

## 0. HOWARD HUGHES: AN ORPHAN - Story Preface

## 1. OIL IN TEXAS

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**3. HOWARD HUGHES: AN ORPHAN**

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When he was fourteen, Howard's parents sent him to the all-boys Fessenden School in West Newton, a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts. It was the fall of 1920, two years after the end of World War I.

Although the school no longer has Howard's records, fellow students recalled that he studied hard and passionately loved golf. Whenever he could, he spent time on Fessenden's course.

On a life-changing day during that school year, Howard's father stopped by to see "Sonny" (the nickname Hughes' family had given him). The two were close and decided to watch the popular Harvard-Yale boat races in New London, Connecticut.

Cheering for Harvard, Hughes Sr. promised his son that if Harvard won, Howard could have anything he wanted.

Making good on his promise, after the Crimson's victory, the elder Hughes paid \$5 each for himself and Sonny to fly in a Curtiss Seaplane. Hughes Jr. had spied the plane tied up on the Thames River in New London, and his first ride led to the one enduring passion in his life: aviation.

The following year, after he completed his studies at Fessenden, Howard was enrolled at the Thacher School in Ojai, California - near Santa Barbara. Since Hughes Sr. had opened a branch of his tool company in Los Angeles, he and Allene thought they would be able to spend more time with their son if he attended school on the west coast.

Still shy, Hughes did not make friends easily. He preferred to ride his horse, in solitude, for hours in the hills near the school.

His mother, ever concerned about her child, wrote to the headmaster in the fall of 1922:

*I think it is awfully hard for an only child to adjust himself well in school and make friends as he should, and I am very interested to hear from you about him.* (Quoted by Donald Bartlett and James Steele in Empire, page 49.)

Allene Gano Hughes would never hear much more about her son from anyone. On the 29th of March, 1922, she checked into Baptist Hospital in Houston for minor surgery. Expecting to be released a few hours later, she never woke up from the anesthetic. She was dead, at thirty-nine.

Howard Sr. was totally devastated. Although he sent a telegram for Howard to return home from school, he did not provide the real reason for his summons. That difficult job fell to his brother Rupert, a famous author and writer of Hollywood screen plays. Rupert recalled the sad situation:

*I received one night a heartbroken telegram from my brother, stating that Allene, his wife, had died suddenly. He had telegraphed young Howard at Ojai, telling him merely that his mother was ill and he had better come home. My brother asked me to meet the boy when he came down from Ojai and put him on the first train for Texas.* (Rupert Hughes: A Hollywood Legend by James O. Kemm, page 121)

Howard, of course, was extremely concerned about his mother's health. Rupert continues:

*Young Howard, then just sixteen, arrived in great anxiety and suspense. I hesitated a long while over telling him the bitter truth. My poor brother, I knew, had suffered so much in the death of his beloved and beautiful wife that telling his son the news would be too much to put upon him. So I steeled myself, told young Howard the truth, and tried to uphold him in his first great tragedy.* (Quoted in Empire, page 49.)

Grief-stricken over the loss of his wife, Hughes Sr. wanted Sonny near him. Allene's younger sister, Annette, agreed to look after her nephew for one year. They moved into one of the cottages at the Vista del Arroyo, a Pasadena hotel, while Howard's father stayed at the then-new, now-closed Ambassador Hotel (later the scene of Bobby Kennedy's assassination) in Los Angeles.

It was just the first of many hotels in which Howard Hughes would spend his life.

Fascinated by his brother's career as a writer of Hollywood silent movies, Howard Sr. wanted to produce films himself. His tool company, after all, was run by competent executives. He never got that chance, however.

On the 14th of January, 1924, while talking with the tool company's sales manager, Hughes "suddenly rose to his feet, grasped at the desk before him convulsively, and fell to the floor." (*Empire*, page 52.) The man who had changed the oil-drilling industry forever was dead at fifty-four.

Seemingly ... one minute both his parents were in good health; the next minute they were gone. At age eighteen, Howard Hughes - high-school dropout - was an orphan.

One can understand why, for the rest of his life, he wanted to shield himself from disease and illness.

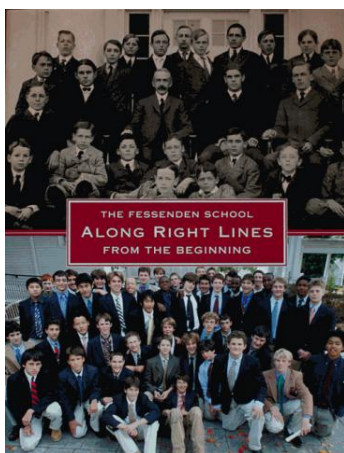
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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/HOWARD-HUGHES-AN-ORPHAN-Aviator>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

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## Media Stream



### Fessenden School

Image online, courtesy [fessenden.org](http://fessenden.org) website.

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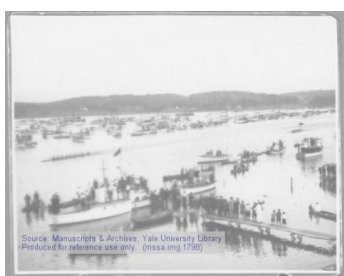


### Harvard-Yale Crew Race

Image online, courtesy [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) website.

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### Crew Racing in New London, Connecticut

Image Online, courtesy Yale University Library.

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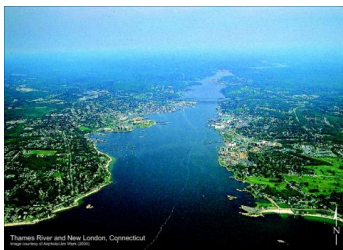


### Curtiss Seaplane - 1918

Image online, courtesy U.S. Library of Congress.

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### Thames River in New London, Connecticut - Aerial View

Image online, courtesy NOAA (nautical charts).

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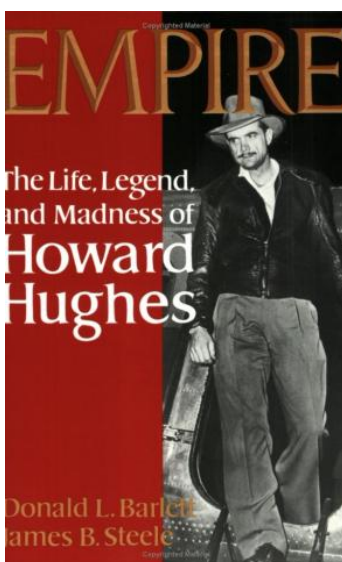


### Ojai, California - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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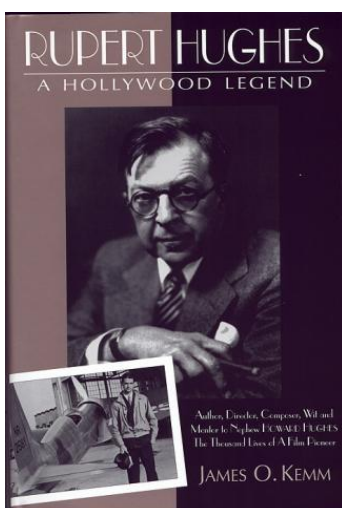
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### Empire - by Donald L. Barlett

Image online, courtesy W.W. Norton and Google Books.

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### Rupert Hughes - by James O. Kemm

Image online, courtesy [lib.uiowa.edu](http://lib.uiowa.edu) website.

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### Howard Hughes - Disrupted Youth

Image of cottage at the Vista del Arroyo, online courtesy Library of Congress.

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### Ambassador Hotel

Image online, courtesy Wikipedia.

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### Vista del Arroyo Hotel - Howard's Pasadena Home

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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### Howard Hughes Sr.'s Sudden Death

Back-cover image of *Empire*, online courtesy W.W. Norton & Company and Google Books.

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### Robert Kennedy - Fatally Shot at the Ambassador Hotel

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Senator Robert F. Kennedy

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