

JAMES EARL RAY  
INTERESTING IDENTIFICATION

Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed on April 4, 1968, while standing on a balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. The unknown killer made good his getaway, but in so doing, left behind evidence that would eventually help lead to his identification, apprehension and imprisonment. Items left behind were a .30-06 Remington rifle with attached Redfield telescopic sight, binoculars, and a blue zipper bag containing clothing and personal articles. These items were found in the vicinity of a rooming house across from the Lorraine Hotel. Investigation determined that subject had rented a room at the rooming house using the name John Willard, and it was from the bathroom in this establishment that the fatal shot was fired. The rifle and other evidence was delivered to the FBI Laboratory and Identification Division by a Special Agent of the Memphis Division.

Several latent prints of value were developed on the items submitted. Two of these latent prints, one on the rifle and one on the binoculars were found to have been made by the same finger and the position of these prints, as well as the shape and slope of the ridges, indicated the prints were probably from the left thumb.

Thorough investigation developed considerable information relative to the murderer. The rifle had been purchased in Birmingham by an individual using the name Harvey Lowmeyer; the white Mustang believed to be the getaway car was registered to an Eric Starvo Galt who had spent the night preceding the murder at the Rebel Motel in Memphis. Galt was further traced to a rooming house in Atlanta where additional evidence was recovered, including a map of Mexico. A latent fingerprint developed thereon was identified with the latent prints on the rifle and binoculars. This identification enabled the FBI fingerprint experts to say that this print, in addition to probably being from the left thumb, was an unat loop of 12 ridge counts.

The latent prints developed on the rifle, binoculars, the map, and other evidence had been compared during the eleven days following the murder with approximately 400 suspects, had been searched through all sections of the FBI's single fingerprint file and compared with all outstanding FBI identification orders.

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Based on the premise that the latent fingerprint recovered from the rifle, binoculars and map of Mexico was probably from the left thumb and was an ulnar loop of 12 ridge counts, a review of the fingerprint records of the 53,000 fugitives on file was undertaken and it was found that approximately 1900 of these fugitives had ulnar loops of 10 - 14 ridge counts in the left thumb. Comparisons were started and on April 19, 1968, 15 days after the crime, the latent fingerprints were identified with the fingerprints of James Earl Ray, an escapee from the Missouri State Penitentiary where he had been serving time for robbery.

The fingerprint identifications with James Earl Ray triggered an intensive man hunt involving law enforcement officers and investigative personnel, not only in the United States, but also Mexico, Canada, England, and other countries.

The possibility that Ray himself might have been killed was not overlooked and all unknown deceased fingerprint cards received by the FBI were referred to the Latent Fingerprint Section for comparison. One case of this type concerned a body found buried on the beach at Acapulco, Mexico. Fingerprints taken by local authorities from this body were examined in the Latent Fingerprint Section but, because of the condition of the body, were of no value. An examiner from the FBI's Latent Fingerprint Section flew to Mexico and on examining the flesh of the fingers was able to determine that the body was not that of James Earl Ray.

Another phase of the investigation led to Canada, and there, following an exhaustive search of passport applications, it was determined that Ray had obtained a passport under the name of Ramon George Sneyd and had taken an airplane flight to London.

Copies of the FBI Identification Order prepared following Ray's identification by latent prints were immediately furnished to Scotland Yard and on June 8, 1969, while attempting to board a flight for Brussels, Belgium, Ray was arrested at London Airport.

Ray was subsequently ordered extradited to Memphis, Tennessee to stand trial for murder and to Missouri as an escaped felon. On March 10, 1969, Ray plead guilty to King's murder and was sentenced to 99 years in the Tennessee State Penitentiary.