



Top row: A young Ned; the murder scene; Hugh Plunkett. Bottom row: Greystone; Ned.

Murder – and suicide? – at Greystone

The second of two parts.

By: [R. Marc Kantrowitz](#) July 21, 2016

Ned Doheny and Hugh Plunkett were an odd couple, habituating different economic stratospheres. Other than age, they had little in common.

Ned, handsome and athletic, heralded from a wealthy family and was considered, even at his young age, one of the most eligible bachelors in Los Angeles. While he could have led a hedonistic lifestyle, he instead married the first love of his life, Lucy Smith, whose father was vice president of Pasadena Rapid Transit Co.

On June 10, 1914, the 21-year-old Ned married the slightly younger Lucy. Among the guests at the lavish affair was Theodore Hugh Plunkett, who worked as a machinist changing tires and servicing cars at a gas station owned by Lucy's father.

Ned and Hugh had met some months prior, introduced by Lucy, and the two hit it off, remaining friendly over the ensuing years. Upon the United States entering World War I, like many young people at the time, both joined the war effort and enlisted in the Navy, serving on ships likely fueled by Ned's father.

When they were discharged, they resumed their friendship and soon Hugh was in Ned's employ, accompanying him on business trips and vacations, as a friend, confidant and advisor.

Along the way Hugh met and married Harriet Marion Hall.

In 1926, given his son's growing brood, Ned's father deeded, from a 400-acre parcel he owned, 12 acres of hillside property overlooking Beverly Hills and the Santa Monica Bay. The magnificent structure Greystone was to be built on the property, complete with its own fire and gas stations.

Hugh helped oversee the project, working late into the evenings. As the building went up, his marriage came down. In two years, the work was done at a cost of over \$3 million (comparable to \$41 million today), and Ned, Lucy and their five children moved into the mansion on [501 Doheny Road, the grandest estate in](#) all of Los Angeles.

Along with the pressures of construction and the dissolution of his marriage, Hugh felt the additional crushing weight of Doheny Sr.'s upcoming criminal trial on the Teapot Dome scandal. Hugh and Ned had delivered the \$100,000 that the government claimed was a bribe, and Hugh was terrified that he, too, would be arrested and charged, although years had passed since the scandal.

With mounting pressures upon him, Hugh snapped, suffering a nervous breakdown on Christmas Eve. Ordered to rest, he stayed at Greystone recuperating.

With the New Year upon them, the Dohenys hoped that 1929 would be a good one. Little did they realize that, in two months, Ned would be dead.

On Feb. 16, after Hugh had moved out of Greystone, he returned at 9:30 p.m., which the guards found normal given all his comings and goings over the past years. Using his key, he let himself in and walked up the marble stairway into the second story family quarters. Well dressed in a pinstripe suit and tie, he surprised Ned and Lucy, who were in their nightclothes. Seeing that Hugh appeared to be nervous and upset, Ned led him downstairs to a guest room where they could talk.

As the two drank and smoked cigarettes, Hugh became more agitated and an argument ensued. Ned, fearing for his friend's mental stability, excused himself and had Dr. Fishbaugh, who had treated Hugh previously, summonsed.

As Fishbaugh was arriving at 11, Lucy heard what she thought was a piece of furniture being overturned. Fearful, she rushed to meet the doctor and together they walked to the guestroom. Upon seeing them, Hugh cried out for them to leave and slammed the door shut. As Lucy and Fishbaugh backtracked, they heard a gunshot. And then another.

Fishbaugh ran to the room and saw Hugh lying face down on the floor with blood oozing from his head, and Ned lying next to an overturned chair. Fishbaugh ascertained that Ned was still alive, albeit barely. Blood trickled from his mouth and both sides of his head, where a bullet had entered and exited. Attempts to revive him failed.

The police were called and rushed over. Under Hugh's right arm they found a gun, which was very warm, and two discharged cartridges; a half-smoked cigarette lay by Hugh's left hand.

While the witnesses told a common story, indicating that Hugh murdered Ned and then shot himself, one of the detectives had doubts. For one, there were powder burns on Ned's temple but not Hugh's, calling into question the identity of the shooter. The trajectory of the bullet also was concerning as it appeared that Ned was sitting in the armchair when he was shot, with both the chair and Ned subsequently falling over. If so, the angle was an awkward one if Hugh had indeed fired.

Also, why was the gun still so warm, and why did it contain no fingerprints? Had the weapon been wiped clean and heated to throw off investigators? Why did Dr. Fishbaugh lie, first telling police that he found Ned dead, face up, and did not move the body, and then confessing that Ned was alive for 20 minutes as the doctor tried to revive him, and repositioned him in the process?

How could Hugh, with his right hand holding the gun and his left hand holding the cigarette, slam the door shut in the first place.

Given Hugh's continuing strained mental status and erratic behavior over the past few months, police quickly rendered their verdict: a murder/suicide with Hugh Plunkett pulling the trigger. The theory was corroborated by the autopsy, which revealed the residue of powder found with the brain of the killer, and the lack of any plausible explanation of why Ned would have shot Hugh.

Epilogue

Ned's death found another victim, that of his father, Edward Doheny Sr., who sank into depression and reclusiveness. Although found not guilty at his bribery trial, he continued to descend, dying on Sept. 8, 1935.

While his name and accomplishments, and indeed his philanthropy, should have landed him into the stratosphere of the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts and Astors, his legacy is found on what bears the Doheny name: roads and a beach in California and the Edward L. Doheny Jr. Memorial Library on the main campus of the University of Southern California.

As for Greystone, it was sold to the town of Beverly Hills and used as a park that was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The grounds and house hosts weddings and social events and has been used scores of times as backdrops in Hollywood productions. Everyone who has gone to the movies or watched TV has seen it.

The above column is based on "Dark Side of Fortune" by Margaret Leslie Davis. R. Marc Kantrowitz, a former Appeals Court judge, lectures and writes and is a mediator with the Real Estate Bar Association's dispute resolution service, REBA/DR. He can be contacted at rmackantrowitz@comcast.net.