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James Earl Ray's Lawyers Get Court's OK to Test-Fire Rifle

MEMPHIS, Tenn.—The defense team for the man convicted of killing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. received court permission Friday to test-fire the rifle allegedly used to kill King 26 years ago.

"We hope to disprove that this was the rifle that killed Dr. King," said Wayne Chastain, one of several defense attorneys for James Earl Ray. The attorneys are working to throw out Ray's 1969 guilty plea and prison sentence.

Criminal Court Judge Joe Brown said the 30.06 Remington high-powered Gamemaster rifle with telescopic sight could be retested by defense ballistics experts and that the bullet fragments could be re-examined.

When and where those tests will occur has not yet been determined. Two ballistic tests, conducted in the months following King's April 4, 1968, assassination, were inconclusive because the slug that killed the Nobel Peace Prize laureate was too damaged to compare with bullets test-fired from the Remington rifle.

Prosecutor John Pierotti opposed the request for a retest and said he will consider an appeal after discussing the matter with the state attorney general.

Ray, 66, is serving a 99-year sentence in Riverbend Prison, a maximum-security facility in Nashville.

—Reuters