

Ray Witness

Denies Seeing Second Man

By LEONARD KATZ

New York Post Correspondent

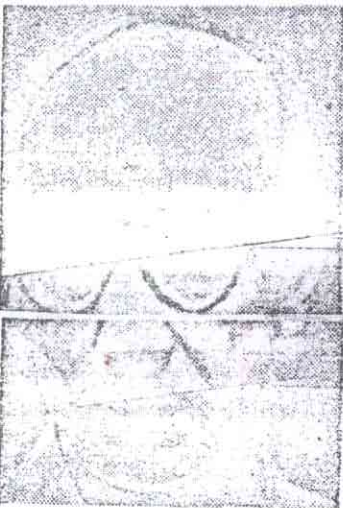
MEMPHIS—The only eye-witness against James Earl Ray said today that he never saw the short, blond-haired Cuban Ray claimed had actually fired the rifle shot that killed the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Charles Q. Stephens said the man he saw hurrying down the hall of a rooming house immediately after the shooting did not fit the description of the mysterious Cuban.

"I'm not even sure I can identify the man I saw as Ray," Stephens told The Post. "But he definitely wasn't a short, blond-haired man."

Stephens also said that at no time after the shooting did he see two men. He saw only this one man who could have been Ray, he said.

If Ray had stood trial Stephens was considered by the



CHARLES Q. STEPHENS
Description doesn't fit.

prosecution to be their most important eyewitness.

Albert Dwyer, an assistant attorney general of Shelby County

and the man who would have prosecuted Ray if the trial hadn't been aborted said, however, that it was this understanding that Stephens would have been able to identify Ray as the man running down the hall.

If this is so, the importance of his testimony would have been twofold: It would have placed Ray in the rooming house immediately after the shot was fired and given the lie to Ray's story that the shot was actually fired by a blond Cuban by the name of Raoul. Ray claims that Raoul hired him to kill King when he was in Canada, but that the actual killing was done by Raoul while Ray waited outside the rooming house in a car. This is the story he told his attorney, Percy Foreman and author William Bradford Huie, who has paid \$40,000 so far for Ray's story.

Stephens, a thin, nervous, middle-aged man who wears glasses and has dark hair, would not consent to an in-depth interview. He said his lawyer had advised him not to talk to anyone.

He rents a tiny apartment in the back of an old frame house in Memphis. His financial condi-

See Max Lerner's column on
Page 54.

tion apparently hasn't improved any since that day on April 4, 1968, when he inadvertently became a witness to Dr. King's murder.

But the unemployed heavy equipment operator, who occupied a room next to the killer's at the rooming-house, gave investigators several headaches on his own.

As a disabled veteran with a metal plate in his head, Stephens proved too fond of spending a big slice of his \$100-a-month pension on bourbon. He was picked up twice for drunkenness in the months after the assassination.

Finally, Criminal Court Judge Preston Battle declared him a material witness in the case and he was confined to Shelby County Jail. Stephens fought the confinement with his own lawyers and was released after a month.

The roots for the conspiracy theory predate the murder by many years. From the time he began his fight for his people, King and his followers rationally feared that members of the Ku Klux Klan or other bigots would plot to kill the leader of

the civil rights movement. It was a possibility that was openly discussed by King himself.

Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark may have inadvertently bolstered the conspiracy theory when he showed up in Memphis the day after the shooting and promptly announced that the murder was the work of one man. Some people immediately assumed that he was so eager to make a premature judgment that actually he was attempting to cover up a plot.

Critics of the deal to have Ray plead guilty and get 99 years in jail say that a trial should have been held and only a trial can bring out the real truth.

"What difference would a trial have made?" Dwyer said. "Ray would simply have gotten on the stand and said a mysterious man named Raoul told him to do it. Does that mean there is a Raoul?"

Outside of Ray's own statements no evidence has emerged that there was a plot or that Raoul really exists. Yet, as he lies in his maximum security cell in Tennessee State Penitentiary, the belief in a conspiracy continues.

Dr. King's widow, Coretta King, and the man who replaced him as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Ralph Abernathy, remain unconvinced that Ray acted alone.