter Sharp, he tested, experimented, and eventually invented the Hughes drill bit. This piece of hardware became the foundation of the family fortune.

Returning to Houston, the family did not enjoy the riches of its drill bit fortune right away, in part because Bo Hughes spent much of his income on gambling and expensive equipment. But by 1913, the Hughes fortune was solidified. The family moved into a pricey apartment and became part of Houston’s country club set.

Their child, nicknamed Sonny, started out life as a sickly, sissified boy, partly a result of his mother's hypochondria. But several summers at Camp Dan Beard in Pennsylvania bolstered his fitness and taught him to appreciate nature and to learn the ins and outs of woodcraft. He also briefly excelled at the private Fessenden School, near Boston, where he edited the school paper, learned to play golf, and played saxophone in the school band.

Hughes' parents began to spend more time in Southern California. They purchased a home on Coronado Island, near San Diego, and in 1921 Sonny transferred to the Thacher School in Ojai, where he excelled in math and science and rode horses. During summer vacation, Hughes spent time with his uncle, Rupert Hughes, a best-selling novelist and screenwriter who exposed the teenager to the movie business.

Multiple tragedies struck the family around this time. In 1922, Hughes' mother, hemorrhaging from her womb, died in a Houston hospital while receiving anesthesia. She was thirty-eight. A year later, Hughes' Aunt Adelaide, Rupert's wife, hanged herself during a trip to Asia. Finally, in 1924, Bo Hughes died of an embolism at his office in Houston. He was fifty-three.

Hughes had withdrawn from the Thacher School and was attending the California Institute of Technology when the devastating trio of deaths hit his family. But rather than falling apart, the eighteen-year-old decided to take control of his father's company. To accomplish this, he had to pay off his father's considerable debts and fend off an attempt by his uncle to run the show.

Helping to establish his maturity to run his father's affairs, in 1925 Hughes wedded a childhood friend, Ella Rice, a member of the oil family for which Rice University is named. But after the newlyweds moved to Los Angeles later that year, the marriage gradually collapsed. Hughes' obsession with business and golf left his wife out in the cold, and she found little comfort from Hollywood society. Hughes' infidelity with the actress Billie Dove was a contributing factor in Ella's return to Houston in 1928. They divorced the following year.

The filmmaker

Hughes moved to Southern California to break into the movie business. His first venture was a film called *Swell Hogan*, starring Ralph Graves, a

friend of Hughes' father. Hughes, a novice producer, had trusted Graves, a veteran actor, to direct the film, and this proved to be a mistake. "It was rubbish," writes Tony Thomas in *Howard Hughes in Hollywood*. "It had no structure, no plot, no tension, and the acting was ludicrous. Hughes ordered the film to be placed in a vault, from which it never emerged."

The *Swell Hogan* disaster changed Hughes' approach. He studied every aspect of moviemaking and became a more careful judge of talent. His next project was called *Everybody's Acting*. Hughes hired proven talent to write and direct the film, and after he secured a distribution deal with Paramount, the movie was financially successful in 1926.

After starting his own movie company, Caddo Productions, Hughes hired Lewis Milestone to direct his next project, a World War I comedy called *Two Arabian Knights*. With a large budget, a good script, and Milestone's expert direction, *Two Arabian Knights* was a hit with moviegoers and critics. The film, released in 1927, earned a Best Director honor for Milestone at the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929. (Three decades later, Milestone would direct *Ocean's Eleven*, a film with legendary connections to Las Vegas.)

With just three movies under his belt and barely twenty-two years old, Hughes had earned a measure of respect in Hollywood. Now he was eager to rise to the top of the heap with his next film. Hughes was fascinated by aviation and wanted to merge that interest with filmmaking. When he came across the World War I story of *Hell's Angels*, he saw the perfect opportunity.

But unlike his previous films, Hughes decided to become intimately involved in the production and direction of *Hell's Angels*. With Hughes hovering relentlessly, original director Marshall Neilan quit after a few weeks. When the second director, Luther Reed, departed after two months, Hughes decided to direct the picture himself.

This proved to be a costly and time-consuming decision. Hughes labored over every detail, constantly making changes in the script and camera angles. This, along with the long hours Hughes demanded on the set, strained the cast and crew. "He could work for twenty and thirty hours at a stretch, and he seemed to show little regard for the more regular time schedules of other people," according to author Tony Thomas. "He never wore a watch and he appeared to be oblivious of time."

Hughes bought dozens of airplanes to be used in the film's aerial combat sequences. It was dubbed the largest private air force in the world. He also purchased and leased real estate across Southern California to stage the ground scenes.

Instead of using military airplanes and pilots, as had been done in the 1927 epic *Wings*, Hughes hired stunt pilots because he thought they were more capable of performing the dramatic maneuvers he wanted to film. But Hughes' demand for dangerous stunts took its toll on the airplanes and the pilots. Three men died in flying accidents during the filming.

The first of Hughes' many flying accidents occurred during the filming of *Hell's Angels*. Trying an unadvised maneuver in a Thomas Morse Scout, Hughes crashed. Pulled from the wreckage, he was in the hospital for a week.

Shooting began in the fall of 1927, and continued through 1928 and 1929. When Hughes was frustrated by the absence of clouds in the Southern California skies, he picked up the giant production and moved to the Oakland Airport in Northern California, where there was more reliable cloud cover.

While *Hell's Angels* was in production, Hughes released two other films in 1928: *The Racket*, a gangster flick directed by Milestone, and *The Mating Call*, starring the French actress Renée Adorée. *The Racket* was a critical success, and *The Mating Call* was a popular success, especially because of its steamy sexual undercurrents. Hughes had become a force in the silent film era.

But he also was something of a victim of the switch to talking pictures. Midway through production on *Hell's Angels*, Hughes decided it needed to be a talkie. He brought in new actors (including a teenage Jean Harlow to replace the heavily accented Swedish actress Greta Nissen) and reshot dramatic scenes.

Hughes orchestrated a grand premiere for *Hell's Angels* on May 27, 1930. Fifty airplanes flew in formation over Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Thousands of people crowded onto closed-off Hollywood Boulevard to watch celebrities arrive by limousine. Hughes attended the event with the beautiful actress Billie Dove on his arm. While the movie's dialogue and plot lines did not impress critics, the aerial battles left them

breathless. The critic for the *New York Times* called it “a strange combination of brilliance and banality.”

Tony Thomas argues that Hughes deserves a place of honor in movie history if only for the astonishing battle scene between Allied and German fighter pilots. “The dogfight between the fighter pilots, involving thirty planes, not only was the most astonishing aerial warfare filmed to that time, but nothing done since has surpassed it. . . . His pilots and photographers achieved a breathtaking sequence, with the planes ferociously attaching each other like angry hornets, zipping, swooping, looping, and tumbling.”

The movie was a huge hit across the country and in England, but it did not earn more than its \$4 million price tag. Hughes opted for more modest budgets for subsequent movie projects.

Hughes’ affair with Dove prompted him to sign her to a contract and to produce a movie called *The Age of Love*, which Hughes hoped would reignite her career. Instead, the 1931 drama was a dismal failure. Hughes arranged for Dove to receive flying lessons and she earned her pilot’s license, after which she starred in a World War I film called *Cock of the Air*. The film received tepid reviews, and moviegoers were disappointed there weren’t more flying scenes.

Dove was under contract to do five movies for Hughes, but when their relationship disintegrated, she wanted to terminate her contract. Dove retired from acting after just one more film.

Pressing on, Hughes produced *Sky Devils*, another World War I flying movie, this one starring a young Spencer Tracy. Despite using aerial footage left over from *Hell’s Angels*, the film was another dud.

Three straight failures suggested to Hollywood observers that Hughes had lost his touch, but Hughes still had a couple of celluloid gems in the works. *The Front Page*, a rapid-fire comedic dissection of the newspaper business written by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, was a wildly successful Broadway play in 1928. Hughes bought the rights to bring it to the silver screen and hired Milestone, who had by now won a second Oscar, to direct. The combination of great script, great director, and veteran actors turned *The Front Page* into an instant classic. (The movie has been remade twice: a 1940 remake called *His Girl Friday* starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell is perhaps the best of the three, while the 1974 version starring Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon is arguably the weakest.)

Hughes' other ambitious film project was *Scarface*, an ultraviolent gangster flick whose main character was obviously patterned after Chicago mob kingpin Al Capone. Written by Ben Hecht and directed by Howard Hawks, *Scarface* was too violent for the sensibilities of legendary censor Will Hays, who demanded an array of cuts and changes. Hughes initially agreed to some cuts and to film a new ending. In addition, the title was changed to *Scarface—The Shame of a Nation*. But when it wasn't enough for some state censorship boards, Hughes became defiant, restoring the cuts and reviving his original ending.

Hughes released *Scarface* in 1932 without an official seal of approval, and received wide support for his cause. He showed the film in places that did not have censorship boards. It opened in New Orleans, then in Los Angeles and other cities, receiving rave reviews. Meanwhile, Hughes sued the censorship board in New York and other places that refused to show the movie. He won those battles, and the film eventually gained wide exposure.

The censorship wars over *Scarface* and Hughes' growing interest in aviation contributed to one of his trademark antithetical moves: Just as he reached the pinnacle of Hollywood success at age twenty-six, he quit the film business to concentrate on flying. Hughes would return to filmmaking eight years later, but could not equal the success of his earlier stint in Hollywood.

The aviator

Since *Hell's Angels* was an aviation picture, Hughes believed he needed to learn to fly to understand his subject and took lessons during the filming. But he didn't dedicate himself to flight until a few years later.

In 1933, Hughes purchased an S-43 Sikorsky Amphibian airplane and hired engineer Glenn "Odie" Odekirk to help him rebuild it. Hughes was prone to taking risks. Testing out the Sikorsky with Odekirk, Hughes ran into a storm, lost an engine, and landed on the Mississippi River. "He and Odie bobbed around for hours in the damaged aircraft, in drenching rain, branches and logs hitting the plane violently," biographer Higham wrote. Hughes finally made contact with the Coast Guard, which sent a cutter that towed him and his plane to New Orleans.

Hughes' next goal was to build a plane that would break the air speed record. Hughes and Odekirk worked around the clock on the Hughes

Racer, or H-1, which cost \$120,000 to build. The authors of *Empire: The Life, Legend and Madness of Howard Hughes* summarized their achievement: "A series of innovations . . . made the H-1 the most advanced plane of its time. Rivets were placed flush with the fuselage to reduce drag. The wings were shortened to increase speed. The single most revolutionary feature was its unique land gear which did not remain permanently in place during the flight, but retracted neatly after takeoff into a snug compartment under the wings."

On September 13, 1935, at an air field in Santa Ana, California, Hughes flew the H-1 352 miles per hour, shattering the previous record of 314 mph. After receiving his accolades, the excited Hughes got back into the plane to resume flying. Something went wrong and he was forced to crash land in a bean field. When emergency crews arrived, they found him sitting on the plane, uninjured.

Hughes' next big feat was to set the transcontinental speed record. With the H-1 in the shop for repairs, he bought a Northrop Gamma and changed out the engine. On January 13, 1936, Hughes took off from Burbank, California, and landed nine hours and twenty-seven minutes later in Newark, New Jersey. On his first try, he had set the record. But Hughes knew his H-1 could do much better. On January 19, 1937, Hughes flew the H-1 — retrofitted for the longer flight — from Los Angeles to Newark in seven hours, twenty-eight minutes. He had cut an incredible two hours off his year-old record. His feats earned him the Harmon Trophy, awarded annually to the world's outstanding aviator.

Hughes had one more record in his sights: the speed for a round-the-world flight. Choosing a twin-engine Lockheed 14 for the attempt, Hughes equipped the plane with the latest communications and navigational innovations. Accompanied by four skilled aviators, Hughes took off July 10, 1938. He traveled from New York to Paris in sixteen hours and thirty-eight minutes, cutting in half Charles Lindbergh's record. Then Hughes flew to Moscow, Omsk, Yakutsk, Fairbanks, Minneapolis, and back to New York. The 14,716-mile flight took three days, nineteen hours and seventeen minutes: another record.

More than his previous record-setting flights, Hughes' round-the-world flight made him a major celebrity. New York, Chicago, Washington, and Houston celebrated Hughes' achievement with ticker-tape parades attended

by millions, and he earned another Harmon Trophy, presented to him by President Franklin Roosevelt.

The onset of World War II spurred Hughes to seek contracts to build military aircraft. The D-2 fighter, designed at his new Culver City, California, research facility, did not garner a military contract. His larger XF-11, however, was commissioned as a photo-reconnaissance plane. The contract, signed in late 1943, called for Hughes to build one hundred planes. But the war ended before the XF-11 could see action.

Hughes also secured a contract for his flying boat — a giant eight-engine transport plane designed to carry seven hundred soldiers into war zones. The idea for the flying boat came from shipbuilder Henry Kaiser, who was dismayed that Nazi submarines were sinking his freighters as fast as they could be built. If the boats had wings, he reasoned, they could evade the Nazi assault. Kaiser, however, could not convince the military to entrust an aviation project to a shipbuilder. Enter Hughes. Intrigued by the challenge of building such a large aircraft, Hughes joined forces with Kaiser in 1942 and they obtained an \$18 million contract to build three prototype flying boats. The contract contained a vexing condition: They could not use steel or aluminum, which were in short supply.

Using wood, Kaiser and Hughes set to work on the HK-1, or Hercules, which would weigh 300,000 pounds and have a wingspan of 320 feet. It was a long and difficult process, and the Allies had since gained the advantage in the war. The government moved to cancel the flying boat contract, but Hughes insisted it was a valuable research project, if nothing else. The federal government ultimately allowed Hughes to complete the one flying boat under construction. In 1946, the giant aircraft, finally ready for a test flight, was transported in three pieces from Culver City to Long Beach Harbor and reassembled.

In the meantime, the XF-11 was finally ready to go airborne. On July 7, 1946, Hughes took off and flew over Los Angeles for about forty-five minutes. As he was returning to his Culver City plant, a propeller problem sent the plane into a spiral. Hughes crashed into the roof of a house in the Los Angeles Country Club and the plane's fuel tanks exploded. Hughes somehow pulled himself from the wreckage despite being critically injured. Doctors thought it would be a miracle if he survived, considering the extent of his injuries. According to *Empire*: "His chest was crushed. He suffered

fractures of seven ribs on the left side, two on the right, a fracture of the left clavicle, a possible fracture of the nose, a large laceration of the scalp, extensive second- and third-degree burns on the left hand, a second-degree burn on the lower part of the left chest, a second-degree burn on the left buttock, cuts, bruises, and abrasions on his arms and legs, and many small cuts on his face. His left lung had collapsed and his right was also injured. His heart had been pushed to one side of his chest cavity. He was in severe shock.” Hughes walked out of the hospital in five weeks, attributing his rapid recovery in part to drinking fresh-squeezed orange juice. Hughes fixed the problems with the XF-11 and delivered one to the military in 1947. But with the war over, the aircraft was not needed. Hughes built only two XF-11s.

After recovering from his accident, Hughes was ready to test the flying boat. He was motivated by U.S. Senate hearings during which he was accused of war profiteering and the flying boat was derided as the “Spruce Goose.” Hughes’ defiant four days of testimony effectively squelched suggestions of wrongdoing on his part.

On November 2, 1947, Hughes taxied the flying boat into Long Beach Harbor with thousands of spectators lining the shore. When the plane reached seventy miles per hour, it lifted into the air. The plane flew one mile and reached a top altitude of seventy feet. Hughes continued to make improvements to the flying boat over the next few years, but eventually his attention turned to other pursuits and the plane never flew again. Today, it is on display at the Evergreen Aviation Museum in McMinnville, Oregon.

The ladies’ man

While Hughes was linked with most of Hollywood’s female elite throughout the ’30s, ’40s, and early ’50s, two relationships stand out. In both cases, Hughes found someone he was attracted to for more than her good looks.

In 1936, Hughes became involved with actress Katharine Hepburn. After success on the New York stage, Hepburn went to Hollywood in 1932 and earned an Academy Award for one of her first film roles, 1933’s *Morning Glory*. She followed that with a great performance in the beloved *Little Women*. Her acting success caught Hughes’ attention and soon they were an item. They shared a love of golf and flying — he taught her how

to pilot a plane. Hepburn eventually moved into Hughes' Los Angeles home. In her autobiography, *Me: Stories of My Life*, Hepburn described their relationship:

“I think that reluctantly he found me a very appropriate companion. And I think that I found him extremely appropriate too. He was sort of the top of the available men — and I of the women. We were a colorful pair. It seemed logical for us to be together, but it seems now that we were too similar. He came from the right street, so to speak. And so did I. We'd been brought up in ease. We each had a wild desire to be famous.”

They may have wanted their fame, but they didn't like being hounded by the celebrity press, which worked overtime to snap pictures of Hughes and Hepburn together. When Hepburn starred in a traveling theater production of *Jane Eyre*, Hughes followed along in his plane, landing in Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and other cities. As Charles Higham reported in *Kate: The Life of Katharine Hepburn*, the actress was “forced to dodge reporters, leaving cars several blocks before they reached her destination and darting behind buildings, using freight or servants' elevators, putting ‘Do not disturb’ notices on all of her doors.”

Despite their natural attraction, Hughes and Hepburn were pulled apart by their individual ambitions. Hepburn, who had a string of financially unsuccessful films, wanted to move back East to revive her theater career. Hughes' diversified business interests were firmly entrenched in the West. “I look back at our relationship and I think that we were both cool customers,” Hepburn wrote. “He could do anything he wanted. And when I decided to move east, I think he thought, well, I don't want to move east. I'll find someone who will stay west. I always thought it was lucky that we never married — two people who are used to having their own way should stay separate.”

Hepburn's fond memories of Hughes do not mention that while she was with him, he had affairs with numerous other actresses, including Ginger Rogers, Bette Davis, Fay Wray, and Olivia de Havilland.

Hughes met Ava Gardner in 1943, after she had separated from actor Mickey Rooney. They quickly became friends — an unusual concept for Hughes, who typically saw women purely as sex objects. With Gardner it was different, as she wrote in her autobiography, *Ava: My Story*:

“Friend is the word for our relationship. Howard didn’t make any extravagant passes, in fact made no demands on me at all. A kiss on the cheek after about our tenth dinner was as far as he went. He made it clear that he was interested in me emotionally and romantically, but he was prepared to be very patient. (For my part, sharing a bed with him was always one length I couldn’t imagine myself going to.)”

Gardner provided detailed insights into Hughes’ eccentricities. Calling him “more eccentric . . . than anyone I ever met,” she described his eating habits: “His taste in food . . . was bizarre to the point of absurdity. I never saw him eat anything for dinner but a steak, green peas, perhaps a few potatoes, and a small salad, followed by ice cream topped with caramel sauce. Night after night, year after year.”

Gardner also marveled at Hughes’ often shabby and ill-fitting attire. One time he arrived to pick her up wearing a “shiny blue serge suit, the trousers held up by a tie, the sort you usually wear around your neck, the coat slung over his shoulder, his shoelaces undone.” Another time, attempting to impress her, he showed up dressed in an “ice cream-colored affair that he must have worn at some high school or college function about twenty years before. Howard, the shy one, the invisible one, pirouetting like a god-damn male mannequin, oblivious to the belt in the back and pleats that must have gone out with dueling. As usual the sleeves were four inches too short and the trouser legs six inches above the socks.”

Hughes may have been more obsessed with Gardner than any woman in his life. His goofy dress-up show was just part of an elaborate scheme to persuade her to become his wife. He also bought her dozens of pieces of expensive jewelry, intending to give her one before each meal and one before bed for seven days, leading to his proposal. Gardner, however, was irritated by Hughes’ behavior and not impressed by the gifts. “Most women would have given their souls for some of that stuff,” she wrote. “I admit it would have kept me for the rest of my life. But at that moment, with my temper aroused, I just didn’t care. I knew exactly what I wanted and what I didn’t, and what I did not want was Howard.”

Gardner and Hughes once got into a physical fight, starting with Hughes slapping Gardner repeatedly and ending with Gardner hitting him in the face with a “heavy bronze bell.” Gardner’s rage was such that she was prepared to follow up her counterattack by hitting him with a

hardwood chair, but her maid broke up the battle. “I had split his face open from temple to mouth,” Gardner wrote, “knocked out two of his teeth, and loosened others. I felt no remorse. In the hospital he had about five expensive doctors sewing him up and putting him back together again.”

At the time, Gardner thought she had seen the last of Hughes, but he was not to be deterred. When she started seeing Frank Sinatra, Hughes tried to convince her that the crooner wasn't good enough for her. “Howard never took no for an answer,” she said. “What can you expect from someone who shrugged off a brass bell tossed at the side of his head? Believe me, there was something scary about Howard's stop-at-nothing determination.”