

JOAN ROBINSON HILL:

The Plastic Surgeon and the Dead Texas Socialite

By Bill Dougherty

The other afternoon I found myself in a cafe in south Texas having lunch. A group of older but well-preserved equestrian women walked in at the same time as I did and we struck up a conversation. They had flown in from Houston for a horse show in Brownsville. Guessing from their age, I quickly popped the burning question: "Did you ride with Joan Robinson Hill?" From that point on we were engaged for the next two hours.

Joan Robinson Hill was the only child of **Rhea and Ash Robinson**, one of the richest oil families in the great state of Texas. Her



Rhea, Joan and Ash Robinson 1964

days began before dawn with cigarettes before coffee, the horse show circuit and unfathomable amounts of charity work. All this was done in her trademark platinum blonde ponytail and fire engine red lipstick. She was adored by Houston society and is also one of the most respected and awarded equestrians in the United States. In the winter of 1969 she would become one of the most famous women in all of Texas.

Her third marriage was to a handsome plastic surgeon, **John Hill**, in early 1958, and the couple had one child. They settled into an enormous mansion in River Oaks, the most exclusive residential section of Houston. The home was just one of the many gifts from the Robinsons showered on the beautiful couple. But the mansion had a long and dark history. A suicide, a high-profile divorce and several long-suffering deaths had all taken place on the grand estate. And the home sat on the market untouched for many years. However, the Hills were more than happy with the wedding gift. It quickly became



Joan Robinson 1955



Joan, Madison Square Garden 1968

a showplace for all of Houston, and they entertained there constantly.

From the start their marriage, largely funded by Joan's parents, had been rocky and reckless. Joan preferred horses and the charity ball circuit. John preferred to listen to complex music and attend recitals. They shared little in common. By 1969 Dr. Hill took a mistress, another Houston socialite, sapphire-eyed and raven-haired **Ann Kurth**. A divorce seemed imminent. However, Joan's father, Ash Robinson, cautioned his son-in-law that if he divorced Joan he would not only lose



The Hills' River Oaks mansion, Houston



Ann Kurth and John Hill 1970

his Cadillacs and the medical practice Ash had helped to fund, but also John's just-finished palatial music room in the couple's impressive Georgian mansion.

Then suddenly and mysteriously Joan Hill became ill. John seemed unfazed by his wife's sickness and the concerns expressed by their weekend houseguests. Days later, the Hills' maid and the Robinsons demanded that an ambulance be called. John, refusing their plea, slowly drove his wife by Cadillac to an out-of-the-way general hospital, passing the state-of-the-art Texas Medical Center only miles from their home. It was there that Joan would die an agonizing and horrific death the next morning. Houseguests from that weekend would later tell Ash Robinson that John had repeatedly fed Joan and them a series of French pastries, insisting that Joan could not exchange or share her treats with their guests.

Joan's funeral was attended by more than 1,000 mourners. Noted Houston Chronicle society columnist Maxine Messenger would comment that there was not a single flower left in the city of Houston after Joan Hill's funeral.

Ash Robinson wasted no time getting the district attorney to indict his son-in-law. But John Hill had immediately had Joan's body



embalmed, washing crucial evidence of her death into the sewers of Houston. He also wasted no time marrying Ann Kurth.

In 1971 Dr. Hill was tried for murder by omission in the death of his wife for failing to give Joan much-needed medical attention. However, a mistrial was granted due largely to the theatrics and media circus the case created. Ann Kurth was by then in the process of divorcing John Hill. She claimed on the witness stand that he had tried to kill her as well and that while they were dating, Dr. Hill was obsessed with a strange bacteria he was concocting in a petri dish.

But things didn't stop there. Returning from a medical convention with his third wife, **Connie Hill**, in 1972, John Hill was shot and bludgeoned to death in the marble foyer of his mansion while his mother and son, hog-tied, watched in horror under the dim shadows of sparkling crystal chandeliers.

Though two women would be tried in a murder-for-hire case, both implicating Ash Robinson for the deed, the crusty oil man was never brought to trial. The alleged hit man was shot by police for resisting arrest before he could be tried.

In 1977 the Hills' only child, **Robert**, who had severed all ties with his wealthy grandparents, filed a civil suit against Ash Robinson together with his grandmother, **Myra Hill**, and second stepmother, Connie, for the wrongful death of John Hill. It was almost immediately thrown out of court.

Connie Hill would continue to live in the River Oaks Mansion for the next two decades with her stepson. They would open the home many times for music performances and parties in the home's heart-stopping music room. She would eventually sell the mansion when Robert left to pursue a law career on the East Coast. Connie Hill would marry again and move to Denver where she remains active in the arts even today. Yet the next occupants of the stately



Joan and John Hill 1969

home would both perish within months of one another in the house, returning the much-photographed estate to its haunted mansion status.

Two bestselling books were written regarding the case. First there was "Prescription Murder" by Ann Kurth. But she was unable to cope with her new-found celebrity, and Houston society turned its back on her as well. She and her sons went into seclusion on a private lake outside of Austin and disappeared forever. She died of an aneurism in 1990. **Thomas Thompson's** meticulously written and award-winning international bestseller, "Blood and Money," would follow. The book would remain on the bestseller list for over two years.

In 1981 a made-for-television film, "Murder in Texas," was made. It starred **Farrah Fawcett** as Joan Hill with **Katharine Ross** as Ann Kurth, **Sam Elliott** as John Hill and **Andy Griffith** as Ash Robinson. The two-part movie remains one of the most successful made-for-television films to date.

In the end Ash Robinson's money brought him nothing but unhappiness. He and his wife, Rhea, spent the rest of their lives exiled in Florida, estranged from their only grandchild, their high-society friends and the state they had helped build into an empire. They had all the money in the world, yet it could never purchase the one thing they desired most — their beloved Joan.