

The King Assassination Revisited

Coretta King marched through the streets of Atlanta last week, honoring the 47th birthday of her slain husband by leading a band of protesters demanding jobs for the unemployed. Before he died, Martin Luther King Jr. had been immersed in planning a Poor People's Campaign with the same goal. Then came the sniper's shot that killed him in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the two-month pursuit of his killer, and the swift conviction of a smirking, small-time thief named James Earl Ray. Yet nearly eight years later, the widespread feeling still persists that King's murder has not really been solved.

In the most recent Harris Poll, 60% of the population has expressed the opinion that there must have been a conspiracy to murder the civil rights leader. Prompted by the revelation that the late FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had conducted a vicious vendetta to discredit King, the Justice Department is probing both the FBI's harassment of him and its investigation of his death.

Tough to Prove. Certainly there are a number of unanswered questions. Why would Ray have killed King? How did he finance a year of travel, ranging from Acapulco to Montreal, London and Lisbon, between his escape from the state penitentiary in Jefferson City, Mo., on April 23, 1967, and his arrest at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8, 1968? How could he have acquired passports, false identification and four cred-

ible aliases without help? For that matter, did Ray—who has repudiated his guilty plea and demanded a trial—really kill King? The evidence against him is persuasive, but it is also largely circumstantial. The case might be tough to prove in court. Because of his guilty plea, Ray's case never went before a jury.

Intriguing answers to some of those questions will be published this fall in a book about James Earl Ray. The book is the fruit of seven years of dogged research by George McMillan, 62, a freelance investigative reporter from Tennessee now living in Cambridge, Mass.* He wrote magazine articles on Southern race problems before working on an NBC-TV special on the John Kennedy assassination. With an advance from his publisher, Little, Brown, McMillan set out in 1969 to do a psychological study of Ray. As he gradually gained the confidence of various members of the impoverished and prison-prone Ray family (he paid Ray's father, two brothers and one sister a total of \$3,850 to help with his research), McMillan became convinced that Ray had the motive, the means and the capability for killing King without any help at all (see excerpts page 18).

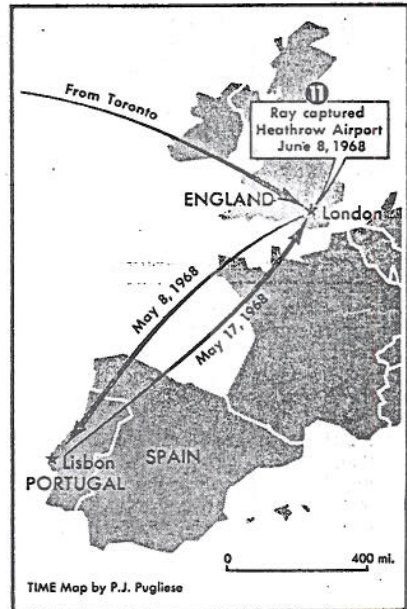
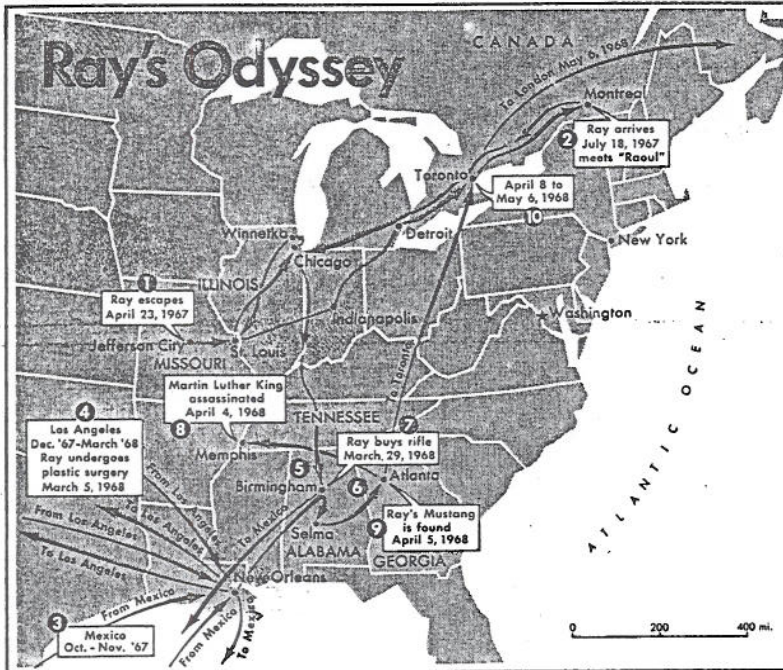
As have other writers, McMillan traces Ray's itinerant and difficult upbringing: eldest of nine children; father

*McMillan's wife Priscilla is writing a book with Marina Oswald on President John Kennedy's assassination.

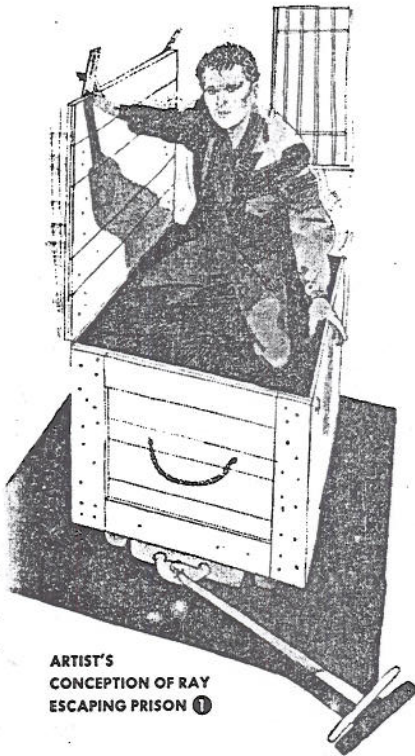
sometimes fixing and trading junk cars, hauling with a pickup truck, dishwashing, more frequently out of work, then abandoning the family; mother turning to alcohol; two brothers often in prison or reform school; one uncle a convict; life, with no privacy, in a farm shack near Ewing, Mo., and in a grandmother's house in Alton, Ill.; postwar service as an Army MP in Nürnberg, Germany; a discharge for a "lack of adaptability" to military service.

Window Fall. Ray was a bungling burglar. In his first known job, he dropped his savings-account passbook and Army discharge notice in the Los Angeles cafeteria he had broken into. Chased on foot by police after robbing a Chicago cab driver, he fell through the basement window of a house. In a dry-cleaner burglary in East Alton, he was surprised re-entering the place for more loot by cops who had noticed the window ajar. After stealing postal money orders in Illinois with a friend, he left a trail of poorly forged cashed orders and was caught. During two grocery-store stickups in St. Louis, he and accomplices scooped up about \$2,000 from cash registers and passed up some \$30,000 in locked safes. Arrested after the second stickup, he insisted on taking the stand in his own defense and was unable to offer a credible alibi. On March 17, 1960, at the age of 32, Ray was sentenced to 20 years in the Missouri state prison in Jefferson City. His accomplice got only seven years.

McMillan claims that Ray was a Nazi sympathizer who used to give the



"Heil Hitler" salute around his home (this was one reason he requested duty in Germany); that he was an anti-black racist; and that he developed an intense hatred for King. McMillan supports these claims with statements quoting Ray's relatives, criminal accomplices and fellow inmates. They may all be shaky sources, but they would seem to have little reason to lie about Ray. McMillan quotes one of Ray's burglary accomplices, Walter Rife, for example, as saying: "Yeah, Jimmy was a little out-



ARTIST'S CONCEPTION OF RAY ESCAPING PRISON ①

raged about Negroes. He didn't care for them at all. Once he said, 'Well, we ought to kill them, kill them all.'"

Was Ray recruited by conspirators to kill King? According to McMillan, he was plotting the murder well before he escaped from prison by hiding in a large crate used to carry loaves of bread to a prison honor farm (this required an accomplice in the prison). Moreover, McMillan quotes the assassin's brother Jerry as saying that Ray telephoned him from Memphis on the morning of the murder and said he was going to get "the big nigger" the same day.

Ray has long claimed that he had met a mysterious Latin-looking man he knew only as "Raoul" in a Montreal bar after his escape. Raoul, Ray insisted, had planned the murder and given Ray money to buy a car and a rifle and to finance his travels. But Ray's brother Jerry told McMillan: "The whole thing about Raoul and running drugs from Canada was bullshit. He went to Canada the first time to look the place over,

to see how to get out of the country."

Yet Jerry, a drifter for many of his 40 years and now a night watchman in northern Illinois, changed his story last week and told TIME in an interview that the mysterious Raoul was behind everything. Jerry insisted that his brother had been "set up" in the case and quoted Ray as telling him recently: "I've got witnesses to prove I was some place else when the shot was fired." Jerry now claims that he never talked to Ray on the day of the murder.

McMillan maintains that Ray was sending large sums of money out of prison and that this was sufficient to cover his expenses and travel for the year in between his escape and his arrest. Although a failure as a crook, Ray was a sharp operator in prison, a moneymaking "merchant" who dealt in drugs, prison food supplies and other contraband.

Illicit Earnings. McMillan reports that Ray's brothers Jack and Jerry gave Ray \$4,700 in cash in a Chicago hotel right after Ray's escape, while Jerry retained another \$1,500 for Ray to use later. In all, according to McMillan, Ray had sent out from prison illicit earnings of about \$6,500, then netted about \$500 in laborer's jobs while a fugitive and probably spent about \$6,800 in his year of freedom. Ray committed a holdup in England before his arrest, indicating that his funds probably had run out—and that no conspirators seemed to be financing him, at least then.

The McMillan book also tackles some peripheral questions that have bothered other investigators. Why did Ray order expensive photo equipment from a Chicago supplier? Possibly to see if he could make money selling pornographic pictures: McMillan quotes two of Ray's brothers as saying they discussed this venture with Ray. Why did he drop a bundle of evidence, including a rifle and binoculars, on the sidewalk near the rooming house from which King was shot? Because a police car was near by and Ray feared he would be caught with the goods.

But how could Ray obtain false ID and passports and thus elude police for so long? McMillan's book, which drops the narrative after the shooting of King, suggests that Ray had picked up some of his aliases from the novels he had read. Since four of the names Ray used in his flight, including Eric Starvo Galt, were living residents of the Toronto area, the explanation of other investigators sounds more reasonable. They claim that Ray went to a Toronto library, looked at old newspapers for birth announcements that gave names of men roughly his own age and picked up his aliases from them. He might well have learned of this tactic while in prison. At least two of the men whose names were used by Ray received calls from someone posing as a government official and inquiring if they had ever applied for passports; Ray presumably did not want to get

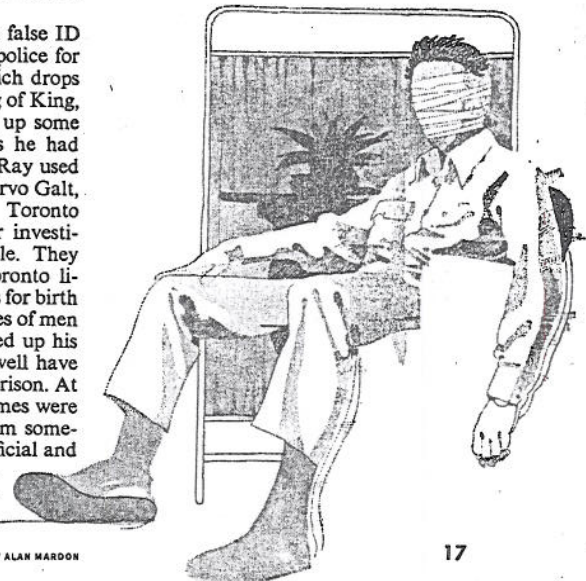


MEETING "RAOUL" IN MONTREAL BAR ②

caught by applying for a passport that had already been issued. He did, in fact, get a passport merely by swearing that he was "Ramon George Sneyd," a Canadian citizen. Ray's false identity had been cleverly established; he even underwent plastic surgery in Los Angeles to alter the shape of his nose—but in the end he left a telltale series of fingerprints at the scene of the King crime.

But what of a more serious concern—that the FBI either bungled the whole investigation because of Hoover's hatred for King, or may even have helped plan the murder? As part of its own fresh investigation of the King case, TIME has learned that a Justice Department re-

AFTER PLASTIC SURGERY IN LOS ANGELES ④



view of the FBI's work will conclude there is no evidence of any kind that the FBI 1) helped arrange the killing, or 2) failed to do everything it could to run down the sniper and any conspirators. Since the FBI is an arm of the Justice Department, of course, that will carry little weight with most critics of the FBI's role. A more independent review would be required to still all doubts, and in fact Justice officials apparently will urge that a special prosecutor or independent commission be named to make a separate inquiry.

Raise Doubt. Ray is now pushing for a trial, claiming that he was coerced into pleading guilty by his lawyer at the time, Percy Foreman. An expensive and



BUYING RIFLE IN BIRMINGHAM 7

flamboyant attorney, Foreman believed that the case against his client was so strong that only a guilty plea could save him from execution. Moreover, Foreman argued, a Southern jury, in the aftermath of national revulsion over the John and Robert Kennedy assassinations, would want to show that the South did not tolerate such acts. Nevertheless, one state witness, who claimed to have seen Ray leaving the rooming house after the shooting, seemed unreliable. The bullet that hit King was too fragmented to be conclusively linked to Ray's rifle by ballistics tests. No one saw Ray shoot. A sharp lawyer presumably had a chance to raise reasonable doubt in the minds of a jury about Ray's guilt. On the other hand, the lawyer would have had to explain Ray's thumbprint on the weapon, his purchasing binoculars and a rifle, and the fact that Ray rejected a room in the Memphis rooming house where he stayed in favor of one with the assassin's view.

Among the experienced writers who spent years researching books on the assassination, most (including McMillan, Gerrold Frank and William Bradford Huie) have concluded that Ray acted alone. Even if they are right, their work is unlikely to dispel all doubts in a period when, with some justification, many people are unwilling to reject readily any conspiracy theory.

'I'm Gonna Kill That Nigger King'

Some key excerpts from George McMillan's book on the assassination of Martin Luther King, to be published in the fall by Little, Brown:

Ray's Hatred for King

In 1963 and 1964 Martin Luther King was on TV almost every day, talking defiantly about how black people were going to get their rights, insisting that they would accept with nonviolence all the terrible violence that white people were inflicting on them, until the day of victory arrived, until they did overcome.

Ray watched it all avidly on the cell-block TV at Jeff City. He reacted as if King's remarks were directed at him personally. He boiled when King came on the tube. He began to call him Martin "Lucifer" King and Martin Luther "Coon." It got so that the very sight of King would galvanize Ray.

"Somebody's gotta get him," Ray would say, his face drawn with tension, his fists clenched. "Somebody's gotta get him."

In that atmosphere, inside Jeff City, it got so that talk about killing King seemed perfectly ordinary, something rather plausible, not at all unreasonable, certainly possible. Ray and [his fellow convict Raymond] Curtis would sit around, often high on speed, while Ray would spin out the details of how he would do the job. . . . Ray said he would have the place all set up, all lined up, then he would get his money, his papers. It was his idea to get plumb out of the country. . . .

There had been the time when Ray had thought there might be a bounty on King's head, and he said, in front of Curtis, about King, "You are my big one, and one day I will collect all that money on your ass, nigger, for you are my re-

tirement plan." But as the months passed, Ray seemed to have given up caring about money, if he ever did consider it seriously, for he got so he would say, about King, "If I ever get to the streets, I am going to kill him."

Something on His Mind

On April 24, 1967, just one day after Ray escaped from the prison at Jefferson City, he met his brothers Jack and Jerry in Chicago's Atlantic Hotel. Both brothers are ex-convicts too.

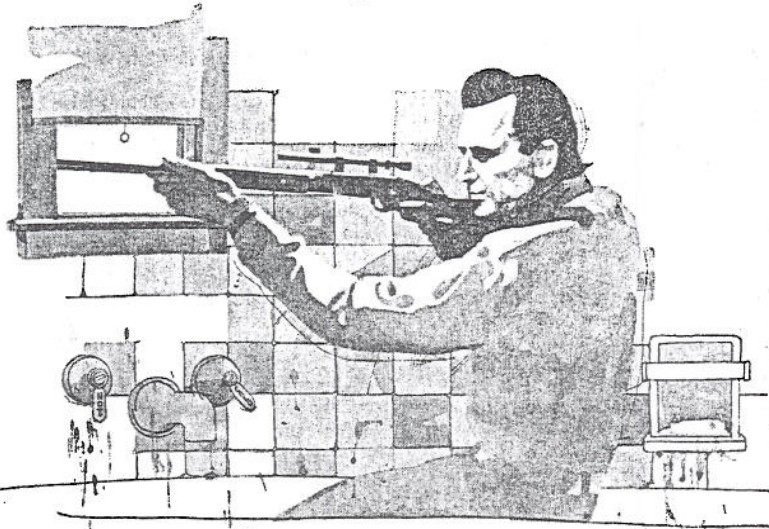
[Jimmy] had something on his mind. . . . They were about to get down to a reckoning of the money that was coming to Jimmy [funds he had sent out of prison], when he suddenly said, "I'm gonna kill that nigger King. That's something that's been on my mind. That's something I've been working on."

Actually, neither Jerry nor Jack was that much surprised. It was just like Jimmy to get an idea like that, so big, so grandiose. As far as the notion itself, [Jerry and Jack] could not have agreed more, at least as far as hating black people, hating liberals, Jews, but neither of them would have ever conceived of killing King. . . . [Jerry] told Jimmy flatly then and there that he would help him where he could, but he did not want to be in on that job. . . . [Jack's] reaction to Jimmy's news was one of unqualified pragmatism: "That's crazy! You can count me out of that deal. There ain't no money in killin' a nigger."

Trying to Help Wallace

On Aug. 22, 1967, Ray and his brother Jerry met again in a North Side Chicago hotel.

The two brothers agreed to keep in touch from this point on. They would write each other. . . . Jerry even prom-



FIRING AT KING FROM BATHROOM OF MEMPHIS ROOMING HOUSE 8

ised that he would come to wherever Jimmy was if Jimmy needed him badly enough ... Jimmy was pleased to have a confidant, and Jerry was excited, fascinated by the chance to have even a secondhand view of something so big ... It took some of the loneliness out of both of their lives.

"Jimmy was going to Birmingham to take out citizenship papers [establish state residency] in Alabama," says Jerry. "He believed that if he killed King in Alabama or if he killed him anywhere in the South, it would help him if he showed he was a resident of Alabama ... Of course, if he killed King in Alabama, he believed Wallace would eventually pardon him, not at first but after a few years, when things had cooled off."

The presidential campaign of Alabama Governor George C. Wallace was beginning to be taken seriously outside the South. "Jimmy was getting caught up in the Wallace campaign," says Jerry. "He was talking as much that night in Chicago about getting Wallace in as he was about rubbing King out. He had it in his head that it would help Wallace if King wasn't around."

Admiring Hitler

Jimmy had thought Hitler was right and President Roosevelt wrong about World War II ... To a young man like Jimmy, for whom so many things are unsettled, troubling, unresolved—not the least problem of which is his own personal sexual definition—Hitler was powerfully alluring ... The Nazis had a strong, decisive way of dealing with threats. They knew how to put an end to Jews, Negroes. The regimentation of Nazism was comforting; that everyone knew exactly who he was, where he belonged in the scheme of things, was reassuring to a young man whose family was always slipping and sliding around the borders of social class, a family more often than not collapsing into deviance and criminality. Besides, the Nazis were clean, not dirty, not lazy and not sex-ridden. Speedy [Ray's father] had once said that "niggers just lay around and f___ all the time."

A Merchant in Jeff City

It is a misconception to assume that the status a man has in prison depends upon his status or rank as a criminal. It doesn't. The fact that James Earl Ray was a small-time criminal didn't keep him from becoming a "Merchant" [prison term for one who deals in contraband] in Jeff City ... [He] understood prison life, and he knew how to operate with "Big Shots," guards and other prisoners.

The history of Ray's illegal dealings as a Merchant in Jeff City has been very difficult to document. The prison authorities are not helpful. Just the opposite. They can no more admit that they have lost control of the prison, that the prisoners are running it, than they can fly to the moon.

[McMillan found two convicts, Bill Miles and Raymond Curtis, who had served sentences at the same time as Ray and who described some of Ray's activities as a Merchant.] "He was a peddler at Jeff City, all right," Curtis went on. "I've seen him work on a plan as long as 30 days to get a dozen eggs halfway across the prison yard. He stole many a case of eggs in his time, sold them for \$1 a dozen, \$30 a

them for \$1 apiece ... I could give you the names of nine guards who worked with fellas like Ray."

Sending His Money Out

The guard with whom James Earl Ray had his connection ... took his share off the top and mailed the rest to one of the Ray family members, in plain envelopes that bore no return address. He sent it in \$100 bills, wrapped in a piece of plain paper. He sent some to Jerry. It was addressed to Box 22, Wheeling, Ill. When Jerry got the money, he would write "O.K." on a piece of paper and mail it back.

A Motive to Kill

JERRY RAY

His ideas had come together. The idea of killing King, the idea of working for a new political structure in America, were one ... By killing King, he would become an actor in the turbulent ideological drama of his times, the drama he had heretofore only watched on the cellblock TV. He saw how King's assassination could serve a larger political power by a single act performed by him. And he saw at the end of the road a hero's sanctuary, if he turned out to need a sanctuary, in several places, one of which was Rhodesia.

For him, by this time, killing King was not a luxury. He needed the mission, he needed the concept of killing King to hold himself together. It gave him the cohesion he was utterly dependent on. It was not just a twisted ideal that led him on. It was a compulsive obsession, and he was having trouble sustaining it over the period of time he had set to accomplish his disparate plans ... Given the chain of

circumstances of his life, killing King had become Ray's destiny.

On the Day of Murder

And now he made one last call from Memphis. It seems to have been on the morning of April 4 [1968]. Jerry was in Chicago, working in a suburban country club as a night watchman. It was in the morning, Jerry's off-time, that Jimmy phoned. "I don't know where he was in Memphis when he called," says Jerry ... "I guess he talked about two minutes ... Usually when he called, he talked, I talked. But not this time. If I tried to tell him anything, he wouldn't let me. He wasn't wanting any jokes or small talk that day. He was excited and all worked up. What he said was, 'Jerry, tomorrow it will all be over. I might not see you and Jack for a while. But don't worry about me. I'll be all right. Big Nigger has had it!'" [King was killed at 6:01 p.m. that day.]

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RAY IN NASHVILLE'S TENNESSEE STATE PRISON LAST MONTH
A lone plot hatched and financed behind bars?

case ... Sometimes we made raisin jack, sometimes homemade beer. Ray supplied the yeast because he could get it in the bakery, where he worked, and I made the stuff ..."

Curtis told me that to his knowledge Ray had used pills and amphetamines since he had first known him 15 years before. "At Jeff City he was in that business," Curtis said. "Him and another boy had the connection. Ain't but one way to get it in—the guard ... I can't use no names," said Curtis, "but Ray's connection was in the culinary, doing a life sentence. There was a lot of stuff in that prison ... One thing you could do is give a guard \$100 to buy a plane ticket to St. Louis and pick [the drugs] up for you, or even \$500 to go to Kansas City. A fella like Ray would end up paying about \$750 a pound [for speed]. You may sell a whole pound to somebody for \$3,500. With pills you make more. You buy 1,000 for 50¢ apiece and sell