Mile From Scene, Ray Tells Court

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MEMPHIS — James Earl Ray has testified that he did not kill Martin Luther King Jr., that he was more than a mile away at the time of the murder and that he had witnesses to prove it.

Ray has not finished his account of his involvement in the murder of the civil rights leader here April 4, 1968, but he admitted involvement yesterday and was to be on the witness stand answering questions about it again today.

He said his involvement had been peripheral.

"I personally did not shoot Dr. King, but I believe I may be partly responsible for his death," Ray, who is 47, testified.

RAY SEEKS a full-scale trial. He pleaded guilty in March 1969 and was sentenced to 99 years in prison after a one-hour court proceeding.

He said on the witness stand yesterday that he had pleaded guilty because he thought his attorney, Percy Foreman of Houston, might "fake" a defense if he insisted on a trial, and that he might end up being sentenced to the electric chair.

He said that Foreman had seemed intent on getting him to plead guilty, and didn't seem to have time to sit down with him and discuss the case.

Foreman estimated there was a 99 percent chance he would get the death penalty if he went to trial, Ray said.

"I TOLD HIM I thought that was ridiculous, that the state would rely on circumstantial evidence and the most they could convict me of, if they convicted me, was aiding and abetting," Ray said, according to the Associated Press.

Ray's attorneys claim he was a dupe of a conspiracy by others to kill King.

Ray later testified that he had rented a room across the street from a motel where King was slain thinking there would be "some kind of meeting between me and another party up there," AP reported.

Ray also said he had witnesses who could verify his whereabouts about 11 minutes before King was assassinated, but had kept the information to himself for fear the FBI would find out and harass them.

WHEN RAY was asked if his first attorney, Arthur Hanes Sr. of Birmingham, Ala., ever asked him if he was guilty of the murder, he replied:

"I just told him no."

He said that Foreman, who took over the case from Hanes, never asked him directly. "But some time in the early part of February (1969) he asked me to write out everything I did when I escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary until I was arrested," Ray said.

"I just assumed he read from that that I wasn't in that particular area (the slaying scene) and I wasn't guilty."

READ INTO evidence was a letter Ray wrote, four days after the guilty plea, to Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman James O. Eastland, D-Miss., saying, "I personally did not shoot Dr. King, but I believe I am partly responsible for his death."

Asked what he meant, Ray replied, "I assumed you could be involved in some kind of crime and not have knowledge of it. I had no direct knowledge."

Ray was asked whether he assumed that a rifle, identified asthe murder weapon and bearing his fingerprints, was used to kill King.

"I DIDN'T MAKE NO strong assumptions in that area," he replied.

He did not say what his responsibility had been, but added that "the man who made the rifle may have been responsible in part."

Much of the evidence that Ray has given to U.S. District Judge Robert E. McRae Jr. has been couched in such cautious language.

Before being sentenced in King's death, Ray had served three prison terms and was in the midst of a fourth when he escaped from prison about a year before King's death.

Ray's involvement in the assassination—which set off riots in black sections of many cities—is being pieced together indirectly.

RAY TESTIFIED yesterday that he left California in March 1968 to go to New Orleans. He had been in California for several months, taking dancing lessons, going to bartender school, and having his nose bobbed.

He said he wanted his features altered so that he could get a merchant seaman's license. He said he knew that the FBI would be circulating a photograph of him, and he did not want to resemble it.

He said that when he got to New Orleans, "I stopped there for maybe an hour or so. Then I left New Orleans. I had to go to Birmingham. I was supposed to meet a party in New Orleans but he had gone on to Birmingham."

Ray has contended that the "party" he met in Birmingham was a "blond Latin" named Raoul whom he had met the year before in Canada and who had persuaded him to smuggle items from Canada into the United States.