

Alleged \$50,000 Offer Termed Possible Ray Motive

WASHINGTON, Nov. 29 (AP) — The House Assassinations Committee said today that an alleged \$50,000 offer made by two St. Louis businessmen could have provided the motive for James Earl Ray to assassinate the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The committee said that while its two-year investigation had been unable to establish a direct link between those who allegedly made the offer and Mr. Ray, "it did determine that they met the necessary criteria for being considered participants in a serious conspiracy."

Before releasing a staff report on its investigation, the committee heard Russell George Byers of St. Louis testify that he had rejected a \$50,000 offer to kill the civil

rights leader or arrange for someone else to kill him.

His testimony was disputed by Murray Randall, a St. Louis criminal court judge, who said that he believed the story of the offer was "fabricated and purposely planted."

Witness Termed Criminal

Before he became a judge, Mr. Randall was Mr. Byers's lawyer. He said that he believed Mr. Byers had planted the story with a criminal associate to find out if the man was an informer for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And he said that Mr. Byers "is known to be one of the most dangerous criminals in the city."

Mr. Byers said that in late 1967 or early

1968 he was approached by John Kauffman, a friend and business associate, who asked if he was interested in making \$50,000. When he expressed interest, Mr. Byers testified, Mr. Kauffman took him to the home of a St. Louis patent lawyer named John Sutherland.

"What do I have to do to earn the \$50,000?" Mr. Byers said he asked Mr. Sutherland. At the time Mr. Byers was a used car parts dealer under Federal indictment for auto theft.

"He said either arrange or kill Martin Luther King," he testified. He added that Mr. Sutherland had told him the money was to come from a "secret Southern organization."

"I told them I didn't think I'd be inter-

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ested. said Mr. Byers, who said that at the time he did not know who Dr. King was.

Mr. Byers, who testified under a grant of immunity from prosecution, was surrounded by four United States marshals throughout his appearance.

He testified that he never again spoke to either Mr. Kauffman or Mr. Sutherland about the proposed murder contract, had no further connection with any plan to kill Dr. King and did not know if someone else had been persuaded to take the offer.

When the civil rights leader was slain in Memphis on April 4, 1968, Mr. Byers said, "it struck me it was an awfully funny thing that I get the offer and the man winds up dead."

He added: "Either it was connected, it

was accidental or everybody was out to kill him, one of the three."

Asked why he thought Mr. Sutherland and Mr. Kauffman had singled him out for the offer, Mr. Byers said that his brother-in-law, John Paul Spica, had been convicted of carrying out the contract murder of a St. Louis real estate man and was serving a life sentence.

In 1973, an F.B.I. informer in St. Louis reported a conversation in which Mr. Byers told of being offered the \$50,000 to kill Dr. King. But the bureau never investigated and first reported the informer's report to the committee last spring.

Both Mr. Kauffman and Mr. Sutherland, who are now dead, supported George C. Wallace's 1968 Presidential campaign on the American Independent Party's ticket, according to the committee's report.

In the staff report, the committee said that it had developed several theories of "possible connectives" between Mr. Sutherland, Mr. Kauffman and James Earl Ray.

Confession Recanted

Mr. Ray is currently serving a 99-year prison term for the King assassination. In 1969 he pleaded guilty to the murder but has since recanted a confession he made then and says that he was drawn into the assassination conspiracy by a mysterious figure named Raoul.

The committee investigation found that Mr. Ray and Mr. Spica, Mr. Byers's brother-in-law, knew each other when both were inmates in the same cell block of the Missouri State Prison. Mr. Byers insisted that he had never told Mr. Spica about the \$50,000 offer.