

An interview with Geoff Schumacher about his new book, *Howard Hughes: Politics, Paranoia & Palace Intrigue*.

Q. Many books have been written about Howard Hughes. What inspired you to write another one?

A. I included a chapter about Hughes in my first book, *Sun, Sin & Suburbia: An Essential History of Modern Las Vegas*, but it just skimmed the surface of his life and his impact on Las Vegas. The research for that chapter piqued my interest in learning more about Hughes, especially his involvement with Las Vegas. I soon realized that although many books had been written about Hughes, his Las Vegas years and his impact on the city had not been fully explored by other writers. I thought I could put together a book that would add something useful to the literature on Howard Hughes.

Q. What were the biggest challenges you faced in researching the book?

A. Two main things gave me trouble. First, numerous key people who knew Hughes well and could have given me great insights had died by the time I started work on the book. Second, a few people who were still alive and who could have added a great deal to the book had a stubborn policy of not talking to reporters about their former boss. Fortunately, I was able to interview several individuals who did work closely with Hughes and were very forthcoming about their experiences.

Q. It seems like the story of Howard Hughes is plagued by wild rumors and secrecy. How did you deal with this?

A. I handled the range of Hughes rumors in two ways. In a few cases, if an allegation about Hughes could not be verified in any way, I did not make any reference to it in the book. I felt there was no reason to continue the life of a rumor that no credible sources would confirm or that simply had no basis in reality. In other cases, if a story was in considerable dispute among the various sources I consulted, I dealt with it directly in print. For example, it was impossible to ignore the intense debate over whether Melvin Dummar picked up Howard Hughes in the Nevada desert and drove him to Las Vegas. A lot of people believe Dummar's story, while others find it ridiculous. I devoted a long chapter to this fascinating — and ongoing — debate.

Q. What were some interesting things you learned about Hughes in your research?

A. The more I learned about Hughes from my reading and my interviews, the more I realized he was a very complex individual. Popular culture has attempted to paint him in black-and-white caricature as an eccentric filmmaker, aviator, casino owner, drug addict, but these characterizations are too simple. We know he was a charismatic public figure during the first half of his life, yet he was a very private individual. His business decisions and tactics often frustrated his lieutenants and employees, yet most of the time there was a method to his madness. His eccentricities must be

balanced with his touch of genius. There was always this yin and yang to his character. Another important point to make here is that this book is as much about the people who surrounded Hughes during his life as it is about him. The men and women who interacted with Hughes were — and are — very interesting people in their own right.

Q. What was Hughes' impact on Las Vegas?

A. Hughes was an important figure in the development of Las Vegas, although not for the reason some might think. Hughes bought and operated six Las Vegas casinos, but he did very little to improve them. He also owned airports, a television station and thousands of acres of land in and around Las Vegas, but he didn't do much with these properties. As Bob Maheu, a former top aide to Hughes, told me more than once, Hughes was a buyer, not a builder. That said, Hughes' impact on Las Vegas was significant. When he came to town in 1966 and started buying casinos, he opened the door for other corporations to get involved in Las Vegas. The reasoning went that if Hughes was willing to invest in Sin City, it must be okay for other "legitimate" businesses to do so too. Hughes also was important to Las Vegas after his death. His heirs, led by cousin Will Lummis, developed much of the land he purchased, helping to grow Las Vegas from a small city into a metropolis of two million people.

Q. Is the story of Howard Hughes ultimately a tragedy?

A. Yes. Hughes lived an amazing life. He packed more drama and excitement into his seventy-one years than ninety-nine percent of people can ever expect. But his life ended very badly. Years of drug addiction, combined with woefully insufficient medical care, took their toll. He lost control of his business empire, falling victim to Machiavellian aides who were more interested in grabbing their share of his wealth than restoring their boss to good health. Those who knew Hughes and those who have studied his life are left to wonder what he might have achieved if he could have overcome his addictions and medical problems and prevented his aides from manipulating him.

Q. What do you want readers to take away from reading your book?

A. One way to look at this book is as a sequel to Martin Scorsese's movie *The Aviator*. The movie ended in 1947. Hughes lived for thirty years after that and did a lot during that time. The book basically picks up where the movie left off. I hope readers come away with a better understanding of who Howard Hughes was and why he remains such a captivating figure three decades after his death. The book also serves as a useful addition to the history of Las Vegas. Finally, few people are going to read the entire shelf of books written about Howard Hughes. So I purposely structured my book so that if it's the only book you ever read about Hughes, it provides a fairly complete picture. There are several comprehensive biographies of Hughes available for those who really want to dig into the minutiae of his life. My book is more focused than that, but it still gives the average reader most of the highlights.