Subject: The Death of Ray
From: David Starks <aweb@cynet.net>
Date: Thu, Apr 23, 1998 15:58 EDT
Message-id: <353F9387.55EC@cynet.net>

James Earl Ray Dies

By Joe Edwards
Associated Press Writer
Thursday, April 23, 1998; 2:39 p.m. EDT

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) – James Earl Ray, the petty criminal who confessed to assassinating Martin Luther King Jr., then recanted and spent decades seeking a trial, died today. He was 70.

Ray, who was serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying, died this morning of kidney failure and complications from liver disease, said his brother, Jerry Ray. He had been hospitalized repeatedly since late 1996.

By pleading guilty in March 1969, Ray avoided the possibility of a conviction at trial and a death sentence. He then argued for years that he was coerced into making the plea.

His attempt to get a trial drew an unlikely coalition that included his family as well as King's family and other civil rights leaders who believe King was the victim of a murder conspiracy, not a lone man.

"America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., as well as establish the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence," Coretta Scott King, the slain civil rights leader's wife, said shortly after Ray's death.

Wayne Chastain, one of Ray's lawyers, agreed:

"We still think he's innocent. ... History will have to write the final verdict," Chastain said today.

William Gibbons, the lead state prosecutor in Memphis, said Ray's legal petitions

aimed at getting his guilty plea thrown out are now over.

"About the only thing I can say is I believe the history books will accurately record that James Earl Ray was the killer of Dr. King," Gibbons said.

The Rev. Joseph Lowery, a co-founder of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said he never believed Ray was smart enough to plan the assassination alone.

Dexter King, one of the slain civil rights leader's four children, met with Ray in 1997 at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville and said he no longer believed Ray killed his father.

But prosecutors cited the evidence against Ray and noted that courts had repeatedly upheld the guilty plea.

It was 30 years ago this month when King was shot while standing on a second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. He was in town to support striking sanitation workers.

The April 4, 1968 assassination touched off race riots in more than 100 cities and set off one of the biggest manhunts in U.S. history.

Ray, a fugitive from a Missouri prison where he was serving time for robbery, was staying in a flophouse near the Lorraine at the time of the assassination. He had a lengthy criminal record, including armed robbery, burglary, forgery and unauthorized use of a motor vehicle.

He fled the city shortly after the shooting and was captured in London two months later.

When he pleaded guilty the following year, he agreed to a detailed description of how investigators said the crime happened.

Prosecutor Phil M. Canale Jr. said there was no evidence of a conspiracy.

He did not outline a motive for the killing or accuse Ray of being a racist.

Even though he had told the judge he understood the plea couldn't be appealed, Ray began trying to take it back three days later. He claimed he was set up by a shadowy gun dealer he met in Montreal and knew only as Raoul, and said he was off changing a tire when the shooting happened.

Authorities have never established any connection between Raoul and the slaying, and numerous courts said there was no evidence anyone else was involved. No one else was ever charged.

In a report this March, state prosecutors in Memphis said the person identified by Ray as Raoul existed but had nothing to do with the killing.

His name was not released. Prosecutors said the man was in his home city working when King was shot.

The U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978 that Ray was the killer but a group of racial bigots in St. Louis, reportedly with a $50,000 bounty on King's head, might have been involved, too.

The House committee issued a report on the killing but its investigative files are sealed until the year 2029. Civil rights groups have lobbied for those records to be opened.

Ray's last legal effort concentrated on tests he wanted conducted on the rifle that prosecutors say was the murder weapon. It had been purchased by Ray and was found near the murder scene moments after King was shot, with Ray's fingerprints on it. But Ray claimed it was placed there to frame him.

Ballistics tests by the FBI and a congressional committee in the 1970s failed to prove beyond a scientific doubt that the rifle was the murder weapon, though King was killed with a similar gun.

Ray's lawyers argued that more sensitive tests developed since the '70s might show the gun was not the murder weapon. But tests that were undertaken after a court ruling in 1997 proved to be inconclusive, too.

The efforts to gain a trial were dealt a severe blow this March 6 when Criminal Court Judge Joe Brown, who allowed the gun tests and made other rulings favorable to Ray, was removed from the case. The state Court of Criminal Appeals found he appeared biased in Ray's favor. A replacement judge was not appointed.

Ray had been in poor health, suffering most notably from cirrhosis of the liver believed caused by hepatitis, which he apparently contracted during a blood transfusion after being stabbed by black inmates in 1981.

Funeral arrangements weren't immediately announced, but earlier this year Jerry Ray said his brother wished to be cremated and his ashes flown to Ireland.

© Copyright 1998 The Associated Press

–
David Starks

Visit The Assassination Web at: http://home.cynet.net/jfk/ and see:

The free Electronic Assassinations Newsletter:
http://home.cynet.net/jfk/front.htm

The Electronic Assassination Bookstore: http://home.cynet.net/jfk/eb.htm

Assassination documentary video and conference tapes available.

Information on how to support COPA, the Coalition On Political Assassinations.