The Globe and Mail, Friday, April 24, 1998

OBITUARY /
James Earl Ray

Assassin insisted he didn't kill King

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — James Earl Ray's 30-year legal fight to take back his guilty plea in the assassination of Martin Luther King died with him yesterday.

The King family's efforts to bring about a broader investigation of the slaying will continue, however.

Mr. Ray died at Memorial Hospital in Nashville of kidney failure and complications from liver disease. He was serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying of the American civil-rights leader.

Mr. Ray long ago exhausted his appeals in Tennessee courts, but at the time of his death at age 70 he was still reaching for a legal long shot focused on retesting the rifle identified as the murder weapon. The King family backed Mr. Ray's attempts to win a trial.

Mr. Ray began filing appeals or other petitions three days after he pleaded guilty in 1969, claiming he was the victim of a frame-up. The guilty plea let Mr. Ray avoid the possibility of a death sentence. But Mr. Ray recanted three days later, and argued for years that he was coerced into making the plea. He claimed he was set up by a shadowy gun dealer he met in Montreal, and knew only as Raoul. Mr. Ray said he was off changing a tire when the shooting occurred.

Investigators have never established any connection between Raoul and the slaying, and numerous courts agreed with prosecutors there was no evidence anyone else was involved. No one else was ever charged. Over the years, the courts repeatedly upheld the guilty plea.

With his latest bid for appeal, Mr. Ray hoped to prove the rifle, found at the murder scene with his fingerprints on it, was not the gun that killed Mr. King in Memphis.

Winning such an argument would not, in itself, have overturned the guilty plea. But it would have given Mr. Ray a chance to renew his request for a trial.

None of that worked out Mr. Ray's way, however, and the effort cannot be carried on for him now that he is dead.

"I would say this puts an end to the case," said Wayne Chastain, one of Mr. Ray's lawyers. "We still think he's innocent. We still think the rifle was not the murder weapon."

Prosecutors are just as convinced of Mr. Ray's guilt.

"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," said District Attorney- General William Gibbons, the chief state prosecutor in Memphis.

Mr. King's widow, Coretta, said the family's efforts for a new investigation will continue. Mrs. King met with Attorney-General Janet Reno in Washington earlier this month seeking the creation of a federal, investigative commission with the power to subpoena witnesses, grant immunity and file charges against suspected conspirators.

"We are more determined than ever to find the truth about this tragedy," Mrs. King said in a statement.

Mrs. King and her son Dexter have said they believe Mr. Ray was innocent. Some other civil-rights leaders, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, have not gone that far, instead saying that they believe Mr. Ray took part in the assassination but did not act alone.