

Bone Hunter

By Amanda Ripley

Prof. James Starrs digs up legends so he can talk about how they really died. And even if he doesn't find out for sure, he can still talk. © 1998 Washington City Paper. All Rights Reserved

Note: We are including this article because of the many letters we receive on the Jesse James legend. No intention to plagiarize is intended --- we are just unsure how long the article will remain on the original web site, so we place it here (without permission) for your interest.

Meriwether Lewis shot himself twice in the early morning dark of Oct. 11, 1809. First he shot himself in the forehead with one pistol, then in the chest with another. But that didn't do the trick. For hours, he cried out for water and mumbled unintelligibly. Finally, he sliced at his flesh with a razor blade until he bled to death.

At the time, Lewis was already an American hero. Just five years before, he'd led the famed Lewis and Clark trek to the Pacific Northwest. He'd trailblazed 4,000 miles to reach the ocean, thrashing his way through curtains of mosquitoes, the Rocky Mountains, and the unforgiving rush of the Missouri River. Then, just when most people took them for dead, Lewis and his team resurfaced in victory. As a reward, Thomas Jefferson named Lewis governor of Louisiana.

But back in civilized society, the slow burn of politics and money had Lewis drinking and drugging. Brash and moody, he had no patience for politics. His critics said he was running the statehouse like a military camp. Edging toward bankruptcy, he was reduced to borrowing money from Clark to pay his bills.

Lewis' downward spiral bottomed out on a trip to Washington to clear up some ugly money matters. He stopped for the night at Grinder's Stand—a

gritty country inn near the Mississippi- Tennessee border on the Natchez Trace. After dinner, he asked Mrs. Grinder for some whisky, and she obliged. Then she sat, petrified, listening to him pacing and muttering angrily in the guest room before the shots rang out. That's how the story goes, anyway. Lewis' grisly death shocked the nation and spurred fast conspiracy rumors in Tennessee. The Natchez Trace was hot with bandits who might have taken Lewis for a mark. And it seemed suspect that a man with two gunshot wounds to the head and heart still had the wherewithal to slice himself up. The odd circumstances of Lewis' demise left questions that linger even now, almost 200 years later.

If it's a crock, James Starrs wants to know. And he believes the truth lies at the bottom of Lewis' Tennessee grave. If only he could dig Lewis up, then he could have the final word about whether the death really was a suicide. If he could get to his bones—provided the soil hasn't totally eaten through them—Starrs is convinced he could trace the trajectory of the bullets and tell you how Lewis really died.

A professor of law and forensics at George Washington (GW) University, Starrs has made Lewis' death his latest morbid fascination. For the past six years, he has been working, tirelessly, to get at Lewis' crumbling body.

Starrs doesn't buy the surreal suicide the history books accept as fact. "You come away saying, 'Oh God almighty, that couldn't be true,'" Starrs says about Mrs. Grinder's story. "If a man who's such an expert marksman can't kill himself with two bullets, with a razor blade, and he has to literally wait until the body runs dry of blood—that's not a suicide. That's something else."

Lewis' bones represent the Holy Grail in a long and festering obsession for Starrs. The GW prof has become the high-profile godfather of "historical exhumations"—a squirrely field that has gained legitimacy as technology has caught up with ancient mysteries.

To get his hands on Lewis' bones, Starrs is entrenched in an all-out legal battle against the National Park Service. The case was recently bumped to a federal court in Tennessee, and Starrs has convinced a large D.C. law firm to represent him pro bono. If he succeeds—and it looks as if he just might—Lewis will make the 10th body Starrs has unearthed so far.

And then what? Doubters say there's no predicting what he'll find in Lewis' grave, and whatever it is, surely it won't be damning or conclusive enough to justify ripping the man out of the ground. They say Starrs' exhumation of Lewis would advance Starrs' profile and little else. All the gyrations—the coroner's trial, the endless briefs for and against, the catfights with historians on all sides of the issue—is a hunt more for headlines than for historical rectitude, Starrs' critics say.

Sitting in his office at GW, Starrs says now—and again and again—"Let's find out the truth."

There's an abrupt knock at the door. Starrs stops moving and mumbles a quiet "Come in." Standing at the threshold is a shiny-eyed lawyer-to-be who wants to see Starrs almost as little as Starrs wants to see her. He gives her the same chilling once-over he gave me at first knock (before he found out I was a reporter and slipped into a jovial grin). The woman has stopped by to report that she's going to miss class to interview at a firm. "So unfortunately I just won't be able to make it," she says with a glossy smile and a furtive glance in my direction. "We'll try and get by," Starrs replies. And then she's gone.

The paralyzing grind of law school, law students, and law books leaves Starrs scrambling for a distraction. "I started [the exhumations] because I was sick and tired of the humdrum of teaching...students who couldn't care less," Starrs says. "I was teaching something that I fanatically, in a frenzied way, believed in: the value of forensic science in criminal law enforcement. I said to myself, I need a bigger and more alert audience."

Chasing wild geese from their graves seems to stave off the

First, Starrs dug world who can do it." up the victims of a 19th-century cannibal in Colorado. Then he switched from victim to perpetrator, exhuming the man who allegedly assassinated legendary

"There's really nobody else in the torpor just fine.

—Starrs on his brand of historical exhumations

Louisiana governor Huey Long in the halls of the state capitol. Before long, Starrs followed the natural conspiracy trail to the CIA and dug up a man who committed suicide (or did he?) after participating in government-directed LSD experiments. Starrs' crowning achievement came three years ago, when he dug up Jesse James in the blinding flash of a massive media blitz. It must have been a painful trip back to his desk at GW.

Starrs has never received a formal degree in forensics. Instead, he has dabbled for the past 30 years. In 1968, back when Starrs was just another bored law professor, the acting director of the FBI lab knocked on his door. He was going door to door through the law school searching for someone to set up a forensic science program at the university. "I literally said, 'Where have you been? This is what I've been waiting for,'" Starrs remembers.

Years before, when Starrs had just returned from the Korean War, he asked his father what to do with his life. His dad—an English professor whose father ran a Brooklyn funeral home—suggested law school. But before sending his son to such a fate, he issued a fair warning, Starrs says: "He said, 'Remember, if you want to enjoy life, do something else.'"

Forensics was something else. "The intellectual component is so much more enticing than the intellectual component in law," Starrs says, waving his hands around at the office he's cultivated since '68. There are books stacked up to the sky, as in any professor's office—only most of the books are the kind you actually want to pick up. True Crimes: Assassinations and Hoover's FBI share shelf space with Constitutional Law. Everywhere there are skeletons: hanging plastic marionettes, ceramic dolls, life-size posters. A femur from Woodstock, N.Y., juts up out of a recycled-paper box full of bubble-wrapped remains. A stash of Guinness lies in wait under the desk.

"The law is so stultifying, so stodgy, as if life is all law or the last case I had. That's not the way it is," Starrs says. "I've been at parties with forensic scientists, and they talk about Albert Camus and the latest biography. You never get that kind of conversation at a law party. One after the other talks about their latest victory or their latest case or the motion they filed yesterday. It's sickening, as far as I'm concerned."

Starrs' self-reinvention has been successful enough to earn him expert status in certain high-profile legal cases. He has testified twice in court, and

he worked on computer simulations for both the O.J. and the Menendez brothers' trials.

A 67-year-old Irish Catholic with nine kids, Starrs still bikes 32 miles to and from work every day. Among his list of publications is a 400-page anthology on the role of the bicycle in literature. "It's very difficult for me to find people here who share my point of view, my interests," Starrs admits. But despite all of the psychological income earned by digging into mysteries, his teaching job is a necessary evil.

Before one class last January, Starrs stares up at the 100 chattering students gathered before him—a crowd punctuated with laptops and baseball hats. Wearing a Jansport fanny pack and sweater vest, he looks small and misplaced, as if he's wandered off the hiking trail. To begin the class, Starrs introduces a guest lecturer who talks about distinguishing heroin from brake fluid in evidentiary analysis. In the back of the lecture hall, one well-coiffed brunette scribes a note to her friend: "I heard Starrs doesn't even read the term papers. He just gives everyone a B."

At the break, the young advocates-to-be mob Starrs to talk about their papers. The guest lecturer stands alone, off to the side, while Starrs fields accusatory questions from a frenzy of 100 law students concerned about their well-planned futures.

As they retreat back to their seats, the students mutter without grace: "He's all, 'It's at my discretion, me, me, me.'" Says another: "It's ridiculous. Basically, he just said, '**** you.'" Starrs, standing at the front, smiles and nods, all the while caressing the thin blade of his pocketknife.

At the next class, Starrs has to ask for help three times before any of the multitude volunteers to pass out photocopies. Later, he suggests, "Our society has become a society of Luddites," and then, looking up, he adds, "I assume you've heard of Luddites." Nothing, not even a polite nod. He counters the silence with a pathetic "Anyone? For five points on the final? Ten points?"

To make his day job bearable, Starrs makes a mistress of the dead. The semantics of law wilt next to the banter of forensics, a field where grown

men attend conferences on "The Use of Insects in Death Investigations" and share e-mails on identifying baby vomitus and anal lubricants in dead bodies.

Things get pretty heady when you're knee-deep in the dead. "There are no loopholes in the story. Starrs' trophy corpse was that of ^{of Meriwether Lewis....I find} Jesse James, which he exhumed in [Starrs' project] disheartening and 1995. Outfitted in shorts and a blue ^{at times sickening."} bandana, he led a pack of scientists ^{—filmmaker Ken Burns} into the Mount Olivet Cemetery in Kearney, Mo., and set up backhoes and radar. The spectacle drew men in lab coats, lawyers in bolo ties, and dozens of media folk.

The rest of the spectators were Jesse James disciples, most of whom claimed to be related to Jesse himself. Some of them came just to pull up a lawn chair and score a "We Dig Jesse" T-shirt. Others came to confirm that Jesse wasn't there at all.

The flimsy rationale for the dig was rooted in the legend that Jesse had faked his own death in April 1882. After a lifetime of robbing banks and running from assassins, the story goes, Jesse made it look as if he'd been shot to death by a member of his own gang in his own house. In fact, they say, he escaped and lived a full life under a pseudonym hundreds of miles away. No matter that the body was displayed for hundreds of mourners or that doctors carried out a full autopsy. Within a year of his death, Missouri farmers were reporting sightings of Jesse James.

In a clearing blocked off by police tape, Starrs gave orders to his team of forensic scientists, geologists, and anthropologists. ("I'm the impresario," he's fond of saying.) Under the watch of more than 40 TV people, Starrs and his men crawled into the pit and strained out rotting clumps of the outlaw. In the shadow of a TV microphone boom, they found a rusted bullet, 15 teeth (four of them gold), and a tie pin that resembled the one in Jesse's open-casket photo. The bits of blackened skull were barely discernible against the dirt they came from.

As the treasures were passed up from the grave, a giddy Starrs left the pit to address the media no fewer than three times. By this point, the Current Affair people had been ousted for imbibing in the cemetery, but there was still a throng of reporters waiting to be fed. Starrs issued updates with the gravity of a surgeon stepping out of the O.R. As the dig progressed, he happily reported that the status of the bones had changed from munge (very, very bad) to quasi-munge (just bad).

At the end of the day, it was Jesse James at the bottom of that hole after all. There had really been little doubt about his death to begin with, as even Starrs has acknowledged.

The biggest find: Jesse was buried in a wooden coffin, not a lead one, as everyone had always thought. The more lasting results of the Jesse dig were dozens of newspaper stories and a decent A&E documentary.

In 1989, Starrs dug up his first body—or his first five, rather. On a bluff in the San Juan Mountains, Starrs unearthed the five victims of "Colorado Cannibal" Alferd Packer over the course of seven days. Packer won the nickname in 1874 after he survived a failed expedition into the Rockies by feeding off of his companions. He emerged from the forest; they never did.

Starrs plucked the victims' bones from the snow and analyzed the hacksaw marks. In what was to become something of a pattern, Starrs found confirmation—not epiphany—in the bones. The markings verified that Packer had probably eaten the victims, just as he was convicted of doing. The lack of revelation didn't stop Starrs from milking the dig for the puns that are as integral to his work as DNA testing: "Cannibalism is not a subject for the thin-skinned," he declared for the first and not final time.

Hooked by the Packer hunt, Starrs then exhumed Carl Austin Weiss—the man who allegedly assassinated Louisiana Gov. Huey Long in 1935. After Long was shot, the governor's bodyguards filled Weiss with bullets. Starrs' analysis of the bullet trajectories showed that Weiss was cowering in defense when he was shot—raising (but not answering) questions about whether it was the bodyguards who actually shot Long.

Just before the Jesse James dog-and-pony show, Starrs dug up Frank R. Olson, a Frederick, Md., researcher who was never quite the same after he

participated in LSD experiments for the CIA. Shortly after one trip session, Olson fell 13 floors to his death. The feds called it suicide. The dissenters floated homicide. Despite a six-month investigation and many press releases, Starrs and his 24-member team could not say for sure.

While Starrs has never come away from a grave empty-handed, he's never really buried any conspiracy theories, either. There are people, underwhelmed either by Starrs' track record or just the notion of disturbing the dead in general, who have sought to take the shovel out of his hands. But the one thing better than being a dilettante gravedigger, Starrs has discovered, is being a dilettante gravedigger with a law degree. In addition to the Park Service suit, Starrs recently won a case to force the D.C. Medical Examiner's office to hand over FBI overlord J. Edgar Hoover's death file. When Hoover keeled over in his northwest D.C. home in 1972, everybody said it was a heart attack—only Hoover had no history of heart problems. And no autopsy was performed. "There should have been an autopsy," says Starrs, with a pound on the desk.

For now, Hoover is safely ensconced in Congressional Cemetery. But the Hoover case is just blatantly questions linger—
for Starrs, at ridiculous....He died. Jim, he died, least. He has not yet explicitly all right?"
broached the prospect of exhuming Hoover, but his curiosity is piqued—
which is how his affairs with the deceased usually begin.

—attorney Mark Zaid

Hoover is a logical fixation for a man who has spent his contentious career chasing rumors and casting doubt. Starrs points out that Hoover had no shortage of enemies, so there's something sketchy about the absence of an autopsy. One fringe theory posits that someone broke into Hoover's home and poisoned his toiletries. Or, Starrs theorizes, Hoover may have killed himself. The night before his death, after all, Hoover got a call from President Nixon urging him to resign.

When Starrs looks back through the mists of time, he has a tendency to see meaningful phantoms everywhere. But the people who were actually there say he's hallucinating. Cartha "Deke" Deloach, the No. 3 man in the FBI throughout the '60s, had lunch with Hoover at the Waldorf one week before his death. "I know of nothing which would indicate suspicions surrounding his death. I know of nothing which would warrant the exhumation of his body," says Deloach, in a slow, deep FBI voice. "He'd had prostate surgery and was ill from time to time, but he played that very close to the vest," he says. "I think the man should be left to rest....After all, he was 77 years old."

D.C.'s former medical examiner, Humphrey D. Germaniuk, tried to protect Hoover's file. In a letter to Starrs, he nobly defended the privacy of Hoover—a man, it's worth mentioning, who did not know the meaning of the word. "Death is the great equalizer and does not ask whether one is a 'Princess' or a pauper," Germaniuk wrote. "Just as in life people are entitled to their privacy, so it's my belief that in death people are entitled to their privacy." But many lawyers and motions later, Germaniuk was forced to cooperate with Starrs, handing over the examiner's investigation and a short police report.

Most genuine Hoover scholars say that how Hoover died is among the less engaging questions the man left in his wake. "I just don't think this is in the ballpark of serious issues," says historian Athan G. Theoharis, co-author of *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition*. Like all of the naysayers, he suggests Starrs is pursuing face time, not truth.

"There really isn't anyone else who's digging up these famous people," says Mark Stolorow, a forensic biologist at Cellmark Diagnostics in Maryland who has worked with Starrs for over 15 years. "He's very intense. I would characterize him as flamboyant, articulate." Like many of Starrs' friends, Stolorow talks about Starrs with the same uneasy mix of respect and bemusement that some people show toward their crazed uncles.

"He's a ham. He likes to be the center of attention," Stolorow says. But that kind of ease under the limelight is unusual for forensic scientists, Stolorow concedes. "It's just not a very public occupation."

Then again, Starrs isn't really a forensic scientist by some people's reckoning. "Professor Starrs masquerades as a forensic scientist, but he is

not a forensic scientist. He is a lawyer," says Peter Barnett, who has worked as a forensic scientist in northern California for nearly 30 years. The rising popularity of historical exhumations—with Starrs at the helm—makes Barnett uncomfortable: "I haven't seen one yet that's really provided any useful information."

"Here we are as forensic scientists trying to live down the O.J. case, the FBI boondoggle, the failure of anyone to do anything about Jon Benet Ramsey, and then Starrs gets up there as a forensic scientist and says, 'I believe somebody broke into Hoover's apartment,' saying somebody poisoned his cosmetics." It's simply embarrassing, Barnett says. Hoover "is a 77-year-old guy that died. That's what 77-year-old guys do."

Indignant in the face of criticism, Starrs insists his graveside ethics are beyond reproach. "I don't dig up people unnecessarily," he says. Leaving aside that necessity is hard to define when it comes to centuries-old corpses, it's not just the actual digging that enrages some of Starrs' colleagues. It's his style.

Starrs has mentioned to many a reporter that he once breakfasted on top of Ernest Hemingway's grave and slept beside the bones of Huey Long's alleged assassin in a hotel room. "That leaves a bad taste in my mouth, and for some of my colleagues, too," says Paul Sledzik, a forensic scientist and curator for the National Museum of Health and Medicine. "It's not the way a forensic anthropologist would deal with a case like that." By virtue of his appetites and profile, Starrs serves as a poster boy for forensic science—without the usual certificates or discretion to back it up, Sledzik says.

"I'm a very conspicuous person," Starrs concedes. He doesn't bother denying his obvious thirst for attention. But he adamantly resents any suggestion that he panders to people's paranoia to get that attention. "I am not a believer in conspiracy theories," Starrs proclaims, whenever the C-word comes up. "Very much the contrary. Just like I don't watch *The X-Files*, I don't believe in those things. I won't even have any truck with them."

Of course, without the vaguest
prospect of conspiracy, there's very

little reason to dig anyone up to **"[Starrs] is very intense....He's a**
begin with. Starrs says he digs in ham. He likes to be the center of the interest
of science. He says he ^{attention."} does it as a favor to all the poor

—forensic biologist Mark Stolorow
people who want to know if they really are descendants of whomever. He says he
does it to find the truth, so that he can help squash the sordid falsehoods that
sully honest men who aren't even around to defend themselves. Which all sounds
good, but you get the feeling that if nobody were watching, not a single
shovelful of earth would be turned.

Another lawyer in town, who has dabbled in gravedigging himself, says right
away what Starrs won't: "It's fun." Mark Zaid tried to exhume John Wilkes
Booth in 1995. Zaid represented Booth's relatives against the cemetery, which
did not want Booth disturbed. But Zaid lost after Starrs testified against the
exhumation, earning Zaid's permanent enmity.

In his testimony, Starrs accused Zaid of not knowing whether his inquiry would
be fruitful and not having sufficient reason to investigate in the first place—
the very criticisms so often leveled at Starrs himself. Zaid says he has no
problem with Starrs' past exhumations, but he adds, "It's when Jim criticizes
others for the very things he does himself that I have a problem."

Sledzik of the National Museum of Health and Medicine also testified in the
Booth case. Unlike Starrs, he did not oppose the exhumation. He says he only
wanted to make sure that if done, it would be done right. Starrs' testimony
made Sledzik uncomfortable. "It seemed very odd to me, knowing that he in
general supports these type of things," he says. Starrs' sudden high standards
about whether a body did or did not deserve to see the light of day rang rather
hollow.

Zaid grants Starrs some expertise. "I'm sure he knows a hell of a lot more
than me," Zaid concedes. "But you know what? It's not my job. It's not his
job."

Even though Zaid shares Starrs' historical necrophilia, the Hoover effort trips his bullshit meter. "The Hoover case is just blatantly ridiculous," he says. "I mean, there's no merit to it at all. He was 77 years old. I mean, come on. What is so suspicious that a 77-year-old had a heart attack and died? He had probably one of the most stressful jobs in the country for years. He died. Jim, he died, all right? I don't think his remains need to be disturbed."

Starrs (who signs all his e-mails "Himself") is not easily humbled by such criticism. For someone ostensibly obsessed with truth, Starrs suffers from a jarring streak of grandeur when it comes to his own life. To prove he's no media slut, he tells the kind of anecdote usually relayed by Michael Jordan— caliber celebrities: Back in 1989, when he was in Colorado digging up the victims of the Colorado Cannibal, he visited a little shop in a tiny downtown. The woman inside did not know who he was, not even when he told her his name. Starrs is positively giggly relaying the story. "I walked outside and I went, 'Whoopee! Yippee! That's wonderful!' She didn't even know who I was. Oh, that was great. That was just absolutely glorious. My research assistant said, 'Aren't you angry?' I said, 'Angry? It's the best thing that could've happened. The bubble burst: I'm a human being again!'"

Although he claims not to read the stories in the media about him, in one conversation Starrs drops four mentions of publications that have featured his work.

Starrs suggests that what might come off as raging egomania is just a passion for rectitude. He says the attention is fine, but mostly he just likes to do new things. And he certainly likes to be right. By mingling science and the law, he has found a way to do both. "There's really nobody else in the world who can do it," Starrs says.

"Let me make myself perfectly clear," says Ken Burns, his voice tightening. "Meriwether Lewis committed suicide. It is a tragedy to his name and to his honor to exhume his body to satisfy the curiosity and the conspiracy theories of some latter-day historian." Burns co-produced an award-winning four-hour PBS series on Meriwether Lewis that aired last December. Mention Starrs to Burns and you'll witness anger that seems out of place in a mild-mannered New Hampshire filmmaker.

"There are no loopholes in the story of Meriwether Lewis," Burns says. "I feel like I know this man. I spent four years getting to know him, and he's under my skin. I find [Starrs' project] disheartening and at times sickening."

Starrs claims to have Lewis' interests at heart. "I think he really thinks that a tremendous injustice has been done to Meriwether Lewis and his legacy," says Art Wilmarth, a law-professor colleague at GW whom Starrs has consulted for some of his projects. "He has this innate desire to get to the bottom of famous stories that haven't been resolved," says Wilmarth, even while acknowledging that Starrs' "scholarship is not deeply empirically based." Starrs' indefatigable drive for bodies stems, according to his friend, from his "Irish sense of justice."

Starrs has sketched out extensive plans to compare the DNA of Lewis' corpse with those of Lewis' living relatives in order to confirm his identity and then look for the entry wounds of the bullets. But Lewis is buried in Park Service territory—more sacred ground than most corpses'. So to get to Lewis' dead body, Starrs has to go through the Park Service.

The cemetery, just around the corner

from the largest commune in **Starrs has mentioned to many a** America, lies on a lovely stretch

reporter that he once breakfasted on along the Natchez Trace in top of Ernest Hemingway's grave and

Tennessee. "It's a beautiful place,"

slept beside the bones of Huey Long's alleged assassin in a hotel room.

says Joseph D. Baugh, a district

attorney in Tennessee who's helping Starrs with his crusade to get at Lewis'

body. Most of the surrounding gravestones are gone now. But a couple of big-

name Tennessee families still keep Lewis company. The locals marked Lewis'

grave with a broken limestone column meant to reflect a life cut tragically

short, Baugh explains: "In the 19th century, they were a very romantic sort of people."

Last December, Starrs came down to Tennessee to convince the rangers in person. He put up a good show—the usual Starrs knee-slappers, coupled with fancy slides of the tombstone and a lovely computer animation sequence.

Says Park Service spokesperson Paul Winegar, "He kind of impressed everybody here. We were sort of fascinated by him....But he didn't change our minds."

"Our business is to protect these graves and not to go around digging them up," concludes Winegar. "We found him interesting, very smart. But still."

The Park Service first heard from Starrs in 1992, when it allowed him to use ground-penetrating radar to survey the Lewis burial site. But in September 1997, it denied his formal request to exhume the body. When Starrs appealed to the regional director in December, he got denied again.

The next step is straight to the top, to the National Park Service's director. But Starrs has decided to stop playing nice and has instead gone to court to force the Park Service to cooperate. So far, a coroner's jury has agreed his case is worth considering, and sometime next month a Tennessee judge will rule on whether to let the case go forward.

Visualizing the havoc his legalese has wrought, Starrs gets visibly excited. "There's lots of money being spent," he says. "They got the U.S. Attorney in Nashville, who's being supported by a solicitor for the National Park Service down in Atlanta, Ga. They're spending a lot of money on this, a tremendous amount."

And just you wait. "They'll spend a lot more if I get a big law firm and we're in federal court here. They'll spend a lot more if they kick it back, as they hopefully will, to state court down in Tennessee. Then we'll have a real battle royal, 'cause I'm gonna bring in witnesses and relatives, I'm gonna bring in engineers, and we'll have a real royal show." The general is hungrily gathering his troops.

Historian Stephen Ambrose, who wrote a bestselling book on Lewis last year, applauds the Park Service's restraint. The evidence that Lewis killed himself, Ambrose says, is "overwhelming." Starrs' suggestion to the contrary "smacks of publicity," he says. "He's feeding on our historical belief in conspiracy theories....It is tantalizing, teasing. He plays very well in the media, and the media are there to be played with." The disdain is mutual. "I don't like the way [Ambrose] has tarred and feathered me, but his book is wonderfully written historical fiction," Starrs says. Ambrose is no scientist,

he points out: "In my view, Stephen Ambrose came to the conclusion that Meriwether Lewis was a suicide and then arduously, energetically, ferreted about to find materials to support an opinion previously entertained." "Ambrose doesn't leave open the possibility of homicide at all," Starrs says. "He does what all my flunking-term-paper law students do: He relies on secondary sources. You've got to use the original sources. That kind of scholarship to me is not worth a passing grade."

Starrs' other critics fare no better. Peter Barnett "has a small mind." Burns' PBS documentary is "skewed." And on and on. Starrs is appalled by their refusal to entertain doubt about conventional wisdom. Only scientists like him, he suggests, have the kind of license that allows them to think out of the box and reach bold new conclusions.

It falls to a fellow scientist to dig into Starrs' bottom line. "What is the greater good here?" asks Sledzik.

Starrs says the goal is truth through science. "I just don't like these myths that continue to erupt," he laments. Of course, absent the conspiracy mill, Starrs would be an antic, bored law professor.

The thing with conspiracy theories is that you can never disprove them," Sledzik says. "If you disprove them, you're part of the conspiracy."

Even though conspiracy theorists provide the grist that he mills, Starrs is less than generous toward them. During the Jesse James dig, Starrs grew exceedingly weary of the hangers-on. "Quite frankly, these people don't deserve all my efforts," he confessed to a Washington Post reporter. "I am tired. I haven't been home in a week. I have spent a lot of money. My wife is angry because I haven't done the lawn."

No matter how much hard evidence he amasses, Starrs says, the people simply will not listen. "Even if you do Starrs has testified twice in court,

prove it's Jesse, the legend won't die," he told the Post reporter. "You know why? It's because the people who believe in this legend are dolts. I mean, let's face it, they are dolts."

and he has worked on computer simulations for both the O.J. and the Menendez

"All these dolts are looking for something that gives them a way out of their mundane lives," Starrs said. Although he should know something about the need for escape, Starrs doesn't make the connection. "They don't even have reasonable restaurants to go to," he said. "Even if they did, they wouldn't go to them."

Starrs has little patience for the commoner's comfort with ambiguity. "Undereducated people do not want to disturb the dead. They are not willing," he laments. Of course, many of the people who know the most—historians—respect him the least. Starrs says they too lack imagination, their vision clouded by the softness of their data. "There's a fixed mind with respect to the dead and disturbing graves and so on."

"I am just distraught at the...lack of historical interest in Meriwether Lewis as an explorer, as an American hero," Starrs insists. "How few people who even knew Meriwether Lewis knew anything about the circumstances of his death—a dramatic, perplexing death."

As an armchair historian and former military engineer, Cheverly resident Robert L. Haworth resents Starrs' Lewis quest. "It's a waste of resources" all funneled into "a vanity quest by a hobbyist in forensics," he says. "I hope that Starrs doesn't find himself on the wrong end of the shovel one day."

"This is our national heritage he's playing with," Haworth says. "Meriwether Lewis and some of these other people are national heroes...in U.S. history, and they deserve to just have their mysteries and secrets be buried with them."

That's just the kind of romantic notion that puts a bee in Starrs' bonnet. Six years ago, he abandoned one of his favorite causes after receiving dozens of letters from relatives of the deceased protesting his investigation. Starrs had wanted to look into the notorious Lizzie Borden case and probe the charges that Borden had murdered her parents with a pickax. "The worst part about it," Starrs laments, years later, "was that [the relatives] also said that they liked the mystery—the mystery being that even though she was acquitted, that everybody else thought she was guilty. They liked that. They were happy with that." Starrs says he has no patience for living with mystery, even though his digs usually do little to actually resolve the debate.

One of the descendants who wrote a protest letter is an Alexandria resident named Douglas Borden. Although he refuses to comment, his wife, Joan, remembers Starrs well: "He was extremely accusatory toward Douglas. He thought he was some sort of ringleader or something." Both she and her husband still want nothing to do with Starrs. "Let the dead lie in peace, regardless of who they are. Just let 'em lie," she says.

Starrs says he wouldn't mind being exhumed one day. "In fact, it might be a credit for some reason as to what I've done or I haven't done," he says.

And yet, when it comes to his own death, Starrs contradicts his own boilerplate about the need to set the record straight. He suggests that post-mortem revisionist history—the lifeblood of his passion—is just so much self-indulgent foolishness. "It's not what people say about you 10, 20, 100 years later," he says. "When my time comes, I can always say I did what I wanted to do, within the limits of the time and the abilities that I had. And isn't that what makes your life worthwhile?"

Without a trace of irony, Starrs says bygoness should be bygoness. "This is a short life to lead, and it's a short time to be remembered," he says. "Who do you satisfy? Do you satisfy the world, your family? You satisfy yourself."

"I am not a believer in conspiracy theories. Very much the contrary."

—Starrs

by Rosalind Wiseman's desk in the law school records office. She jokes that she's "just the lowly records clerk person." But she's also Starrs' biggest groupie, as both he and she will tell you. He loves to enchant her with his latest tales of conquest and discovery. "He's always got a smile, a twinkle in his eye, a story," O'Hara says.

When he's on TV, Starrs alerts O'Hara, and she watches. Sometimes she even videotapes his appearances for him. "It's like he can read the remains....I could never do that. I can't even imagine doing that kind of work."

She's right, of course. Starrs is a smart man who knows more than a little about a lot of different things. And he cares a great deal about each of his subjects, dead as they may be. When he adopts a corpse, he follows through and through, doing his homework and checking it twice.

His thoroughness and rigor are impressive, but they are accompanied by a relentless effort to draw attention—not to the person in grave, but to the guy standing on it. And then it's on to the next. For a man like Starrs, there's never a final resting place.