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OBITUARIES

James Earl Ray, Convicted Killer

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James Earl Ray, 70, a career petty criminal who was the convicted killer of legendary civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., died of liver failure April 23 at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital in Nashville.

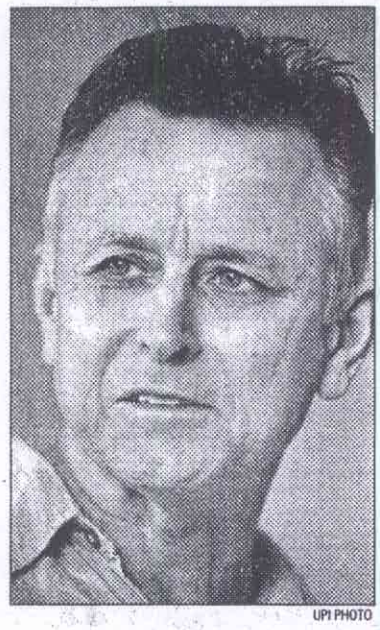
He was serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying, after pleading guilty in March 1969 and avoiding a possible death sentence. Mr. Ray, who had been in and out of hospitals since 1996 for treatment for liver disease, later recanted his confession, saying he was coerced into pleading guilty.

King was killed by a sniper April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The civil rights leader and noted preacher had gone to Memphis to lend his support to striking sanitation workers.

The echoes of that rifle shot ignited rioting in more than 100 cities, including Washington, and seemed to dim the spirit of the entire country, where King had become a leading civil rights figure by winning stunning victories for racial justice through militantly nonviolent means.

Only weeks later, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.), brother of the slain president, was gunned down in the midst of celebrating his victory in the California Democratic presidential primary. To many, the two 1968 slayings marked a watershed in U.S. history.

Mr. Ray was an escaped convict with a lifelong list of crimes and a distinct penchant for getting caught. He quickly became a suspect in King's slaying after the gun was traced to him and his fingerprints were found in the room where the shots were fired. The room, in a cheap rooming house across from King's motel, was registered to Mr. Ray.



UPI PHOTO

JAMES EARL RAY
. . . pleaded guilty, then recanted

Mr. Ray managed to lead authorities on a 25,000-mile chase. He drove out of Memphis through police roadblocks; took a bus from Atlanta to Canada, where he got false identification papers; then fled to Britain, Portugal and back to Britain. He was apprehended at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8, 1968, two months after the death of King and on the day of Kennedy's funeral.

He eventually waived extradition and returned to the United States. He fired his first attorney the day before his trial was to begin and instead hired Percy Foreman, the noted Texas trial lawyer.

Foreman persuaded Mr. Ray to plead guilty to the shooting, saying that the evidence was overwhelming and that the media had already convicted him. A trial could well end with a death sentence, but a guilty plea would result in a life sentence.

Mr. Ray pleaded guilty to murder, got a 99-year prison sentence and, three days later, tried to recant his story. He also began a tortured and disturbed decades-long prison incarceration.

Over the years, he was attacked several times by fellow inmates, once receiving 22 stab wounds.

Once, he escaped from Bushy Mountain Prison in Tennessee, eluding authorities for 54 hours before being recaptured in another one of the greatest manhunts in modern memory.

Mr. Ray constantly changed his story about the assassination, at times saying that he was part of a conspiracy and other times saying he acted alone. By 1974, at his first parole hearing, he said he had not killed King at all. He did not win parole.

Many of those supporting Mr. Ray's calls for new trials or investigations were people who really did not like Mr. Ray. Civil rights leaders, journalists and congressional investigators questioned whether an inept petty criminal could have masterminded the shooting of King or the subsequent chase that ended in Europe. King's killing eventually took on the air of a possible conspiracy, much as did the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Among those with doubts about Mr. Ray and the shooting were the King family. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, recently called for a new trial. Dexter King, one of the Kings'

# of King, Dies at 70

four children, met Mr. Ray in 1997 and said he was convinced that Mr. Ray did not kill his father. Other doubters included the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery Jr., a founder of the King-led Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who said he never believed Mr. Ray was smart enough to mastermind the assassination.

Mr. Ray was born in Alton, Ill., and was a high school dropout. He robbed gas stations and stores, served prison sentences in Illinois and nearby Missouri and received a suspended sentence in Los Angeles.

Over the years, those who knew him painted a portrait of an almost comically inept criminal who, when imprisoned, spent his time planning great escapes.

His first criminal failure was in 1949, when his holdup of a cabdriver ended ingloriously after he was chased and fell through a basement window. The second may have been in 1950, when he received a 90-day jail sentence for stealing a typewriter.

Later brushes with the law included an incident in which he leapt into a police car, thinking it was a taxi, to escape a crime scene. Another time, while robbing a dry cleaning establishment, he fled the store after dropping his wallet on the floor and severely cutting himself on the glass he had broken to enter the building.

His early prison escape attempts also were unsuccessful. He made several attempts, once managing to nearly suffocate himself in a heating vent and another time receiving a serious injury when he fell on his head after climbing halfway up a prison wall on a makeshift ladder.

But, in April 1967, he escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. His odyssey, as it was later reconstructed, included Chicago, where he worked as a busboy; Birmingham, where he obtained a driver's license and took dancing lessons; and Los Angeles, where he took more dancing lessons, studied bartending, had plastic surgery done on his nose and underwent hypnosis.

He also made stops in Louisiana, Atlanta and Canada, where he claimed he took part in smuggling operations masterminded by a "blond Latin" named Raoul. In late March 1968, Mr. Ray was back in Birmingham and bought two rifles at a marine supply store. The second gun was the deer rifle believed to have been used to slay King. Mr. Ray had been serving his sentence at Riverbend Maximum Security Prison in Nashville when he entered the hospital in 1996 with liver ailments.

On Dec. 24, 1996, his brother, Jerry, told reporters: "I'm not going to sit here and say James is an angel, because he's been in trouble. The family still supports him. The family knows he's innocent."

The brother also deplored the justice of Mr. Ray dying of cirrhosis of the liver, as he supposedly had never drunk alcohol or smoked.