

NEWS

Houdini can't escape mystery



By **BALTIMORE SUN**

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New York — Get ready for CSI: Houdini.

A team of forensic experts will pore over the exhumed remains of renowned escape artist Harry Houdini to determine whether he was killed 81 years ago, the head of the investigative team said last week.

“Everything will be thoroughly analyzed,” promised James Starrs, dean of the disinterment dream team of pathologists, anthropologists, toxicologists and radiologists. “We’ll examine his hairs, his fingernails, any bone fractures.”

Legal paperwork necessary to dig up Houdini's body from a New York City cemetery will be filed tomorrow to get the process started, said Joseph Tacopina, an attorney representing Houdini's family.

It could take months before the body is exhumed, although the process should move faster because the family and cemetery officials support the plan, he said. Decades after Houdini died on Halloween 1926, his great-nephew wants to exhume the magician's body to determine if enemies poisoned him for debunking their bogus claims of contact with the dead.

"His death shocked the entire nation, if not the world. Now maybe it's time to take a second look," George Hardeen said.

The generally accepted version of Houdini's death held that the 52-year-old suffered a ruptured appendix from a punch in the stomach by a college student who was testing the performer's abdominal muscles.

His death certificate listed him as a victim of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix. No autopsy was performed, though, and rumors that he was murdered started almost immediately.

When the death certificate was filed Nov. 20, 1926, Houdini's body – brought by train from Detroit to New York – had already been buried, along with any evidence of a possible death plot.

Within days, a newspaper headline read, “Was Houdini Murdered?”

A 2006 biography, *The Secret Life of Houdini*, raised the issue again and convinced some that he might have been poisoned, including Hardeen, who lives in Arizona and is the chief spokesman for the president of the Navajo Nation.

The likeliest suspects were members of a group known as the Spiritualists. The magician devoted large portions of his stage show to exposing the group's fraudulent seances.

In the Houdini biography, authors William Kalush and Larry Sloman detail a November 1924 letter in which one of the movement's devotees, Sherlock Holmes author Arthur Conan Doyle, said Houdini would “get his just deserts very exactly meted out. ... I think there is a general payday coming soon.”

Two years later, Houdini, by all accounts a man in extraordinary physical shape, was dead.

Kalush and Sloman say “the Spiritualist underworld’s modus operandi in cases like this was often poisoning” – possibly arsenic, which could be detected decades later.

The authors also suggest Houdini might have been poisoned by “an experimental serum” injected by one of his doctors at Detroit’s Grace Hospital.

Houdini took the Spiritualists’ death threats seriously, but he traveled without security, often accompanied only by his wife, Bess. “If someone were hell-bent on poisoning Houdini,” the authors wrote, “it wouldn’t have been very difficult.”

Starrs said he was long familiar with the story of Houdini’s death, and believed the fatal injury was the result of an accident until he read the Houdini biography.

“My eyebrows went up when I read this book,” Starrs said. “I thought, ‘This is really startling, surprising and unsettling, and at bottom, suspicious in nature.’”

The exhumation plan received support from a surprising source: Anna Thurlow, the great-granddaughter of “medium” Margery, whose husband, Dr. Le Roi Crandon, was one of the Spiritualist movement’s biggest proponents and one of Houdini’s enemies.