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Ray Loses Effort to Turn Trial Into Forum on King Slaying

WARTBURG, Tenn., Oct. 27 (UPI)—James Earl Ray, convicted assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., lost a bid today to turn his prison escape trial into a forum on the 1968 assassination.

Circuit Court Judge Lee Asbury told Ray's attorneys the issues in the trial must be confined to Ray's June 10 escape from Brushy Mountain State penitentiary, where he is serving a 99-year sentence for the King slaying. If convicted on the escape charge, a five-year term could be added to Ray's sentence.

"I have no intention to provide a forum for Mr. Ray to air his complaint against the state or the previous investigation dealing with theories of conspiracy or whatever," Asbury said.

"The issues are very narrow. Even as a matter of dealing with the punishment question for the escape, I will not allow any attack on the previous judgments or the original conviction."

Ray and six other prisoners used a makeshift ladder to scale a wall at the rear of the prison courtyard while guards were distracted by a fight. All of the escapees were captured during a massive manhunt involving the FBI, bloodhounds and helicopters.

Defense attorney Mark Lane had

hoped to turn Ray's escape trial in a makeshift courtroom at a vocational school here into a hearing on the King slaying. Lane said he wanted to establish an "atmosphere for getting the story out."

But he brought District Attorney Arzo Carson to his feet with objections and was cut short by the judge when he began his opening argument with:

"The defendant has waited a very long time for this moment, and I believe the American people have waited a very long time for this moment. This is a moment in American history. The silence in this case and in the case which preceded this case..."

At that point, Carson objected and the judge sent the jury out while attorneys debated what issues could be presented.

When he resumed opening arguments, Lane suggested that Ray staged the escape to win a trial for the King slaying and suggested mild punishment. Ray pleaded guilty in 1968 to the murder.

Lane said Ray would testify in his own behalf but only in relations to possible punishment, should he be found guilty.