

OBITUARIES

Percy Foreman, Ray lawyer, dies at 86

New York Times News Service.

HOUSTON — Percy Foreman, the flamboyant lawyer who defended James Earl Ray in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., died Thursday at Methodist Hospital in Houston. He was 86.

A hospital spokesman, Brenda Koch, said Mr. Foreman died of cardiac arrest. She said he had been a patient in the hospital for some time, but, citing what she said was a request from the family, she refused to say when he had been admitted.

"There is no better trial lawyer in the U.S. than me," Mr. Foreman once asserted.

As evidence, he cited 1,500 death-penalty cases he had handled. Fewer than half ever went to trial, and of those that did, he lost only 53. In the rest, his clients were either never indicted or pleaded guilty to lesser offenses.

Only one of his clients, a restaurateur named Steve Mitchell, who was convicted of shooting his wife, was executed. Mr. Foreman, a steadfast opponent of capital punishment, said later that Mitchell "deserved to die."

Mr. Foreman became James Earl Ray's lawyer 36 hours before he was scheduled to go on trial for the killing of the civil rights leader. Ray had dismissed his attorney, Arthur J. Hanes, after conferring with Mr. Foreman for several hours. Mr. Foreman eventually persuaded Ray to plead guilty to the 1968 slaying in



ASSOCIATED PRESS

PERCY FOREMAN

exchange for a 99-year sentence.

Ray, who maintained that his only role in the assassination was to buy the murder weapon and give it to a man named "Raoul," later said Mr. Foreman had pressured him into pleading guilty by saying he was 99 percent certain Ray would go to the electric chair if he faced a jury in Tennessee.

Until he took the Ray case, Mr. Foreman was most famous for a case he did not handle at all. Jack

Ruby, shortly after he shot Lee Harvey Oswald, asked that Mr. Foreman represent him. But Ruby's family objected to what it considered Mr. Foreman's excessive fee. "Ruby's family was quoted a figure which happened to be four times higher than the fee I had actually asked," Mr. Foreman said later, "and they turned it down. I don't know how something like that happened, but it did."

As one of the nation's best known criminal lawyers, he was constantly bombarded with appeals for help and built his practice on an unshakable loyalty to clients. "They may not always be right, but they are never wrong," he once said.

It was Mr. Foreman, however, who invariably became the center of attention. In court, he spurned conservative pinstripes for attention-getting black-and-white plaid sports jackets and bow ties. As he sat at the defense table, wisps of gray hair would tumble over his forehead, and as he shuffled papers, he sometimes seemed disorganized. But opponents soon learned that he was not.

He was a Baptist deacon, but a colleague once said that in addressing juries Mr. Foreman was as likely to quote *Playboy* magazine as the Bible. Some opponents questioned his tactics and his concept of justice. "The only justice he knows," one former adversary said in 1964, "is get 'em off and get their money."

Services were tentatively set for Monday.