James Earl Ray Files Libel Suit Against Madison County Deputy

By Edward H. Kohn
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James Earl Ray, who pleaded guilty to the 1968 murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, is seeking $150,000 in damages from a Madison County sheriff's deputy who he says libeled him and violated his civil rights.

Ray, in a complaint filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court here, says that Sheriff's Deputy Conrad "Pete" Baetz, along with the U.S. Department of Justice, libeled Ray by giving reporters false information about his activities.

In the complaint, Ray charges that Justice Department officials, including Federal Bureau of Investigation Director William H. Webster, had suggested in interviews that Ray had robbed banks to support himself in 1967-68 while a fugitive from the Missouri State Penitentiary, where he had been serving time for robbery.

He also charges that Baetz, a former investigator for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, ordered a government informer to steal "material" from Ray's brother, Jerry W. Ray.

In addition, Ray charges that Baetz libeled him in a July 1979 interview with the Post-Dispatch. In the interview, the complaint says, Baetz said that one of Ray's relatives had been an intermediary in a plan to receive money from St. Louis patent lawyer John H. Sullivan in a plot to kill King.

Baetz, in an interview Wednesday night, denied that he had ordered anyone to steal from Ray's brother. Baetz said an informer, Oliver Patterson of Black Jack, had offered to supply him with "materials" in Jerry Ray's possession in 1978, but that he had rejected the offer. Later, he said, Patterson turned up with what he alleged to be an escape map of Ray's prison, and he accepted it under instructions from his superiors. The map was turned over to the congressional committee.

"Whether he stole the map or not, I don't know," he added.

"As far as the libelous statements," Baetz continued, "the only information the press printed attributed to me, or anybody else, is the same information that's contained in the final report of the Select Committee on Assassinations."

Ray, who now contends that he didn't kill King, is serving a 99-year sentence at the Brushy Mountain Prison in Petros, Tenn.

He said in the court document that he was filing the complaint because he plans to go before a parole board with evidence to clear himself in the King killing, and he said he fears the "malicious and false accusations" may jeopardize his case.

In the suit, Ray alleges that Baetz and members of the House committee wrongfully harassed him and other members of his family by accusing them of robbing banks.

He asks that the Justice Department be ordered to specify "what criminal acts, and the evidence to support same, that the department contends (Ray) committed prior to his departing the United States (for England) in April 1968 — excepting (Ray's) convictions in courts of law."

Ray also charged that Webster, in an interview last month with the Post-Dispatch, had implied that Ray had robbed banks to finance the King assassination.

Ray offered to stand trial for the "offenses" that he says he has been accused of in the press. Ray's complaint, which was received by mail, was assigned to U.S. District Judge William L. Hungate.

Baetz said he believed Ray was suing him out of anger over his role in last month's capture of Ray's brother, John Larry Ray. John Larry Ray, who was wanted in connection with a Liberty, Ill., bank robbery, was arrested after Baetz recognized him walking along an Alton street.