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King Assassination

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) -- A judge who agreed to unusual court hearings on the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. said Monday he won't let the proceedings deteriorate into a "fishing expedition."

Criminal Court Judge Joseph Brown told a lawyer for confessed killer James Earl Ray to trim his list of potential witnesses to those who can address any claims of new evidence in the 1968 slaying.

At least 60 witnesses are expected, including former Memphis businessman Loyd Jowers, who claimed last year that he hired King's assassin and it was not Ray.

In April, Brown agreed to allow the hearings to improve "the historical record" on the assassination of the civil rights leader. He met Monday in court with lawyers and a prosecutor to lay down ground rules.

"I'm not going to let you use this courtroom to bring somebody in here on a fishing expedition," Brown said.

Ray, 66, claims innocence despite a confession and a guilty plea. The hearings will be his first opportunity to subpoena witnesses. The hearings have not been scheduled but are expected in August.

After the meeting, prosecutor John Pierotti said he may file an appeal to stop the hearings.

"It's a waste of time," Pierotti said. "I've never ruled out that he might have had some help, but no one has been able to prove it in 25 or 26 years and they won't prove it here."

Last month, Brown gave defense lawyer Wayne Chastain permission for tests on the rifle identified as the murder weapon and the bullet removed from King's body.

The hearings cannot lead directly to Ray's release from prison, however, his lawyers can use the record of the testimony in an appeals.

Ray, who is serving a 99-year prison sentence, contends he did not fire the fatal shot. He says he was set up by a shadowy figure he knew only as "Raoul."