

Dealer tops five bidders for Mustang of assassin

By Clay Bailey
Staff Reporter

James Earl Ray's 1966 Mustang, a memento from the most infamous day in Memphis' history, will remain in the city at least for now.

Red Strickland, a Whitehaven auto dealer, nervously wrote a \$27,000 check yesterday and drove the white car from The Peabody's Tennessee Exhibit Hall.

Minutes earlier, Smith raised his hand enough to outduel five other bidders who tried to buy the car Ray drove from the 400 block of South Main moments after the April 4, 1968, shooting of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Ray is serving a 99-year sentence after pleading guilty to the slaying.

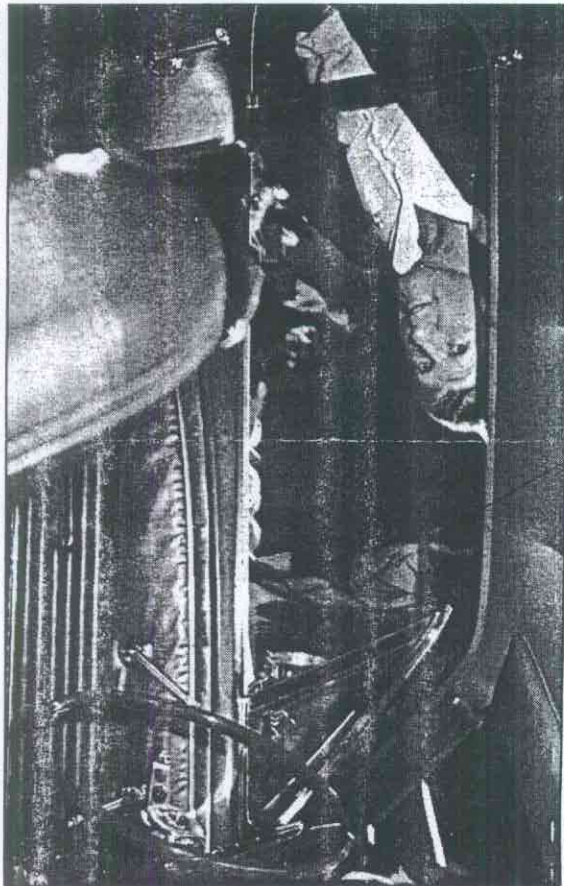
Profits from the sale will be split between private investigator Renfro Hays, who said he was never paid for his work in Ray's defense, and an unidentified person, who bought Ray's 40 percent share, said auctioneer Don B. Smith.

Strickland, owner of Auto Corral at 3350 Elvis Presley, said little after the sale, which lasted

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THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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By Richard Gardner

Memphis automobile dealer Red Strickland takes a look inside the 1966 Mustang belonging to James Earl Ray that Strickland bought at auction yesterday for \$27,000.

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Car

about 10 minutes. He said he lived in Memphis at the time of the slaying and bought the car strictly as an investment.

"I don't know how to explain it," Strickland said. "I bought it because I'm in the car business and I think somebody will buy it and pay me a profit. That's the only reason I bought it. It's a shame it (the assassination) happened, you know."

With a call of "All right now, Sale time," Smith opened the floor to the 60 registered bidders. Few participated, however, after a \$15,000 opening bid.

Among the bidders were Robert "Prince Mingo" Hodges and Aubrey J. Howard. Howard, the only black actively bidding on the car, stayed in until it reached about \$25,000.

Howard declined to name the person he represented but said it was a local resident involved in civic activities. He declined comment when asked if he was

representing a group planning a civil rights museum at the Lorraine Motel where King was killed.

Asked if he was uneasy about bidding on the car, Howard replied: "History is history. You

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— Aubrey J. Howard

can't change that. Whatever the negative is, that someone lost their life, that's what creates the value. On the other hand, that loss was a monumental activity that affected so much... One person who did not agree with the sale was Jacqueline

Smith. Ms. Smith, who said she was representing a group called Poor Peoples' Association of South Downtown, said the auction would be an embarrassment for the city.

"We feel the car should be destroyed and buried," Ms. Smith said before the auction. "We feel it is a way to glorify a killer that committed a horrible deed."

Strickland, a tall, slender man with blue eyes and close-cropped red hair, said he thinks he got a good deal considering the car's historical value. Strickland spent time after the auction talking to Don B. Smith II about the car's authenticity.

Strickland possibly got a better deal than he realized. Within 30 minutes after the sale, Peabody officials brought Smith a telegram from a Mobile, Ala., man authorizing a bid of \$29,500.

The telegram, written about 6 p.m. Wednesday by Mike Nix, was delivered in the afternoon mail and brought to Smith. Nix said late yesterday that he has "some other investors that possibly are interested in it."