

30 years later, Memphis still

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Just a 10-cent-an-hour raise: that's all it took, finally, to settle a strike by black sanitation workers three decades ago. In reality, though, the cost was too high to calculate.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had come to town to support the strikers, but in the flash of a rifle shot he lay mortally wounded. And from that day, April 4, 1968, Memphis would forever carry the burden of a martyr's death.

"This was a typical Southern city. Whether we realized it or not, our eyes were closed to what is now considered to be grave injustices," said the Rev. Nicholas Vieron, one of a group of local clergymen who tried to settle the strike.

The eyes were opened but at a terrible cost.

In the four months before King's death, the sanitation workers' strike had led to black boycotts of downtown businesses and set off a near riot that brought the National Guard to town.

Protesters, many carrying the now famous signs saying "I Am A Man," were beaten or gassed by police as the city's white leaders stubbornly refused their demands.

Just 12 days after the assassination, the city ended the strike by recognizing the union and granting the dime-an-hour raise.

For the anniversary of King's death, many will join a "Pilgrimage to Memphis," a celebration of King's life and the accomplishments of the civil rights movement.

"New life springs up from the blood that waters the soil," said the Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles, a friend of King's and an organizer of the pilgrimage.

The Rev. Kyles was present

when a single rifle slug struck King, ripping into his face and neck, as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. The site was transformed seven years ago into the National Civil Rights Museum.

"The climate for his assassination was right in Memphis, no question about that," the Rev. Kyles said. "But the climate was right in many cities in the nation ... I do think it was a quirk of history that it happened here."

But it did happen here, and this city, for blacks and whites alike, has never been the same.

James Earl Ray, a prison escapee from Missouri, pleaded guilty to the killing and is serving a 99-year sentence at a Nashville prison. He has long sought to retract his plea, saying others were

involved, a conclusion reached by congressional investigators in 1978. No one else has ever been charged.

"Now we speak of Memphis pre-King assassination and post-King assassination," the Rev. Kyles said.

Charles Crawford, a specialist in Tennessee history at the University of Memphis, said the shock of King's death made it clear that traditional patterns of white paternalism had to change.

"It was sort of a watershed that broke the Old South pattern of Memphis and began to bring — I'm not sure the proper word is cooperation — but a biracial approach to solving the city's problems," Mr. Crawford said.

The Rev. Vieron, a Greek Orthodox priest who joined other white clergymen in urging negotiations

struggles with death of King

with the strikers, said the hard line taken by then-Mayor Henry Loeb and his associates could not happen now.

"When you look back on it, it seems almost childish, and in a way it was," the Rev. Vieron said.

It would be unthinkable now, he said, for city leaders to flatly refuse to negotiate in such a racially charged conflict.

Many other changes have occurred in Memphis since then, said W.W. Herenton, the city's first elected black mayor.

Mr. Herenton beat a popular white incumbent in 1991 and was re-elected four years later by a landslide.

"I was born in Memphis. I remember riding on the back of the bus, drinking out of 'Colored Only'

water fountains, not seeing any blacks in high political offices or in corporate boardrooms. Certainly today it's vastly different," he said. "The challenge that's before us now is not one of civil rights but it's more of economic rights."

Memphis has a growing black middle class and many of its leaders are black, including the police chief, the superintendent of schools and a majority of the city council.

But blacks still make up a large portion of the city's poor. In 1970, 36 percent of black families in Memphis were below the federal poverty level. In 1990, 35 percent of the city's black residents were poor, when the overall poverty rate was 23 percent.

In 1968, Memphis' population was just under 40 percent black.

Now it's more than 55 percent black.

Larry Moore, a University of Memphis business professor, said guilt over the assassination has weighed heavily on the city's black residents because King died while trying to help them.

Traditionally, Memphis attracted blacks from across the Mississippi River Delta. Beale Street was an entertainment and commercial mecca. E.H. Crump, the political boss for half a century who died in 1954, relied on the black vote and was quick to shut down extreme racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

But after the assassination, many blacks were ashamed of living in Memphis and this view of their hometown "carried over to the next generation," said Mr. Moore, who is black.