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Opinion

Jesse remains a good debate

Jesse James is dead, but he is still stirring up controversy. Now under fire is Professor James Starr's conclusion that there was "a reasonable degree of certainty" that

bones found in the purported Jesse James grave at Kearney, Mo., were actually those of the Missouri outlaw.

Starr, a George Washington University law professor, was the man who

studied material from that grave after Betty Dorsett Duke, Liberty Hill, Texas, claimed that Jesse had faked his death and instead lived to a ripe old age in Texas. That Jesse was known as James



Fred Slater
Timely Observations
Emeritus

L. Courtney, Mrs. Duke's great-grandfather.

A new convert to the theory that Jesse James may not have been killed by Bob Ford in St. Joseph on April 3, 1882, is Jim Riek, news anchor at KOMU-TV, Columbia, Mo. Riek, with more than 24 years experience in broadcasting, has been with the Columbia television station for 3½ years.

As a Jefferson City native, he had heard Jesse James lore for decades. He dug into the James story several months ago when he typed the words "Jesse James," "Missouri" and "Texas"

into the Yahoo Web site. He kept on digging, and eventually he concluded "The 1995 exhumation of Jesse James ... was misleading, inaccurate and did nothing to solve an age-old mystery."

Unfortunately, Riek's James story was telecast at the same time Gov. Mel Carnahan was killed in a plane crash, and the James tale did not get deserved exposure. Riek's story was based on interviews with ten or more people connected with the exhumation and at least five sources of information.

Some excerpts from Riek's findings:

- The Starr report was based on hair and not DNA on a tooth reportedly found in the grave.

- Just where the tooth came from is not certain, and it is doubtful if it came from the Kearney grave.

- Because tombstones at Kearney cemetery were switched to keep people from digging up Jesse, there is no proof that Jesse's remains were found.

- The bones given Starr in a tupperware container did not come from the grave in the cemetery.

- Starr refuses to release his findings for peer review and has been failing to answer repeated calls from the Columbia telecaster.

- The bones supposedly were female and upside down. Instead of being in a metal casket, they were in a wooden box.

- Starr said he could not exhume Jesse James' mother, Zerelda James Samuel, for a DNA test because Missouri law forbids exhumation of a per-

son who died of natural causes. Riek was told by the Missouri Attorney General's Office there is no such statute.

- Emmitt Hocter, a Plattsmouth, Neb., historian who has a master's degree from the University of Nebraska, came up with the idea of exhuming Jesse, but Starr gives him no credit, nor has Starr sent him results of the exhumation.

The only real way to determine if "Courtney-James" in Texas is the real Jesse or not is to obtain a DNA sample from that body and compare it with a sample from Zerelda's skeleton. Last year, a judge in Texas blocked obtaining a specimen from the Courtney grave.

But Jim Riek isn't through with the Jesse James puzzle yet.

That is evident as Jim, who has a nose for news and a desire to learn the truth, says, "I won't quit until I get the answer."

The controversy is a boon to Jesse James attractions in Missouri. *The Kansas City Star* this week reported that the James Farm and Museum at Kearney brings in about \$65,000 in admissions a year and the gift shop there an extra \$55,000. The "See the bullet hole" (though the fatal bullet never exited Jesse's skull) James House in St. Joseph received more than \$34,000 in admissions and over \$15,000 from its gift shop last year.

Fred Slater's column runs on Fridays.