

# A plan, a sniper's opportunity, a rifle shot — and a leader fell

By James Chisum  
The Commercial Appeal

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the Lorraine Motel balcony, laughing and talking with those in the courtyard below.

Light from the setting sun across the Mississippi River brightened his face.

Across Mulberry Street from the motel, James Earl Ray stepped into a flophouse bathtub. He placed the tip of a rifle barrel on the windowsill and

sighted through the scope. In the cross hairs, King was close enough to reach out and touch.

At 6:01 p.m., 24 minutes before sunset, Ray pulled the trigger. He saw King grab for his throat and fall backward.

*This account of King's assassination in Memphis 25 years ago comes from hundreds of pages of witness statements, many smudged with the sweat of the police officers, FBI agents and prosecutors who wrote them. It comes from the handwritten*

*notes, the summaries, the laboratory results and the investigative reports filed with those statements.*

*It also comes from the men who tracked down the witnesses, found the suspected murderer weapon, looked at the scene with the eyes of skilled and experienced homicide detectives.*

*One day stands out in their memories: April 4, 1968, the chilly spring day when King died. This is what their files and their memories say happened that day.*

## 25 YEARS LATER:

The Commercial Appeal marks the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with a series of stories that continues today.

- Thursday: The Invaders
- Friday: King's Last 48 Hours
- Today: James Earl Ray
- Sunday: The Color of Memphis
- Monday: Hunting a Killer

James Earl Ray, driving down Mulberry Street, saw that the rear windows of a brick floph-

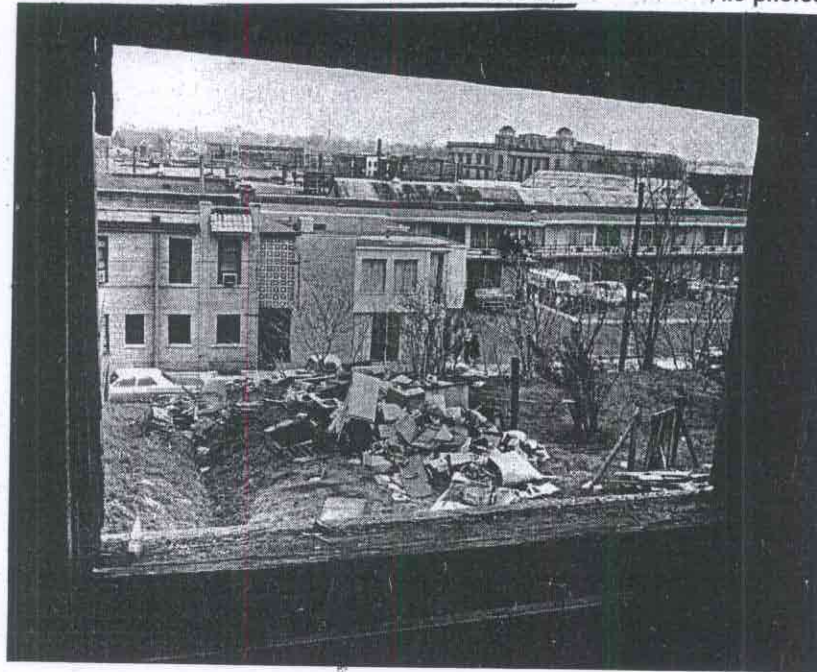
Please see RAY, Page A8

MEMPHIS, SATURDAY, APRIL 3, 1993

File photos



1968 photo of James Earl Ray, who used the aliases of John Willard and Eric Starvo Galt.



The bathroom window at the South Main rooming house afforded a clear view of the Lorraine Motel and the balcony on which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was standing when assassinated.

From Page A1

## Ray

house to the west overlooked the Lorraine Motel.

He knew that King, the man he'd come from Atlanta to kill, was at the Lorraine. He'd read it on the morning newspaper's front page, and he'd heard a radio station say King was in Room 306.

Around 3 p.m., Ray parked his white 1966 Mustang in front of Jim's Grill at 418-420 S. Main.

He climbed the stairs at 422½ S. Main to the rooming house managed by Bessie Brewer. She showed him a room in the south wing with a stove and refrigerator.

No, he said, he just wanted a sleeping room. She showed him Room 5B in the north wing.

Ray saw the room had a window that probably overlooked the Lorraine.

John Willard's the name, Ray told Brewer as she wrote out a receipt for the \$8.50 weekly rent. She nodded and handed him the receipt. There was no register for him to sign.

She pointed out the communal bathroom at the end of the hall.

"Everybody around here is usually quiet, but this guy next to you, he usually drinks," she

said.

"That's all right. I take a beer once in a while myself," he said. She wondered why he was there. He wasn't wearing the work clothes favored by her usual tenants. Willard had on a dark sports jacket and looked like he'd never worked outside.

After she'd gone, Ray shoved a blond chest of drawers away from the window that faced the south wing of the rooming house. By leaning out, he could look east between the wings and see the Lorraine.

He propped open the window with a stick he found nearby and swirled the curtains back over the chest. He brought a chair to the window.

After a time, he left the window and walked to the bathroom at the end of the corridor.

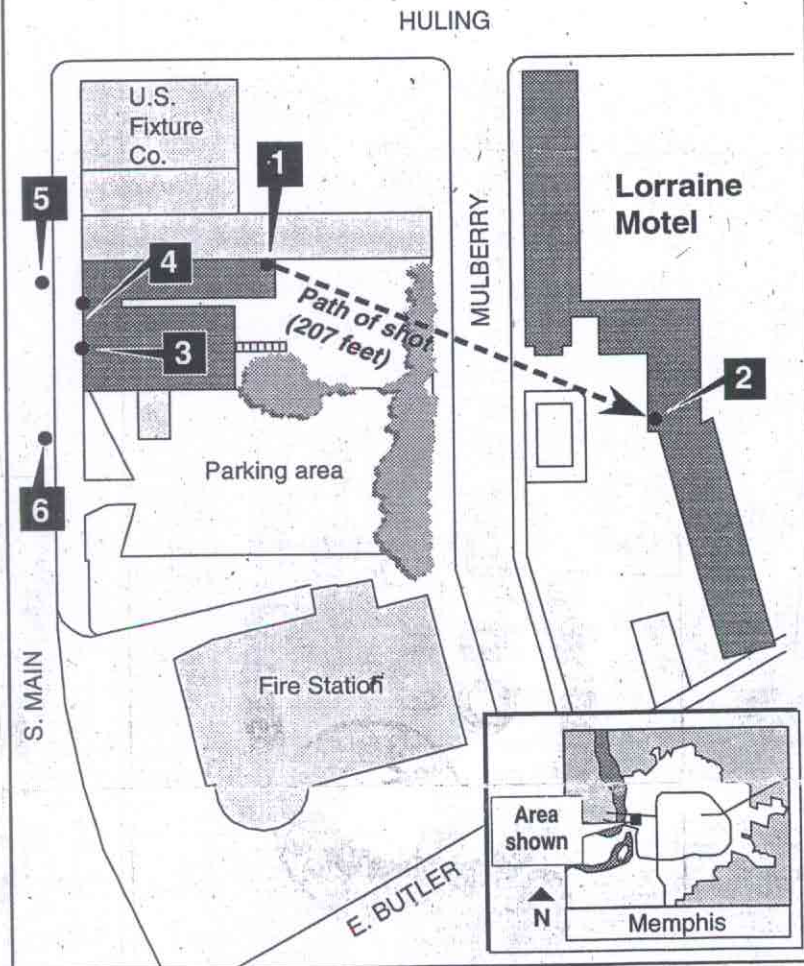
Pushing up the dusty window there, he had an even better view of the Lorraine. Ray stayed for 15 or 20 minutes, looking at the people moving up and down the outside stairs and concrete balcony of the motel.

None of them was King, though, and he went back to his room to watch from the window. During the afternoon, he re-

## ASSASSINATION SCENE

This graphic is based on a crime scene diagram found in prosecutor's files. The documents were prepared but never used in a trial of James Earl Ray for the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Bathroom window, north wing of rooming house | 4. North entrance to rooming house                            |
| 2. Point where Dr. King was shot                | 5. White Mustang seen here about 4 p.m. and later             |
| 3. South entrance to rooming house              | 6. White Mustang seen here between about 4:45 p.m. and 6 p.m. |



turned to the bathroom several times to get a better view.

Then the thought hit him: Maybe King didn't look like his pictures. To be sure, he needed binoculars.

Late in the afternoon, Ray drove up to York Arms Co. at 162 S. Main. He asked 34-year-old salesman Ralph Meredith Carpenter about binoculars.

Carpenter showed Ray one set priced at \$90 and another at \$200.

Don't you have anything cheaper? Ray asked.

How about these? Carpenter asked, showing him a pair of Bushnell "Banner" binoculars from the window display. With tax, they would come to \$41.55.

Ray reached into his right pocket and pulled out two neatly folded \$20 bills and a \$1 bill. From his left pocket, he pulled out two quarters and a nickel.

Driving back down Main Street, Ray saw that the parking place in front of Jim's Grill had been taken. But there was another just south of the rooming house stairways, almost in front of Canipe's Amusement Co., a used-phonograph-record store on the lower floor of the rooming house.

Ray turned around in a driveway and pulled into it; the Mustang pointed north.

He sat in the car a few minutes, looking around him. A few cars drove by. He could see some women looking out from the Seabrook wallpaper store across the street. He kept his head down.

But he didn't see any cops. Must be busy somewhere else with the striking garbage men, he thought.

Unlatching the car's trunk, Ray pulled out a bundle. Piled on top of a green and brown bedspread was a small zippered bag, a transistor radio, a bag containing several cans of beer and a long box.

Inside the box was a Remington "Gamemaster" 30.06 rifle, Model 760, with a scope.

Ray grabbed the corners of the bedspread, picked up the bundle and carried it up to Room 5B. He tossed it on top of the skimpy

bed.

Almost 6 o'clock now, and business was picking up over at the Lorraine. Cars in the parking lot, and some people milling around in the courtyard. The binoculars brought their faces up close.

Damn! Wasn't that King up on the balcony? Startled, Ray hurriedly checked the focus on the binoculars. It was King, making himself an easy target.

Ray had thought it might take several days to get in place to shoot. He hadn't even loaded the rifle.

But there King stood. Might as well do it now. Ray grabbed a cartridge, rammed it into the rifle breech and ran for the bathroom window.

The window was still up. With the tip of the rifle barrel, Ray pushed out the screen. It fell to the ground below.

Ray fired. The boom of the heavy rifle reverberated through the bathroom and down the hall of the rooming house.

Running back into Room 5B, Ray threw the rifle into the open box, still on the bedspread. Grabbing the corners, he folded the spread into a bundle, picked it up and walked rapidly out the door and down the hall.

He didn't see Charlie Stephens, the resident of Room 6B, who heard the shot, saw the commotion at the Lorraine from his kitchen window and ran to his door in time to see Ray walking hurriedly down the hall.

He did see William Charles Anschutz, who lived in Room 4B. Anschutz heard the shot and went to his door. He saw Ray coming out of Room 5B.

"That sounded like a shot," Anschutz said.

"Yeah, it was a shot," Ray said. He kept his free arm up so Anschutz couldn't see his face.

It looked good so far. He'd been careful about fingerprints upstairs. Now he could throw the bundle into the Mustang, drive away and nobody would ever know he'd been in Memphis.

Surveyors from the city engineer's office later determined that the bullet traveled 207.02 feet, or about 69 yards.

"That's not a tough shot, even without a scope," says Robert Cochran, who supervised detective work on the case as a homicide captain.

Ray likely would have gotten away with it but for an unexpected and accidental encounter with Memphis police.

Unknown to him, a tactical

unit of 12 police officers and sheriff's deputies had stopped for a rest break at the Main Street fire station half a block south of the rooming house. The station is across Mulberry from the Lorraine, and watching officers saw King fall.

As Ray ran down the rooming house stairs with the rifle in his hand, the alarmed officers ran toward the Lorraine, then began to move back toward Main Street and his escape route.

Ray, emerging from the rooming house stairway, heard shouts and the sound of running feet.

He saw, half a short block away, the tactical unit's marked station wagon, parked on the firehouse apron with its front wheels on the Main Street sidewalk. A uniformed man in it was shouting into a microphone.

Ray stepped out of sight into the inset doorway of Canipe's Amusement Co., a few steps from his parked Mustang. The running footsteps seemed closer.

His thoughts raced. Were they after him already? If he didn't have the rifle, could he talk his way out if they stopped him?

Ray then made the decision that branded him forever as King's killer.

He dropped the bundle in the doorway, walked quickly to the Mustang and screeched away.

"Had he not thrown that evidence down, we probably wouldn't know today who killed Martin Luther King," says N. E. Zachary, who led the investigation as chief of the Memphis Police Department's homicide bureau.

Zachary examined the bundle about 6:15 p.m. and sent it to police headquarters. FBI Special Agent in Charge Robert Jensen inventoried and packaged its contents. Later that night, an agent carried the rifle and other items from the bundle to the FBI lab in Washington.

The FBI lab found fingerprints on the rifle and its scope, on the binoculars, on the front section of The Commercial Appeal, on a bottle of shaving lotion and on an unopened can of Schlitz beer.

Later, they matched the fingerprints with those of James Earl Ray, who pleaded guilty to killing King.

The upstairs rooming house today serves as a single residence. The Lorraine houses the National Civil Rights Museum.

HAROLD: I AM GOING INTO SELF-PUBLISHING (ANIMAL STORIES)  
CAN YOU GIVE ME SOME TIPS IN ATTACHED ENVELOPE?  
ANY GOOD, CHEAP PRINTERS IN D.C. AREA? LEFT P.D. THANKS!