

CALL MADE TO N.O.

Phone Booth Located In King Slayer Search

(This is the fifth of a series of reports by Louis Lomax, Negro reporter, who has been retracing the route of James Earl Ray and Hollywood songwriter Charles Stein from Los Angeles to New Orleans, seeking clues to Ray's action.)

By LOUIS E. LOMAX
(c. 1968, North American Newspaper Alliance)

SAN ANTONIO — The gas station phone booth from which James Earl Ray, alleged slayer of Martin Luther King, talked long distance with his New Orleans contact on the night of Dec. 16, 1967, has been located.

The call was one of two telephone contacts Ray made

that night with the New Orleans man who is believed to be the "cashman" behind Ray, then known as Eric Starvo Gault.

CHARLES STEIN, the Hollywood songwriter who made the Dec. 15 trip with Ray, and this reporter located the gas station at about 1 a.m. Identification of the phone booth climaxed a 24-hour search in the area.

Telephone company officials in Texas are now attempting to locate records that will show precisely whom Ray was calling. From conversations between Ray and Stein

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as they drove from Los Angeles to New Orleans, it has been established that Ray said his contact was a New Orleans industrialist.

The exact location of the phone booth is being withheld until telephone company officials can locate the records.

Before leaving Los Angeles, Stein gave me a detailed description of the gas stations where the two phone calls were made. The first call was placed at approximately 8 p.m. Dec. 16 in a relatively small town. Highway 90 ran through the town and Stein recalled that Ray drove into the station, on the right hand side of the road.

RAY, ACCORDING to Stein, got out of the car, told the attendant that he did not want gas, and raced to the phone booth left of the station and out of Stein's view. Stein recalled the station had a long roof that jutted out from the main building to the gas pump area. He said the jutting roof area was flooded

with continuous light.

The first 24 hours of the search proved fruitless because of the manner in which Stein's memory works. He never wears a watch and has great difficulty recalling if an event occurred in the morning or in the afternoon. He knew, for example, that he left Los Angeles on Friday, Dec. 15, and arrived in New Orleans on Sunday, the 17th, but he could not recall the approximate departure or arrival times.

Cross checks with Stein's family in Los Angeles establish that he and Ray departed at about noon on Dec. 15. A check with Stein's mother in New Orleans disclosed that he and Ray arrived at her home shortly after noon on Sunday.

After having plotted the trip as carried out with the two men taking turns at the wheel, we determined approximately where they would have been at 9 p. m. Dec. 16, the night the two calls were placed.

THIS TIMETABLE pointed to the Houston area. Only after a search of that area failed

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to locate the gas stations involved did Stein begin to completely relive the trip. He remembered that after the last phone call, he, Stein, took over the driving and immediately hit a road under construction.

After three hours of driving and covering more than 125 miles, we found the stretch of highway. The location of the "bump road" suggested that our original calculations were off by 500 miles.

Then Stein's memory produced these facts: he and Ray drove through a snowstorm on their first night out, Dec. 15.

the wheel and drove to the next small town, where they pulled into a small gas station. Ray had the new tire put on, reasoning that his skid had been caused by a smooth tire.

A CHECK WITH the weather bureau confirmed the snowstorm and the icy roads. Given the breakfast in Las Cruces and the weather factors, it became clear that the phone calls were made somewhere after El Paso rather than between San Antonio and Houston as first thought.

Stein, struggling to recall details of a five-month-old trip that meant nothing to him at the time, remembered that Ray was short on gas as he drove through a small town. As they passed the last gas station in the town, Ray remarked that the station was across the road, which had a divider, and that he would get gas at the next station, which he guessed would be a few miles down the highway. Ray drove about three miles without coming on a gas station.

Stein recalled this clearly because once they returned to the highway they indeed did come upon a gas station about a mile from where Ray made the U-turn back to the small town.

STEIN AND I found the town. The road divider is there and we bought our gas at the same Phillips 66 station where Ray bought his.

From these fixed points it was just a matter of time before Stein, who was driving my rented car at the time, slammed on the brakes and then pulled into a gas station.

"This," he shouted, "is it. Thank you, Jesus!"

The station has the juttied roof. The lights are continuous. And as I sat in the car, as Stein had done with Ray in December, and watched Stein race around the left side of the station to the hidden phone booth, I became convinced that indeed this was the place.

The location of the booth is so uncommon and an abutment which makes it all but invisible even from the front of the gas station are so unique, even in Texas, the odds are a million to one against the existence of two such phone booths.

But only Stein's identification of the booth matters. A citizen of the semi-underworld, Stein is a ruthlessly honest man when he wishes to be. Stein's only reward, or payment, for taking the trip along with me would be to help provide critical information that leads to those involved in the death of Martin Luther King.