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MANHUNTS:

Where Is James Earl Ray?

He seemed to materialize out of the air in Birmingham last August, a man without a past, and he vanished just as mysteriously in Memphis on April 4—the night Martin Luther King was murdered. He called himself Eric Starvo Galt, and under that name he was charged by the FBI last week with conspiracy (with an even more shadowy “alleged brother”) in King’s assassination on a Memphis motel balcony. But who was Eric Starvo Galt? Not even the Feds were sure until a slogging search through 53,000 sets of fingerprints identified him as a hard-case escaped con born James Earl Ray 40 years ago—a disclosure that at last pinpointed the prime suspect yet left him apparently as far out of reach as ever.

Till then, the hundreds of G-men thrown into the coast-to-coast manhunt seemed to be pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp—a two-dimensional cutout with a name that could have been pasted together out of paperback novels. Moving like a pinball gyroscope from dancing school in Birmingham to bartender’s college in Los Angeles, he shuffled identities as easily as an actor makes costume changes: he was, by the FBI’s painful accounting, “Eric Starvo Galt” when he bought the white Mustang ultimately fingered as the getaway car, “Harvey Lowmyer” when he purchased the .30-'06 Remington Gamemaster rifle identified by the bureau last week as the murder weapon, and “John Willard” when he checked into the Memphis flophouse from which the fatal shot was fired. He seemed to blur even in photographs; a number of witnesses who knew or had seen “Galt” said the one known picture of him—his bartending graduation photo—showed the wrong man.

Nor was the portrait fully fleshed out by the shards of information rationed out by the FBI or scoured up by newsmen a step behind the Feds. “Galt” might as well have been born last Aug. 26, the day he checked into the Economy Grill and Rooms in Birmingham. The deepest catacombs of a record-happy society—from Internal Revenue to Selective Service to Social Security—yielded nothing under his name till he took out an Alabama driver’s license on Sept. 6.

Cash: No one in Birmingham or in Los Angeles, where “Galt” lived from December till March 27, recalls him working, yet he seemed to have cash galore: \$2,000 for the Mustang, \$465 for dancing lessons, \$225 for bartending school (where he announced himself desperate for a job and turned down the first two offered him). He logged 19,000 miles on the Mustang, including a jaunt to Mexico, but two excursions seemed particularly to fascinate the FBI: a mysterious Los Angeles-New Orleans round trip in December—and the spring trip east via Birmingham (where “Harvey Lowmyer” bought the gun on March 30) to Mem-

phis (where “Eric Galt” checked into a motel on April 3) and Atlanta (where the Mustang was ditched on April 5).

“Galt” was somehow a vague personality—and that was precisely the way people remembered him. The FBI called him a loner, catalogued his thoroughly ordinary tastes (dancing, vodka, beer, country and Western music), noted his single tic—tugging nervously at his ear lobe. Most people thought of him as shy, at least about himself. A Los Angeles dancing instructor who tried, with the unremitting geniality of his trade, to draw “Galt” out recalled: “Every time I asked something personal, he’d turn away, avert his eyes . . . Now, with hindsight, I can see he wasn’t shy—just preoccupied.” His Birmingham landlord, who rather liked Galt, says he talked only about the weather, never politics—or race. But in Los Angeles, chance acquaintances pegged him as a George Wallace activist who once made a nasty anti-Negro scene with a girl in a cocktail lounge.

But finally the laborious fingerprint search produced James Earl Ray’s name—and, so the bureau said, Eric Starvo Galt’s biography. Ray, according to the FBI’s dossier, was a withdrawn, footloose chronic felon with a taste for aliases far older (if less imaginative) than Eric Starvo Galt: he had been through James McBride, James Walton, W.C. Herron, James O’Connor. He was the child of a dirt-poor Depression family in Alton, Ill., a tenth-grade dropout and an Army washout, and he got into trouble so early and often that fully a third of his life has been spent behind bars.

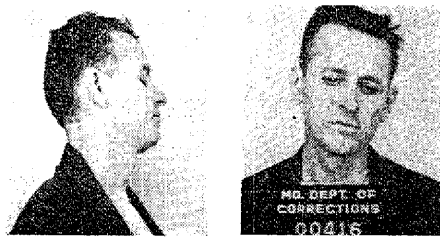
Exit ‘The Mole’: He was already a three-time loser (burglary, armed robbery, forging U.S. money orders) when, in 1960, he was convicted of a \$120 St. Louis grocery stickup and sentenced to twenty years in a Missouri prison. He bumbled two escape attempts, got nothing for his pains except a new nickname—“The Mole”—but finally made it by hunkering up in a two-by-six bakery basket and riding out on a bread truck.

His life otherwise seemed remarkable mainly for its banality. “He read a lot of small books, detective stories,” his sister Melba Ryan, 29, recalled last week. “He was obedient and he never hurt anybody, and he liked being clean. He always kept his hair combed. He’d send his white shirts to the laundry and make sure they were starched . . . When Jimmy went into the service, he sent money home to my parents, and he said, ‘You keep half and put half in the bank for me.’ That was so when he got out he could buy a business. My parents spent it all. Jimmy understood. He just got a job . . . Like they say, it begins at home—it ain’t the country’s fault. I think my brother thinks a lot of the country . . . I don’t think he’d kill anybody on purpose. Only kind of thing he ever did was rob a bank. I don’t think he would shoot Martin Luther King . . .”

The FBI thought otherwise—but that



Case file: Ray as 'Galt,' 1968 . . .



. . . as a Missouri con, 1966 . . .



. . . as a four-time loser, 1960 . . .



Associated Press photos



. . . as a stickup suspect, 1959
and (below) as a robber, 1952



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was only part of the King murder mystery. Was the "conspiracy" case against Galt and his "brother" merely a legal fiction to enable the FBI to take over the murder investigation? If there was indeed a conspiracy, was it a political plot—and who were the plotters? Or was it, as one farther-out theory under investigation by G-men in California had it, a hired-gun killing arranged by a Negro with a personal animus against King? And the biggest question of all remained unanswered at the weekend. Now that Eric Starvo Galt was officially accounted for, where was James Earl Ray?