

King Slay Plot Charges Puzzle Ex-Cops

By TIM WYNGAARD
and CARL WEST

Scriptsp-Howard Staff Writers
LOUISVILLE, Ky. — They are almost all in their 60s now, graying and potbellied, leisurely working part-time retirement jobs after lifelong police careers.

Until last week, the only excitement in their present lives came from their growing pack of grandchildren, and the dependable stir caused by the arrival of monthly pension checks.

Now they have been named as being involved in a 1965 plot to kill the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

They quietly go about their work here, maintaining that they know nothing of the charges leveled against them by a former Louisville cop.

And they are searching their memories for reasons why a man they recall fondly would secretly accuse them to

investigators for the House Assassinations Committee.

A dozen years after the alleged fact, they cannot come up with any answers, they said. They do not know why they have been named or precisely what they are said to have plotted.

But slowly they are finding out that the charges of retired Louisville patrolman Clifton E. Baird, that they offered him \$500,000 to kill Dr. King, have caught them in the rapidly closing vise of congressional politics.

Baird's accusations, contained in a still-secret letter to the House committee, are being used by members of the beleaguered panel as a lever to pry approval for another year's continuation from a reluctant House.

Approval of a new budget of \$2.7 million is expected tomorrow, following committee leaks outlining Baird's charges and a 14-page preliminary committee report claiming new leads in the murders of Dr. King in 1968 and President Kennedy in 1963.

The panel, in its first report of the year, noted the Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's killer, and Jack Ruby, who in turn killed Oswald, did not know each other. But the committee said it has found a witness never before questioned who claimed to have been introduced to Oswald by Ruby before the Nov. 22, 1963 assassination.

The committee also claimed several "new leads" indicating that Oswald was associated with CIA-supported anti-Castro groups as well as having connections with the CIA and FBI.

Scriptsp-Howard News Service has interviewed four of the six Louisville policemen named in Baird's letter — and they categorically deny his charges.

One of Baird's former commanding

officers stood in a county courthouse hallway, recalling Baird warmly, and exploded when a reporter told him the contents of the secret letter.

"It's preposterous," he said of Baird's claim that six local lawmen and three FBI agents planned to kill Dr. King during a period of open-housing tension here.

"It's so preposterous that it's ridiculous. I just can't believe it . . . He's wrong," he said.

A second, a self-described gun fanatic, was called away from a gun show — and was bitter. Calling Baird's charges "silly and stupid," the former detective offered to take a lie detector test and added:

"If he's accusing me, he's an out-and-out liar."

A third, the only one of the four still on the Louisville police force, offered to take a lie test and said he intends to deny the charges under oath to the House committee.

Another retired lawman — a ranking officer attached to the same district as Baird and the rest of the policemen named in the letter — took a more soft-spoken approach to his denials.

"It's kind of weird to me" he said slowly, sitting at a desk in his real estate office and rubbing his back, injured long ago.

"But I really can't help you. All I know about it is what I have read in the newspapers."

Unanimous in their memories of Baird, they recalled a "good cop — strong as an ox" who was quiet on the job and kept to himself when off duty. And, individually, they all raised the

same questions about Baird's charges. The same questions are sure to confront the House assassination committee if it continues its investigation of the 60-year-old former Louisville lawman and other evidence.

Why, they ask, did Baird remain silent about the alleged murder plan for almost 12 years — and for two years following his retirement after an unblemished 27-year career as a policeman?

Where would they — even with the connivance of the FBI — have come up with \$500,000 to pay a gunman, they ask.

And they ask if the FBI was involved — with all the sophisticated equipment at its disposal — why would they have settled on an insignificant patrolman, not highly regarded as a marksman, as the triggerman?

Baird, now a Pinkerton's security guard here, has disappeared since making the charges. Reporters have been unable to find him and committee sources refuse to say if he is being held under protective custody.

His wife, Mary, said he is working on an undercover assignment in Kentucky, but repeated attempts to pass requests for an interview through her have failed.

Now, perhaps, he'll find "peace of mind" since making the charges to the committee, she said in an interview.

"My husband has spent many a sleepless night — he'll lie there and toss and turn, then get up and read the paper. . . . Having peace of mind would mean a whole lot to everybody," she said.