

@Body:

AM-King Assassination, 2nd Ld-Writethru,0846<P>

Jury decides Martin Luther King Jr. was victim of conspiracy<P>

Eds: Rewrites throughout to ADD what evidence Pepper claimed to<P> have, detail on 1978 congressional committee. Other minor editing to tighten. Loyd and Morphy are cq.

AP Photo NY25<P>

By WOODY BAIRD<P>

Associated Press Writer<P>

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) _ A jury hearing a lawsuit filed by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s family found Wednesday that the civil rights leader was the victim of a vast murder conspiracy, not a lone assassin.

The King family had sued Loyd Jowers, a retired businessman who claimed six years ago that he paid someone other than James Earl Ray to kill King in Memphis in 1968. The family's lawyer claimed that the FBI, CIA, the Mafia and the military were involved.

The family wanted the jury to find evidence of a conspiracy and lend support to their call for a new investigation into the killing. Prosecutors have long said that they are convinced Ray fired the fatal shot and that they could find no evidence anyone else was involved.

The Kings asked for only a token amount in their wrongful-death lawsuit. After three hours of deliberations, the jury of six blacks and six whites awarded the family \$100 in damages.

"I'm just so happy to see that the people have spoken," King's son Dexter said. "This is what we've always asked for."

Ray confessed to shooting King and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He spent the rest of his life claiming to be innocent and trying to get a trial. He died of liver disease last year.

Ray's guilty plea was upheld eight times by state and federal courts. A congressional committee concluded in 1978 that Ray was the killer but that he may have had help before or after the assassination from a St. Louis-based group of bigots. The committee did not find any government involvement.

William Pepper, the Kings' lawyer, told the jury that Jowers, 73, was part of a conspiracy involving the Mafia and federal agents to kill King because of his opposition to the Vietnam War and plans for a huge march on Washington.

In his closing argument, Pepper said the order to kill King came from the head of organized crime in New Orleans to a Memphis produce dealer who got Jowers to handle the payoff and murder weapon. An Army sniper squad was in place to shoot King if the Mafia hit failed, Pepper claimed.

The FBI, CIA, the media, Army intelligence and state and city officials helped cover up the assassination, said Pepper, who also represented Ray in his efforts to get a trial.

Pepper called witnesses who claimed that King's police protection was pulled back moments before the shooting, that Army agents had him under surveillance and that a police officer who was at King's side after he was shot later went to work for the CIA.

Juror David Morphy said he believed the assassination was too complex to be carried out by one person.

"We all thought it was kind of a cut-and-dried case, with the evidence that Pepper brought forth that there were a lot of people involved, everyone from the CIA, military involvement in it _ Jowers was involved in it, we felt," he said.

Lewis Garrison, Jowers' lawyer, told the jury that while they could reasonably conclude King was the victim of a conspiracy, his client's role was minor at best.

In 1993, Jowers told ABC that he hired King's killer as a favor to an underworld figure who was a friend. He did not identify the purported killer, but said it wasn't Ray.

Jowers, who has never repeated the claim but has not recanted it either, was sick for much of the trial and did not testify.

In 1968, Jowers owned a small restaurant, Jim's Grill, across the street from The Lorraine Motel, where King was killed. On the day of the assassination, Ray, a prison escapee from Missouri, used an assumed name to rent a room in a rooming house above Jim's Grill.

Garrison told the jury it was hard to believe that "the owner of a greasy spoon and an escaped convict" could have pulled off King's assassination.

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, testified that her family believes Ray did not act alone.

"If we know the truth, we can be free and go on with our lives," she said on the trial's opening day.

Shelby County prosecutor John Campbell, who has investigated the assassination, said Jowers' claims have no merit. Campbell said several of Jowers' friends and associates said he was hoping to get a movie or book deal.

"We looked at this off and on for five years ... and I've still seen nothing that would change my opinion," Campbell said.

Last year, Attorney General Janet Reno ordered a limited probe by the Justice Department into two allegations of a conspiracy in the King murder. One was Jowers' claim; the other was a statement by former FBI agent Donald Wilson that he found papers in Ray's car that might support a conspiracy.

"Our review is still ongoing," Justice Department spokeswoman Carol Florman said. She would not comment on the Memphis case.

AP-ES-12-08-99 2056EST