



NYC exhumation could determine if Houdini was poisoned

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NEW YORK (AP) - For all of his death-defying stunts, Harry Houdini could not escape the Grim Reaper: the unparalleled performer, age 52, died on Halloween 1926, taking with him many of his trade secrets. The rumors that he was murdered, however, soon took on a life of their own.

Eighty-one years later, Houdini's great-nephew wants to exhume the escape artist's body to determine if he was poisoned by enemies for debunking their bogus claims of contact with the dead. A team of top-level forensic investigators would conduct new tests once Houdini's body was disinterred, the legendary star's relative told The Associated Press.

"It needs to be looked at," said George Hardeen, whose grandfather was Houdini's brother, Theodore. "His death shocked the entire nation, if not the world. Now, maybe it's time to take a second look."

The circumstances surrounding Houdini's sudden death were as murky as the rivers where his act often found the virtuoso emerging unscathed from chains, locks and wooden boxes. The generally accepted version was that Houdini suffered a ruptured appendix from a punch in the stomach, leading to a fatal case of peritonitis.

But no autopsy was performed. When the death certificate was filed on Nov. 20, 1926, Houdini's body -- brought by train from Detroit to Manhattan's Grand Central Terminal -- was already buried in Queens, along with any evidence of a possible death plot.

Within days, a newspaper headline wondered, "Was Houdini Murdered?" A new biography, "The Secret Life of Houdini," raised the issue again and convinced George Hardeen and others that poisoning was a real possibility.

A Friday morning news conference was scheduled for details on the exhumation plans. Prominent New York lawyer **Joseph Tacopina** is assisting the family in clearing any legal hurdles to the exhumation.

The likeliest murder suspects were a group known as the Spiritualists, which became Houdini's bete noir in his final years. The magician devoted large portions of his stage show to exposing the group's fraudulent seances; the movement's devotees included Sherlock Holmes author Arthur Conan Doyle.

In the Houdini biography, authors William Kalush and Larry Sloman detail a November 1924 letter from Doyle that smacks of Professor Moriarty-style malevolence: Houdini, it said, would "get his just desserts very exactly meted out. ... I think there is a general payday coming soon."

Two years later, Houdini -- by all accounts an extraordinary physical specimen -- was dead before his 53rd birthday. Kalush and Sloman noted that "the Spiritualist underworld's modus operandi in cases like this was often poisoning" -- possibly arsenic.

The biography additionally detailed the injection of "an experimental serum" into Houdini by one of his doctors at Detroit's Grace Hospital.

While Houdini took the Spiritualists' repeated death threats seriously, he traveled without the security trappings now de rigeur for celebrities -- no bodyguard, no entourage, often just his wife Bess.

"If someone were hell-bent on poisoning Houdini," the authors wrote, "it wouldn't have been very difficult."

The team working on the exhumation includes internationally known forensic pathologist Dr. Michael Baden, and Professor James Starrs, a forensic pathologist who has studied the disinterred remains of gunslinger Jesse James and "Boston Strangler" Albert DeSalvo.

Baden, who chaired panels reinvestigating the deaths of President John F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., pointed out a pair of oddities in Houdini's death certificate: It noted his appendix was on the left side, rather than the right. And the diagnosis of appendicitis caused by a punch was "very unusual."

Starrs said he was long familiar with the story of Houdini's death, and believed the fatal injury was the result of an accident. Details contained in the Houdini biography convinced him otherwise.

"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 most virulent enemies.

During a 1924 "seance," Margery channeled a "spirit" named Walter who greeted Houdini with a threat: "I put a curse on you now that will follow you every day for the rest of your short life."

While the spirit was imaginary, the prediction of a short life was all too real. Thurlow believes there may be a connection.

"With people that delusional, you have to question what they're capable of," she said. "If there's any circumstantial evidence that Houdini was poisoned, we have to explore that."

7

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