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Starrs still intent on studying remains of Meriwether Lewis

BY CARLOS SANTOS

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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CHARLOTTESVILLE James Starrs' quixotic bid to exhume Meriwether Lewis continues optimistically despite more than 15 years of effort and setbacks.

But then Starrs is a naturally optimistic man. He recently worked a crowd of Meriwether Lewis collateral descendants at a graveyard picnic in Ivy in Albemarle County to keep the fire of hope burning.

"Where we are right now, there is room for optimism," Starrs told the gathering of about 50 people. He won't say more for fear of derailing what has become his most intense investigative passion.

The historical mystery is well-known. Many historians believe that a depressed, alcoholic and possibly even syphilitic Lewis shot himself in a fit of madness on the rugged Natchez Trace in Tennessee on Oct. 11, 1809. His death occurred a mere three years after he had returned as a national hero from his famous expedition west.

Others, including Starrs, believe that Lewis may have been murdered in the then-isolated wilderness, populated by outlaws, about 70 miles west of Nashville.

Starrs has almost all of Lewis' living relatives supporting his efforts. A total of 184 descendants have signed a petition supporting him.

"He's really completely unbiased," said Howell Bowen, a Lewis relation. "He's going in there to solve the mystery. I can't express enough how solidly we are behind him. He's a brilliant guy with so much energy. . . . There's been so many different stops and starts. Maybe this time we'll get it done."

The starts and stops have included a major roadblock thrown up by the National Park Service, on whose land Lewis is buried. Park Service officials, in denying Starrs' bid, have said exhuming Lewis would set a precedent that could lead to other historic grave sites being disturbed.

But there are ways around the Park Service.

Federal legislation could give Lewis' relatives a say over what should happen to his remains. The Park Service could be sued to force an open hearing on whether Lewis should be disinterred. Relatives also could request that Lewis receive a Christian burial, because he was buried with little or no ceremony. To do that, the remains in the grave would have to be proved to be those of Lewis.

If Lewis' remains are sufficiently well-preserved, Starrs' experts can find the answer to Lewis' last

hours. Lewis' bones could show where and how many times he was shot. Forensic science could show from what distance Lewis was shot, based on any residue of lead or gunpowder. Experts also could determine whether another person shot Lewis.

Starrs will first have to prove that the remains at Natchez Trace belong to Lewis. Starrs is prepared: Just before the picnic, he took cheek swabs of three descendants of Lewis' sister, Jane, to collect their genetic material.

"I think we can prove within the range of scientific certainty that the remains are those of Meriwether Lewis and we can say the manner of his death," Starrs said. "If and when the time ever comes."

Contact Carlos Santos at (434) 295-9542 or csantos@timesdispatch.com

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