

A museum with a dream

Civil-rights struggle told in motel where King died

By Jack Schnedler
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MEMPHIS — A square hole about as big as first base gaped in the recently poured concrete floor of the balcony outside Rooms 306 and 307 at the former Lorraine Motel.

"We found Dr. King's bloodstains still on the old concrete, and I felt they should be preserved," explained Judge D'Army Bailey, the guiding force behind the new National Civil Rights Museum at the motel site. "So that piece of concrete will be put back in place as part of the memorial."

The motel where Martin Luther

King Jr. was shot to death by James Earl Ray on April 4, 1979, opens Sept. 28 as the country's first full-fledged civil-rights museum.

"To many Americans, the civil-rights era of the 1950s and '60s is now a remote period of the past," said Bailey, who was expelled from Southern University in 1962 for his role in protests against segregation in Baton Rouge, La. He was elected last fall to the Tennessee bench.

"But it was a great and glorious time in U.S. history. We were carrying out our destiny as black Americans, and changing this nation in the process."

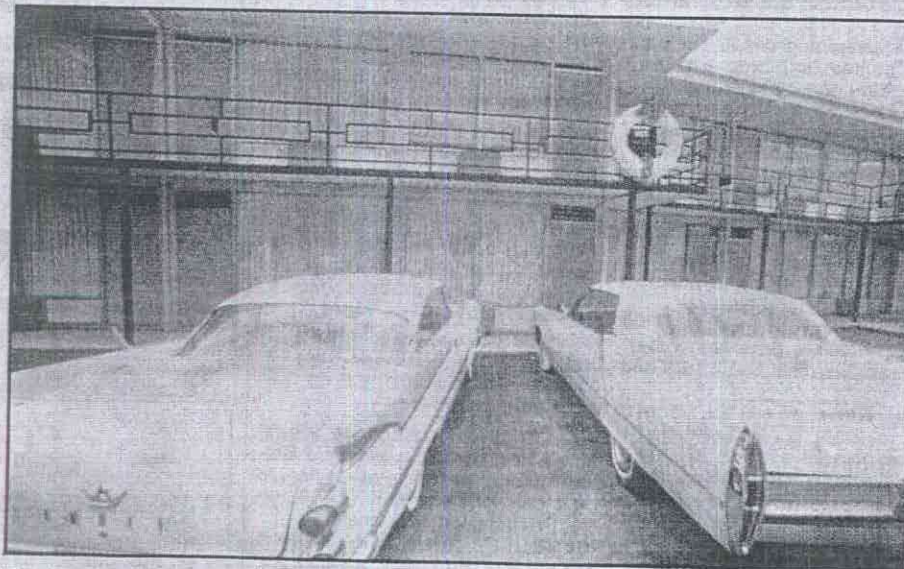
The National Civil Rights Muse-

um, a project nine years in the making, aims "to bring these dreams to life" and "to provide a focus of national remembrance" for the struggle to break down racial barriers in the South and across the country. It was built with \$9.2 million in funds from the state of Tennessee, the city of Memphis and Shelby County, to be operated by the non-profit Lorraine Civil Rights Museum Foundation.

Like the civil-rights movement itself, the museum has been the focus of controversy. Visitors to the site on Mulberry Street, just south of downtown Memphis, may encoun-

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The facade of the motel where King was killed has been restored to its 1968 appearance.

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ter Jacqueline Smith. A former Lorraine Motel clerk, Smith has been staging a one-person protest vigil across the street since she was evicted 3½ years ago to make way for museum construction.

Smith argues that King would have objected to spending millions of dollars on a museum. She maintains that the money should have been spent to create housing for the poor and homeless in the decrepit motel, which had become a haunt for drug dealers and prostitutes before it was bought for \$144,000 by the museum foundation at a 1982 foreclosure sale.

"She has her point of view, and housing is an important issue," Bailey said. "But a museum like this can provide both the inspiration and the strategic direction for how we confront today's void in leadership and our disheartening social stagnation. It can give young people a sense of who they are, and of the opportunities to be part of a cause and a social crusade."

Bailey vowed that the museum would not become "just another Graceland" — a reference to the tourist-thronged Elvis Presley mansion that is the No. 1 paid attraction in Memphis.

"The museum is being done competently and with integrity," he said.

A laser "sculpture" has been one point of contention in the museum's design. The laser beam is intended to trace part of the fatal bullet's path 23 years ago from a boarding house across Mulberry Street to the motel balcony where King was standing.

"There has been some sensitivity in the black community to say, 'Let's not dwell on the negative of Dr. King's death,'" Bailey acknowledged. "But the laser sculpture will be tastefully done. And you can't ignore the fact that one thing every visitor wants to know is where the shot came from."

Most of the museum's 10,000 square feet is new, but the facade of the Lorraine Motel has been preserved and restored to its 1968 appearance. The balcony where King was shot is in the sight line of visitors as they head toward the museum entrance and lobby, dominated by Michael Pavlovsky's massive \$300,000 sculpture titled "Move-

ment to Overcome.

Fifteen exhibit areas give a roughly chronological tour of the civil-rights movement, starting with a 10-minute overview video and featuring artifacts as well as audio-visual displays.

The layout focuses on vignettes of key events in the civil-rights era, starting with the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* desegregation ruling in 1954, and ending with a view of King's motel room restored to its appearance on April 4, 1968. A preparatory exhibit covers black activism before the 1950s, while a final



Former motel is now the site of the country's first civil-rights museum.

section looks at developments since 1968 under the heading "The Struggle Continues."

At one exhibit, tourists can climb aboard a vintage Montgomery city bus and sit where Rosa Parks was seated in 1955. A recorded voice then orders them to move to the rear of the bus.

An orange garbage truck and a picket line of marchers set the stage for the exhibit on the 1968 strike of Memphis sanitation workers, which brought King to the Tennessee city for what turned out to be his last crusade. Then comes a look at the spot where King was slain.

"Visitors probably will have a sense that the civil-rights movement ended or slowed down drastically after Dr. King's assassination — not that it should have," Bailey said. "But the movement did what it was supposed to do. A lot of us from those years are still dedicated soldiers who simply need to be re-

energized. It's time to measure our progress, as this museum seeks to do, and start all over again."

Jack Schnedler is the travel editor at the Chicago Sun-Times.

Hours: The National Civil Rights Museum officially opens Sept. 28 and will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and from 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

Admission: Fees are expected to be \$5 for adults, \$4 for senior citizens and students, and \$3 for children 6 to 12. Admission will be free from 3 to 5 p.m. Mondays.

Information: Contact the National Civil Rights Museum, 450 Mulberry St., Memphis, Tenn. 38103; (901) 521-9699.