

King plot theory kept alive at Ray memorial

From Tribune News Services

NASHVILLE—James Earl Ray was remembered Thursday in a memorial service dominated by questions of whether he was the real assassin of Martin Luther King Jr.

"On this occasion we renew our determination for a full investigation to seek out the truth about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.," said Coretta Scott King, widow of the slain rights leader, in a statement read at the service by a nephew of her late husband.

"We were saddened by the physical pain and suffering James Earl Ray endured during the last months of his earthly life," she added.

"We also shared... a deep regret at the tragic failure of the criminal justice system to give him his day in court, which is the birthright of every American."

Ray died of liver failure at age 70 last month while serving a 99-year prison sentence after pleading guilty to the King assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968. But he recanted almost

Families of slain rights leader, killer lament failure to get trial

immediately and until the end of his life had sought a trial.

He claimed he was a pawn in a larger conspiracy whose organizers remain unidentified and unpunished. Coretta King, son Dexter and other family members also backed a trial, claiming the true story about the assassination has yet to be told.

"The hardest part for us about all of this... is that it makes it harder to get at the truth," said Isaac Farris, a nephew of King and chief operating officer of the King Center in Atlanta.

Farris spoke to a black and white crowd inside Metropolitan Interdenominational Church near downtown Nashville. The church agreed to hold the service after two other mostly black churches in Nashville declined.

Farris said Coretta and Dexter King could not be present because they had planned to be in Wash-

ington to meet with President Clinton on the conspiracy questions.

He said the meeting was canceled at the last minute because Thursday's nuclear tests by Pakistan had occupied Clinton's attention.

But he said Atty. Gen. Janet Reno had called the family and "the tone is she may be moving toward recommending some action."

King's widow has called for a "truth and reconciliation commission" to investigate the assassination, with immunity for anyone involved who would come forward. Farris said no new date had been set for the White House meeting.

Several official investigations over the years concluded that Ray killed King and that he hadn't been part of a plot. But some books and Ray's own

actions have kept the conspiracy alive burning.

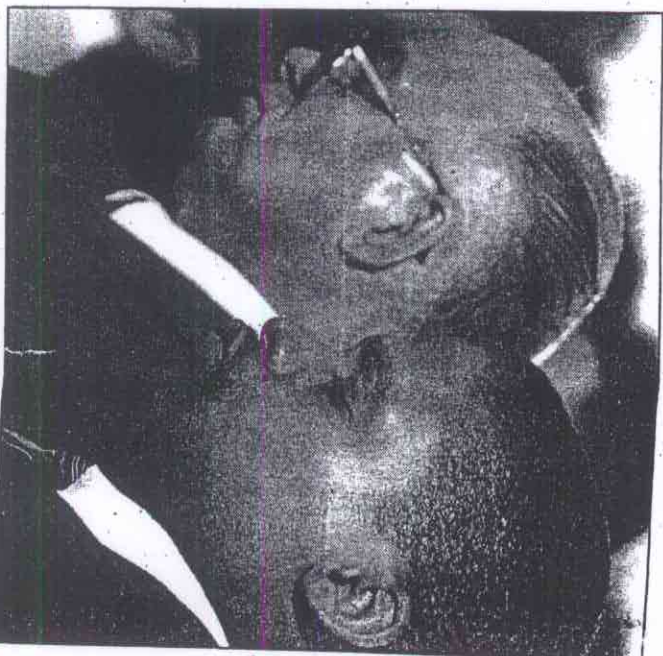
At Thursday's service, in which Ray's ashes rested in a ceramic urn in front of an altar with red and pink flowers and a single red candle, conspiracy interspersed with prayer and song was again the theme.

Ray was "a gentle, caring man, very witty, humorous man, with tenacity," said Rev. James Lawson in his eulogy. "He was not the assassin of Dr. King."

Lawson, pastor of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, was involved in the 1968 strike that brought the civil rights leader to Memphis. He has long maintained that Ray was innocent.

Ray's brother, Jerry, told the assembly "the sad part is that all this never should have happened. My brother didn't deserve to be there.... He should have had a trial years ago. If James were here he would thank all of you personally for being here."

Ray's ashes will be scattered in Ireland, home of his ancestors, Jerry Ray said.



AP Photo
Jerry Ray (left), brother of James Earl Ray, and Isaac Farris, a nephew of Martin Luther King Jr., pray during Thursday's memorial service.