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Stoner Says Ray Claims He Was Pushed Into Plea

Libel Action Against Life Magazine Planned

By JOHN VAN MOL

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — James Earl Ray's new lawyer said Saturday Ray has reversed the position he took in open court and now says he was innocent and was "pressured into a guilty plea" in the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

When Ray pleaded guilty in Memphis March 10, Criminal Court Judge W. Preston Battle asked him specifically if he had been pressured in any way into pleading guilty. Ray replied then, "No."

But the lawyer who visited Ray Saturday, J. B. Stoner of Savannah, Ga., reported he now has changed his story.

Asked to elaborate on what sort of pressure Ray contended was put on him, Stoner declined any further comment.

Stoner said he would represent Ray in filing libel suits against "Life magazine and others" who Stoner said interfered with Ray getting a fair trial.

Stoner's two-hour and 20-minute visit with Ray, in the Tennessee State Penitentiary maximum security section, was followed almost immediately by a visit from Ray's brother, Jerry, from East St. Louis, Ill.

Stoner had no comment when asked if he would help Ray in a postconviction hearing in Memphis. He refused to discuss any criminal aspects of the case, saying he would represent Ray in "civil suits and libel suits only."

EARLIER REPORT

Stoner's office earlier said he had been retained to help Ray win review of his guilty plea and 99-year sentence for first-degree murder in the death of King, slain in Memphis last

April 4.

Judge Battle had asked Ray in Memphis: "Has any pressure been put on you to enter a plea of guilty?" Ray replied, "No."

Battle also asked Ray: "Is this plea of guilty on your part a free act of your own free will, made with your full knowledge and understanding of its meaning and consequences?"

"Yes, sir," Ray replied.

Stoner was the first person to visit Ray since he was confined here—and, as nearly as can be learned, the third since he was returned to Tennessee from London last July. He previously had been visited in his Shelby County Jail cell by attorney Arthur Hanes, former mayor of Birmingham, Ala., whom Ray fired Nov. 10, and Percy Foreman, whom Ray hired to replace Hanes.

Asked who in addition to Life magazine would be involved in libel actions, Stoner replied, "So many have libeled him (Ray) it would be impossible to include them all." But, he said, "Life magazine and others" could "count on it."

KLANSMEN CLIENTS

His past associations with Ku Klux Klan members should not harm his case, Stoner said, adding: "I have represented Klansmen and other white men in the past. I don't think it will hurt."

Ray, he said, "appeared in good spirits for a man in a hotel like this." Ray, he said, gave him permission to make the statement about Ray's being pressured into a guilty plea. But he did not elaborate.

Thus, Stoner left unanswered when and how Ray will carry through his announced inten-

tion of seeking a review of the case.

In Memphis, Capt. R. A. Cochran of the Memphis Police Department, who played a major role in the investigation of King's slaying, said he is "amazed that so many people still insist" that King's death was the result of a conspiracy.

Ray, he said, "made so many major blunders, things he would never have done had there been any sort of mastermind behind the plot." Police Chief Henry Lux said his office is not saying there was no conspiracy, just that there is now no evidence of it.

Blunders enumerated by Cochran as evidence that the slaying was a one-man job included his buying a rifle and having a telescope sight mounted personally, openly registering in a Memphis motel under the name of Galt, a known alias, purchasing binoculars in Memphis, personally buying a Mustang used in the getaway and leaving fingerprints on the rifle and beer cans in a rooming house from where the shot was fired—when he knew he was a wanted criminal with fingerprints on file.