

Cash flowed from Hubbard's ranch

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The Press-Enterprise

CRESTON — Actor Robert Mitchum once quartered horses at the Whispering Winds ranch, four miles south of Creston. Until last week, it was the closest this town of 270 people had come to celebrity. Last week Church of Scientology founder Lafayette Ronald Hubbard died here.

Hubbard, a science fiction writer who turned a book he wrote called "Dianetics" into a church making \$100 million a year, was both worshipped by Scientologists who embraced his teachings and condemned by those who fled the church, claiming to be defrauded and abused.

In life, Hubbard was a controversial, elusive recluse who vanished from the church's compound at Gilman Hot Springs in Riverside County in March 1980, the last time he was seen publicly. A Los Angeles judge once described the church and Hubbard thusly: "The organization clearly is schizophrenic and paranoid, and this bizarre combination seems to be a reflection of its founder."

A church spokesman said Hubbard lived on the ranch for

the past 2½ years and wrote and researched topics of the spirit and cross-breeding of animals as well as dabbling in photography. Hubbard lived in a motor home while his home was under renovation, a process just finished when he died. The Rev. Ken Hoden said Hubbard lived with long-time friends Pat and Anne Broeker.

A glimpse of the last 2½ years of Hubbard's secret life on the Whispering Winds ranch, secluded in rolling hills and dreamy green meadows 25 miles from Morro Bay, has been pieced together from interviews and public records.

In death, Hubbard was no less controversial than in life. A stroke ended Hubbard's secret existence at 8 p.m. Jan. 24, inside his \$250,000 Bluebird motor home parked near a pen of llamas. His doctor said he suffered a brain hemorrhage several days before his death.

Little is known about what happened from the time of his death and 12 hours later when church officials asked a funeral director to pick up the body. A neighbor, Robert Whaley, a retired advertising executive, re-

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Hubbard . . .

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county permits be taken out for building. "They said they didn't want any permits. If they got caught, they'd take responsibility for it," he said. A check of permits showed one in 1983 for a water tank.

Mitchell once offered a neighbor \$750,000 cash for her 132-acre ranch — \$250,000 above the appraised value. The real estate agent involved in the proposed sale said Mitchell said he wanted the woman out because she complained that one of his dogs had killed her sheep.

The owner of the property said Mitchell told her to take her house with her if she liked, but sell. After the woman said she wanted \$1 million, the real estate agent said Mitchell rejected it.

The agent said Mitchell, about 30 years old with brown hair and a New York accent, gave

the impression he was spending his money, which he had inherited. "When I was dealing with Mike," the agent said, "I got the impression he was doing his own thing. If a decision had to be made, he made it right then."

Scientology spokesman Hoden said he did not know whether Hubbard spent his money as described by the residents of Creston. "I wasn't there," he said, adding, "There is no doubt in anyone's mind that L. Ron Hubbard was a wealthy man." Hubbard's wealth has been estimated to be as much as \$200 million.

While contractors grabbed Hubbard's money and worked continually for 2½ years on the ranch, Hubbard practiced an obsession for privacy. None of his neighbors knew who he was. He didn't even receive mail at the ranch, and visitors often arrived in the middle of the night.

When he did come out of his motor home during the day, it was

only to putter around the estate, feeding horses, llamas and buffaloes.

Whaley said he invited Hubbard and the Mitchells to dinner shortly after they moved in, but, "They turned us down."

The neighbor recalled a chance eye-to-eye encounter with Hubbard.

One day Whaley went to a stable at the ranch to borrow a tool and surprised Hubbard, who was filing a piece of metal. "This older man gave me a very dirty look and ran into the workshop and closed the door," Whaley said.

"He looked at me very suspiciously. I thought this was odd. Here I am a neighbor, stopping over for a neighborly visit."

Hubbard . . .

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membered "tremendous traffic" at the ranch that Friday night.

The next morning, Scientologist attorney Earle Cooley telephoned Reis Chapel in San Luis Obispo, 20 miles southwest of the ranch. "He asked if we did cremation," said Irene Reis, an owner of the chapel. She said special arrangements for the cremation were made at a crematory, usually closed on weekends. Her husband, Gene, picked up the body of the 74-year-old Hubbard at the 160-acre ranch.

Cooley accompanied the body to the chapel and stayed near it while other church officials went to lunch. "Mr. Cooley insisted that he never leave the body (alone)," said June Rodrigues, a chapel receptionist.

Church officials said they "wanted everything, private — they wanted nothing released to the press," Reis said. After chapel officials learned who Hubbard was, they called the San Luis Obispo County sheriff-coroner. Rodrigues said the chapel was concerned that church officials made a "request for immediate cremation."

San Luis Obispo County Deputy Coroner Don Hines arrived at the chapel and stopped any cremation until an independent pathologist could examine the body and tests could be performed on blood samples.

Cooley presented Hines with a written certificate signed by Hubbard giving religious reasons for not wanting an autopsy at his death. Hines also was given at least one will, dated just before Hubbard's death. Rodrigues said Cooley may have shown Hines two wills, one outdated.

"He (Cooley) said something (that) in the later will, the wife (Mary Sue Hubbard) was provided for more than she was in the former will," Rodrigues said. Hubbard's will left tens of millions of dollars to the church, his wife and four of his five children. Son Ronald DeWolf was disinherited after he denounced the church several years ago.

Rodrigues said Hines and chapel employees discussed the validity of the will, and Reis said the district attorney was consulted. "They wanted to make sure this wasn't a scam," Rodrigues said. "The whole thing was just different. No autopsy or anything."

While Hines checked the documents, pathologist Karl Kirschner examined Hubbard's body for marks, found none, and accompanied Hubbard's personal physician Eugene Denk to a laboratory to test the blood. Although Kirschner declined to discuss his findings, coroner officials said acceptable levels of anti-stroke medication were in the blood. After Hines saw test results, he cleared the body for cremation, about 3:30 p.m.

Hubbard had suffered a stroke in 1978, but was apparently in fairly good condition in the months before he died. "He looked like a person who was active," Reis said. "His muscles were well developed."

Errol Rohrberg, who built a horse racing track on the estate, said Hubbard "was in real good health . . ." But he said once in a while "The old man wasn't feeling very good (and) a few days would go by without seeing him."

Neighbors and people who were hired to work on various construction projects at the ranch over the past two years described Hubbard as a "Colonel Sanders" lookalike because he sported a white beard and was overweight. They said the man who they knew only as "Jack" rarely emerged from the motor home and was driven around the ranch in a truck by a petite blonde woman who lived on the ranch.

The word of Hubbard's death hit the news wires two days after it happened, and reaction was quick. Scientologists mourned the passing while Scientology critic, Boston attorney Michael Flynn, sought an investigation of the death. By Wednesday, the San Luis Obispo County coroner said the case was closed.

For Hubbard, life opened on the ranch in the summer of 1983, when a man who has identified himself as "Mike Mitchell"