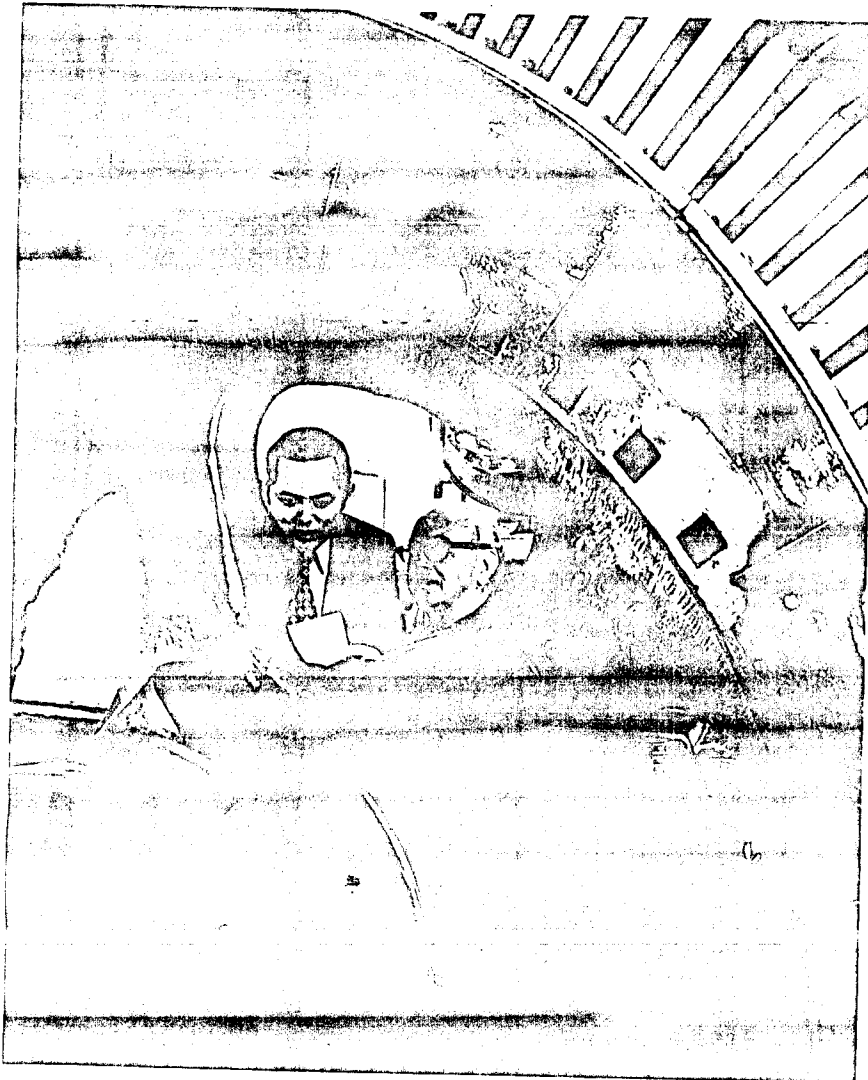


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The Assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Possible Links With the Kennedy Murders

— Part 8

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Was the murder of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the result of a conspiracy? Previous installments of this series described the "eggs and sausage" man, later given the code name of Jack Armstrong, who appeared on the scene the day of the murder. Also appearing on the scene were Tony Benavides and J. Christ Bonnevêche who claimed to have information and understanding of Dr. King's and John F. Kennedy's assassinations. Are these two men to be believed? Are they one and the same person — possibly aliases for Jack Armstrong?*

Is there a relationship between these assassinations? a conspiracy at work by an organization or several individuals? or are these murders more simply vendettas? Mr. Chastain continues to seek the answer to these questions and to the murders of Dr. King and the Kennedys.

Thompson's Private Investigation

Thompson and his wife were gone six weeks. When they returned to Memphis, Ray was in custody in England. Thompson said he called Canale, the FBI, and Holloman, and asked when they were going to show him the photographs of the man that may have been Benavides.

"They seemed diffident and evasive." Thompson said. "Everytime I mentioned the name Benavides, I seem to have touched some exposed nerve."

When the authorities expressed interest in Thompson's story, he said they seemed very intrigued by the Denver address I supplied them with. When I mentioned this to them on my return to Memphis, this did not seem to re-awaken their interest in the man called Benavides. Canale finally told him to forget Benavides. "He was just a nut, Russ," Canale said.

Then, Thompson related a bizarre footnote to the Benavides affair. It involved an incident which occurred in late August 1968 — after Ray had been safely extradited to the States and was being held under maximum security in the Shelby County Jail. It started when Thompson got a call from a fellow attorney.

"This attorney, a friend of mine, represented a Mississippi man — with blond hair — who had been arrested in Mississippi on a warrant, had been extradited and held in the county jail for several days on a charge not related to murder," Thompson said.

"During his confinement, he was interrogated by a battery of FBI agents, prosecutors, and even U.S. Justice Department attorneys," Thompson added.

*Parts 1 through 7 were published in the February through August issues of *Computers and People*, and are available from the publisher as back copies at \$2 each.

Finally, the man was released from custody. The minute he was free he went to the attorney friend of Thompson and asked him to represent him because he was afraid he was going to be charged with the murder of Dr. King — even though Ray had been charged with the crime and was incarcerated in the same jail.

Why did he think he was going to be charged for the King murder, the attorney asked his new client? The Mississippi man told him that the King murder was the subject matter of this prolonged interrogation. He said the interrogators kept asking him: "Why did you go see this attorney Thompson and give your name as Benavides?" The Mississippi man said he had never heard of Russell Thompson.

The attorney contacted Thompson and asked him what it was all about. Other than Thompson's two

Wayne Chastain of Memphis, Tenn., is a veteran newspaper reporter and Southern journalist with experience on several metropolitan dailies in Texas, including El Paso, Houston, Dallas and San Antonio, as well as on the St. Louis Globe-Democrat and a Memphis daily. He had traveled with Dr. King's entourage on and off for two years prior to the assassination. He had spent the last two days of King's life covering his speeches in Memphis prior to the shooting. He was on the murder scene within 10 minutes after Dr. King was shot. He interviewed eyewitnesses for one of the first comprehensive news accounts to the nation of Dr. King's death. A native Texan and a graduate of the University of Texas with a bachelor's degree in history and political science, Mr. Chastain also spent several months in early 1964 investigating and researching the assassination of President Kennedy, Jack Ruby's link with Lee Harvey Oswald and a group of pro-Cuban arms runners, and other activities related to Kennedy's death. Months before The Warren Commission's report, which was published in the fall of 1964, Mr. Chastain — after exhaustive interviews with hundreds of witnesses — had reached the conclusion that President Kennedy's death was the result of a plot involving paramilitary professionals financed by a group of wealthy, right-wing Texans with strong connections with former high officials with the Central Intelligence Agency as well as lower echelon CIA personnel still assigned to the bureau. The present installment is an excerpt from a forthcoming book entitled: *Who Really Killed Dr. King — And the Kennedys? A Disturbing View of Political Assassinations in America.*

law associates, Thompson had not told anyone about the Benavides visit except the police, FBI, and Canale.

Thompson, however, went ahead and told his attorney friend about it. After all, had not the FBI, police, and Canale told him to forget about Benavides, as if they had some evidence that showed he was not connected with King's death?

Thompson said he viewed photographs of the client of his friend, and said the client was "definitely the man who visited me and called himself Tony Benavides".

Not

The incident indicated, Thompson said, that despite statements to Thompson by authorities that they were no longer interested in the man called Benavides, they were still very much interested in him. It also suggested they did not have any idea who Benavides was.

Then Thompson learned about the man called Bonnevecche who visited the two ministers. He also learned about the references to the Mafia, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. The prediction that Robert F. Kennedy would be next took on even more significance now, because Robert F. Kennedy had now been assassinated — on the morning after he won the California primary.

Quietly, Thompson launched his own private investigation. After all, he spent almost 20 years as an insurance investigator and he knew how to go about and get information about sensitive matters.

Thus, Thompson learned about the Mafia figure and his identity that Bonnevecche had alluded to in his conversation with the ministers. He learned that the Mafia figure had indeed been arrested on the day of the assassination of President Kennedy. The man was Eugene Brading. Ironically, the information Thompson uncovered was developed from a tip that Benavides had provided him — namely, the address of the "rooming house" in Denver.

Confused Identities

In checking out the Denver address, Thompson learned all sorts of things about the Denver underworld. Some of this information led to more information in Texas.

This resulted in learning of Brading's identity as the man who was arrested in Dealey Plaza, but who was turned loose when he presented Dallas police with identification indicating a phoney name.

Thompson also learned that the similarity in names resulted in confusion between Brading — now a resident of Los Angeles with close ties to the Denver, Colo., underworld — and Eugene Bradley, a leading right-wing spokesman and associate of Life Line, a hard-line anti-Communist organization financed by H.L. Hunt of Dallas. Bradley was erroneously reported to be in Dallas too on the day of the Kennedy assassination and was also questioned by the FBI.

Thompson had to untangle a skein of confusion, contradiction, and coincidences. For example, Bradley was apparently mistaken for Brading, and this was what prompted FBI agents to think Bradley was in Dallas.

Then an uncanny coincidence was uncovered. The phoney identification Brading used was that of an oilman. He said he had come to Dallas to see Lamar Hunt — son of H.L. Hunt — on an oil deal. It was the invocation of the magic name "Hunt" — well respected in Dallas — that prompted Brading's release.

Then Thompson realized why the FBI, the Memphis Police Department, and the Attorney General's office were so interested in the Denver connection — the story related by Benavides about his friend, Pete, and he being roommates in Denver.

Thompson pieced together a tenuous relationship between Brading and Benavides. This process was aided when Renfro Hays, a private detective hired by Ray's first attorney, Arthur Hanes, came to his office and showed him the photographs — all of the same man.

It was then when Thompson picked out the one photograph that appeared to be Benavides — the rugged, outdoors type with crude hair apparently bleached by the sun. This was the man the Committee To Investigate Assassinations tentatively identified by the code name Jack Armstrong.

Mafia Linked to Assassinations

Based on these findings, Thompson became convinced of the thesis that somehow the Mafia was linked to the assassinations of both Kennedys and King. He arrived at this conclusion after he had finished a discreet but thorough check of the man called "Jack Armstrong". He then visited the FBI and provided them with everything he knew about the man called Jack Armstrong. The FBI did not seem interested — even when he provided them with his real name, a street address, and the city in which he lived.

He also provided the FBI with information that not only linked Armstrong with Brading and Denver Mafioso figures, but also with the disappearance of a Cleveland Mafia figure in late 1956. One report said this particular figure had been killed in a plane crash in Northern Mexico when he was smuggling gold out of the U.S. His pilot was Jack Armstrong, or Tony Benavides, or J. Christ Bonnevecche.

The wreckage of the plane owned by the Mafia figure, who had a genteel and respectable reputation in Ohio, was never located. Neither were the corpse or cargo, Thompson said.

That was approximately in early 1957. The same year, Armstrong bought an airplane and joined the guerilla army then being organized in Mexico City by Fidel Castro.

FBI Turns a Cold Shoulder

"When I related everything I had uncovered, the FBI would always appear stoney-faced and indifferent," Thompson said. "Jensen would appear bored and sometimes irritated. He once even became insulting and compared me to some crackpot who wrote him letters from Texas about the Kennedy assassination. I would always remind him that it was the FBI — and the Attorney General — who got all excited when I first reported the Tony Benavides episode. At the time, I wasn't sure whether Benavides was not some nut running around without any connection to the King slaying."

Thompson said it was the sharp questioning by Canale and FBI agents that got him interested in Benavides.

William Lawrence, head of counter-intelligence for subversive activities in the Memphis FBI area, finally told Thompson, after Jensen began refusing to see Thompson, that he had actually talked to and interviewed the man called Benavides.

"Russ, forget the man called Benavides," Lawrence said. "He was just a nut. Believe me, he has nothing to do with the assassination."

Thompson said he was willing to accept Lawrence's assurances, but just for caution's sake, why not show Thompson a picture of the man Lawrence said he interviewed and see if it were the same man who visited Thompson's office on April 9?

"The FBI would not give an inch," Thompson said. "They would not only refuse to show me pictures of the man they insisted was Benavides, but they would not confirm or deny the identity as that of Jack (Armstrong)..."

Lawrence retired from the FBI after 25 years in late 1969, only a few months after this last conference with Thompson. Note, Lawrence's statement to Thompson that Lawrence had located and interviewed the man called Benavides. This statement conflicts with the report given by Frank in his book, "An American Death".¹ Frank, purporting to relate what was in the official records of the Memphis police department, wrote:

"Within a few days (after the two ministers and Thompson separately reported their visits from their respective visitor), Zachary had complete reports from the sheriff at Brownsville. The town had less than a 15,000 population — small enough so a stranger would be noticed if he tried to contact any well-known citizen. The exhaustive check failed to disclose anyone resembling the man, with or without his tinted glasses. The FBI ran a check of its file as well: "no man, no name or alias such as Benevitas² was found".

Thompson was convinced Lawrence never interviewed the real Benavides — Jack Armstrong. Instead, Thompson believed Lawrence had interviewed the blond man from Mississippi — the one his fellow attorney told him about.

Reverend Latimer Interviewed

Meanwhile, this writer interviewed Rev. Latimer in early 1973. I showed him several pictures, mostly mug shots from the Miami Police Department's intelligence division and from Miami newspaper clippings. Latimer pointed out at least two or three photographs which he said looked like Bonnevecche.

Then, Latimer studied one photograph in particular. It was from a Miami Herald Newspaper clipping. Then Latimer said he remembered something that he had completely forgotten.

In Feb. 1969, shortly before Ray was about to stand trial, and at a point of time when Latimer and his friend had felt that the excitement concerning Bonnevecche had died down as far as the police and FBI were concerned, a big man visited him at his church.

"He said he was an investigator for the Attorney General's office," Rev. Latimer said. "I should have asked, I guess, whether he meant the Shelby

Attorney General's office, the State Attorney General's office or the U.S. Attorney General's office. But I didn't."

The man showed Latimer several pictures — some which Latimer believed were the same ones as I had shown him. Latimer said he was sure that the investigator showed him a glossy print of a photograph of the same man shown in the Miami newspaper clipping.

Latimer said he recalled pointing out this particular photograph as well as several others that he thought were those of Bonnevecche, but the investigator never revealed the identities of the men in the pictures. *Should be here*

The Official Police Theory: Ray as Lone Assassin

The official lone assassin theory, the crux of the case of The State of Tennessee v. James Earl Ray, can be briefly summarized as follows:

First, a bundle containing a rifle, some shells, a pair of binoculars, a radio, a suitcase containing clothing — all wrapped inside a bedspread — was found lying in a doorway on the sidewalk only a few feet from the stairwell leading to the rooming house above Jim's Cafe by Inspector N. E. Zachary of the Memphis police department less than 15 minutes after King was killed.

Second, the rifle in the bundle was purchased at a sporting goods store in Birmingham less than a month before King was killed. The buyer has been identified by a store clerk as James Earl Ray.

Third, although the fatal bullet had shattered inside King and it was impossible to definitely link the fatal bullet to the rifle found in the doorway, enough fragments were salvaged from King's body to make a tentative determination that the fatal bullet was of the same caliber and generally of the same make as the bullets found with the rifle in the bundle. The inferences drawn from this third set of facts do not follow a neat, syllogistic sequence, but the police and FBI insist that these inferences compel the following conclusions:

- a) The rifle found in the doorway must have been the murder weapon because of its propinquity to the murder scene as well as to the bullets of the same caliber found with it in the bundle.
- b) Ray must have been the killer because he purchased the weapon.

Fourth, binoculars had been bought at a sporting goods store in Memphis the day before King was slain. The clerk at that store also identified Ray as the buyer.

Fifth, the radio was imprinted with the serial number Ray had when he was a prisoner at the Missouri State Prison.

The photograph in the newspaper clipping showed a man with dark wavy hair, high cheekbones, long sideburns, a trim beard and goatee, and mustache. He was dark and very handsome.

He was the man identified by the code name used by The Committee To Investigate Assassinations as Jack Armstrong.

Sixth, the suitcase contained clothing, some of which fitted Ray, and carried the laundry mark of an alias Ray used right up to the time King was killed.

Seventh, Ray's fingerprints were on the rifle, the shells, the binoculars, the radio and the suitcase.

Eighth, the bedspread contained fibers that matched fibers taken from the fabric lining of the trunk of Ray's car. This proved that the bundle had been inside the trunk of Ray's car before King was killed and before Ray had moved into the rooming house.

Ninth, a witness, Willie Stephens, a resident of the rooming house, identified Ray as the man who came out of the bathroom with a rifle seconds after the sound of a shot was heard inside the bathroom. Stephens made the identification in a signed statement to police five weeks after King was killed.

These are the nine major points of evidence that police and FBI used to link Ray with the slaying of Dr. King. But do these nine points of evidence preclude the possibility of a conspiracy behind Dr. King's slaying? Do they conclusively prove that Ray acted as lone assassin?

Circumstantial Evidence

First, is this evidence sufficient to even prove Ray guilty? The first eight points, of course, constitute circumstantial evidence. Many law professors, mostly those with prosecuting proclivities, are fond of arguing that circumstantial evidence is superior to direct evidence — that is, evidence gained by eyewitness testimony identifying the defendant as having committed the crime in the eyewitness's presence.

"Humans can lie, and occasionally err, but physical evidence cannot" is a maxim many law professors quote in their criminal law and evidence courses in law school.

Discretion — defined as a healthy sense of survival — characterizes the better part of valor of the average law student, so the fallacy inherent in the maxim usually goes unchallenged inside the classroom lecture. At coffee breaks, outside the earshot of the professor, most students perceive the speciousness of the argument and it becomes obvious that physical evidence can lie — especially if it has been manufactured and planted on an unsuspecting defendant by the real culprit who has framed him.

As Sam Spade, the fictional private detective spawned by the pen of Dashiell Hammett¹, cynically explained to the fat man in the classic "Maltese Falcon", any criminal conspiracy can be successful if the conspirators leave a fall guy for the police. It is essential to plant enough physical evidence that will incriminate the fall guy, if the cover-up is to be successful. The police must have an apparent "open and shut case", and the police will invariably avoid dredging up conspiracy clues because "they like to keep it simple...they want to close the file", Spade explains.

Thus, would a reasonable criminal leave all this physical evidence behind that would identify him as the killer? If Ray knew he had to make a fast get-away once he fired the fatal shot, would he not have put all of these items beforehand in the trunk of the car, except perhaps the rifle? Also, Ray's defense attorneys quickly point out that the rifle was neatly placed back in the leather covering. Would an assassin take such pains to put the rifle back when he wanted to make a quick get-away?

The Memphis police and FBI would respond to these questions in their sur-rebuttal by arguing:

Ray did not originally intend to leave the bundle on the sidewalk. He was in the process of carrying it to the trunk of his car only a few feet away when police began swarming over the area from every direction. He set the bundle down inside the doorway so he would not be conspicuous when he walked to the curb to get in his car.

Ray was not a very reasonable man anyway. All of his crimes were marred with a fey blend of blunder and bad luck. "Inept" would be a fair adjective to describe his performance in every crime he committed, all of which resulted in his eventual capture. (A key FBI agent made this analysis, but this did not prevent him from later concluding that Ray masterminded and executed King's murder — as well as carrying out his successful escape — without any help from a criminal confederate!)

Ray wanted to be caught anyway. He may have either consciously or subconsciously left the bundle there as a way of notifying the world that he had killed King, a major achievement in the world of racists and common criminals.

Of course, point nine is based on direct evidence — namely, the eyewitness testimony of Charles Stephens. More will be said later about the weight of credibility that should be accorded to Mr. Stephens.

Even if one can accept all nine points of evidence as of sufficient weight to implicate Ray, how can this evidence suggest a "lone assassin" or non-conspiracy theory?

But first, is the evidence — circumstantial or not — indicative of Ray's guilt?

Is Ray Guilty?

Let's view the other points:

Point Two: The clerk in the Birmingham store identified Ray as the buyer. He said Ray called himself by the alias Harvey Loweyer. Ray actually made two trips to the store, the clerk said. On his first trip, he seemed unfamiliar with firearms and was not sure what he wanted to buy, the clerk said. He finally bought a rifle, and paid cash. Later that day, before closing, Ray called back and said he wanted to come in the next day and exchange the rifle for a more expensive and heavier kind. He seemed to know more about what he wanted and indicated he had talked to someone in the interim that gave him an elementary education on firearms, the clerk said. On his second visit, Ray bought the second rifle — the one found in the doorway — and said he did not know much about firearms but his brother did. He was buying the rifle to go hunting with his brother, the clerk quoted him as saying.

Taking this combination of physical and direct evidence at face value, does it suggest conspiracy? Or does it tend to substantiate the lone assassin theory?

Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark flew to Memphis the day after King was killed and conferred with FBI agents in organizing the manhunt for the alleged assassin of King. At the time, Clark made an announcement that there was no evidence suggesting a conspiracy.

Yet two weeks later, the FBI office in Birmingham, after interviewing the clerk in the sporting goods store, concluded otherwise. They applied and received a warrant from the Federal district court charging James Earl Ray (by that time he had been

identified by the fingerprints and serial number on the radio as the purported owner of the bundle) with conspiracy to violate the rights of Dr. Martin Luther King.

This impetuous move by Birmingham FBI agents not only embarrassed Mr. Clark, but irritated state department officials, who later faced the job of extraditing Ray from England.

In England, an alien cannot be extradited for "political crimes". In the long history of English jurisprudence, the term "political crimes" evokes connotations that might elude the average American attorney. "Conspiracies" in British and European experience have usually involved political and economic controversies. Most Conspiracy statutes were so abused in both England and America during the 19th and 20th century — especially against labor unions — that the modern libertarian tradition in Great Britain today has fostered a suspicion in the minds of many legal scholars that these conspiracy statutes, when applied, are usually the tools of politically-minded prosecutors seeking to repress some faction or political opposition.

To insure a successful extradition, the idea of conspiracy had to be played down. Instead of trying to get Ray back to the U.S. on the federal conspiracy warrant, the State and Justice Departments decided to rely exclusively on the murder indictment rendered by the Shelby County Grand Jury against Ray. The international impression that the slaying of Dr. King was nothing more than a murder case perpetrated by a common criminal had to be carefully nurtured.

The Other Points

Point Three: If the famous Professor Wigmore, internationally recognized authority on legal evidence and former Harvard law professor, had reviewed this evidence, he would probably have rejected it as conclusive proof of Ray's guilt, and not regarded it as even very good circumstantial evidence. Steeped in philosophy as well as law, Professor Wigmore always applied a rigorous set of theorems — much like the professors of logic in the department of philosophy. The conclusions of the prosecutors — namely, that the rifle must have been the murder weapon because it was found near the scene of the crime and that Ray must have been the killer because he purchased the weapon — both embrace the common fallacy that the professor of philosophy always warns his freshman class against: "Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc". (It means: "after this, therefore because of this." The fallacy is that you cannot deduce a cause and effect relationship between two events merely because of temporal sequence.)

Points Four and Five: This evidence cannot be accepted as indicative of guilt until it can be determined that Ray carried these items from his car into the rooming house and then from the rooming house to the spot where they were deposited on the sidewalk.

Point Six: I purposely omitted the fact that there was other clothing in the suitcase that did not fit James Earl Ray and did not carry the laundry mark. I omitted this fact because the police and the FBI always meticulously omitted this fact when they cited the evidence against Ray in the news releases. The fact is that the clothing that did not fit Ray would have fitted a much smaller man. Later on, we will discuss the testimony of another rooming house tenant, Mrs. Grace Walden, the commonlaw wife of Stephens, who contradicted the testimony of Stephens.

Mrs. Walden said she saw the man who came out of the bathroom. He was white and was a much smaller man than Ray — a man whom the clothing would have fitted.

Point Seven: This evidence really amounts to nothing more than pseudo-corroboration of the other evidence. One would have to presume that all of the other evidence would lead the reasonable man to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that Ray was in the rooming house. Since reasonable men might draw differing and conflicting inferences from the other evidence, how would the fingerprints on these items — standing alone — incriminate Ray?

Point Eight: This is an even weaker thread of evidence. The fibers on the bedspread match the fibers in the trunk of the car. All this proves is that the bundle had been in the trunk of the car. It does not prove who took the bundle from the car into the rooming house. Nor does it prove who set the bundle on the sidewalk. Later on, we will see that the evidence showed that there were two sets of keys to the Mustang that Ray allegedly drove to and from Memphis. The evidence will also show that Ray only had one set of those keys. Thus, the party who had the other set of keys could have easily put the bundle in the trunk or removed it. Also, the person with the second set of keys might have been the party the police alleged to in Point One that intended to put the bundle in the trunk but decided to lay it on the sidewalk when he saw police converging on the scene. In fact, the logic is much more compelling that if Ray had the bundle, he would have been tempted to walk a few more feet to the trunk of the car, open it and put the bundle in, before driving away. Another party, who knew that there was nothing in the bundle to incriminate him, would more likely have played it safe and gambled on appearing inconspicuous as he walked to the car.

As we have seen by analyzing each of these points (I am saving point nine for later), inferences of conspiracy can be drawn from the very evidence police used to infer Ray's guilt as the sniper.

How can they stick with a "lone assassin" theory if they used this evidence to convict Ray?

(To be continued)

Footnotes

1. Gerold Frank. "An American Death". Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., p. 155
2. Frank consistently misspelled Benavides' name, apparently, because he relied almost exclusively on official Memphis police department reports. As most veteran police reporters will confirm, policemen — even those with college training — tend to be extremely bad spellers. Frank apparently did not use any method of cross-checking information in the reports by interviewing the persons quoted in the police reports and comparing what they actually said with what the police quoted them as saying. Also, Frank consistently refers to the destination of Bonnevecche and Benavides as Brownsville, Texas. In fact, it was Brownsville, Tenn.
3. Many of Hammett's theories about crime and law enforcement were not mere spinoffs of a fiction writer's fantasies. Before he started writing mysteries, Hammett spent 10 years as a private detective with the Pinkertons — noted for their expertise in framing union leaders for violent incidents perpetrated by agents provocateurs the Pinkertons had planted in the unions. Some of the episodes Hammett cites in his non-fiction writing dwarfs the Watergate episode by comparison and makes E. Howard Hunt look like a bungling amateur.