

Remains of Lincoln's Assassin Can't Be Identified,

BALTIMORE, May 20 (Reuters) — An expert who has exhumed bodies to solve some of the most grisly mysteries in American history has told a judge that John Wilkes Booth should stay in his presumed grave.

Descendants of Mr. Booth have petitioned Judge Joseph H. H. Kaplan of Baltimore Circuit Court to allow the remains to be dug up and examined to determine if they are really those of the man who shot President Abraham Lincoln more than 130 years ago.

But the expert, James Starrs, a law professor at George Washington University, who exhumed bodies to

determine if Lizzie Borden "gave her mother 40 whacks" with an ax and to see if Alferd Packer ate the flesh of five prospectors in Colorado, said there would be little point in digging up the Booth family plot.

"DNA testing would be unsuccessful" in proving the identity, Professor Starrs said, because a female descendant of Booth's mother would be needed to carry it out, and no one knows if such a person exists.

In more than three hours of testimony this week, Professor Starrs explained in detail why the disinterment would not resolve the question of whether Booth escaped after the

assassination, as some historians contend, and someone else was buried in his family's plot in Baltimore's Green Mount Cemetery.

Jeremy Friedberg, a lawyer representing proponents of the disinterment, disparaged Professor Starrs as unqualified to make such a judgment. Mr. Friedberg told the judge that the professor once boasted he ate a breakfast of eggs and bacon on Ernest Hemingway's grave.

Professor Starrs admitted that and also that he once wore a T-shirt adorned with skeletons and the slogan "Give Me 5" while digging up the burlap-wrapped bodies of Pack-

NATIONAL SUNDAY, MAY 21, 1995

2
8

Expert Says

ers' victims in Colorado. He also admitted sleeping beside the body parts of Dr. Carl Weiss, the man accused of assassinating Gov. Huey P. Long of Louisiana, which he had carefully laid out on a bed in his hotel room. Asked how he had managed to sleep with the remains, Mr. Starrs said, "They were resting in pieces, weren't they?"

"I do have a whimsical nature," Mr. Starrs said in a courtroom packed with historians, distant Booth relatives and reporters.

One of the historians in court was James O. Hall, 82, also one of three authors of a book about the assassi-

nation, "Come Retribution" (University Press of Mississippi, 1988). Professor Hall said he would tell the judge that the theories that Booth escaped are "utter nonsense."

The instigators of the move to unearth the remains — Nathaniel Orlowek, a high school teacher in Potomac, Md., and Arthur Ben Chitty, who teaches at the University of the South in Tennessee — are planning to outline why they believe Booth did escape and lived for 38 years after the 1865 assassination, killing himself in Enid, Okla.

Frank Gorman, who represents the cemetery, which opposes the exhumation, told the judge that Mr. Orlowek and Mr. Chitty were "obsessed people" who based their case

on what he called a 1907 hoax by a man named Fennis Bates, who wrote a book saying that a mummy he was selling was the body of Booth.

The traditional version of events has Booth, an actor who believed in slavery and hated Lincoln for ending it, sneaking into the Presidential box during a performance at Ford's Theater in Washington and shooting the President in the head. Booth then leaped onto the stage, breaking his leg, but still managing to get out the door, jump on a horse and escape, aided by conspirators.

Twelve days later, Union troops shot and killed a man identified as Booth when he refused to surrender at Bowling Green, Va., about 90 miles south of Washington.