

FBI Veteran: His Ambition Now Reality

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As a teen-ager in Tunica, Miss., Joe Hester read some articles about FBI agents and their exploits in catching such gangsters as "Machine Gun" Kelly, John Dillinger and other such "notables."



Joe Hester got hooked.

"Yes sir, from that time on, all I ever wanted to be was an FBI agent," Hester said.

That's what he has been, too, for 24 years.

Hester, a supervisor in the Memphis FBI office, was the agent in charge of the Martin Luther King case after the civil rights leader was killed in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Although hundreds of agents all over the country worked on the case, the primary responsibility was Hester's.

"That was a big investigation," he recalls, "I worked seven days a week, leaving the office at midnight and back at my desk at 7 a.m."

Thus, Hester is the man who knows more about the details of the King killing than any official in the country, and he states emphatically, "We got the right man," when the subject of James Earl Ray comes up. Ray is serving a 99-year-sentence in the Nashville penitentiary on his guilty plea to the King slaying.

The 49-year-old, soft-spoken Hester grew up the son of an automobile dealer in Tunica. His parents also owned the town's only hotel. He has two sisters and a brother.

"I was actually born in Memphis. Mama and I came up here to the hospital for me to be born and then we went right back home to Tunica," he laughs.

He attended high school at Columbia Military Academy and spent two and a half years in the Army after that. "No, I didn't win any medals. I just survived it," he said.

When he got out of the Army, Hester's parents had retired and moved to Memphis, so he moved in with them and attended Southwestern, where he majored in chemistry.

"During my years in college I had

visited the FBI office and talked to them about becoming an agent, but they told me that they only hired people with law and accounting degrees so I just put it out of my mind," Hester said.

After getting his degree, however, he also put chemistry out of his mind.

"I had a number of job offers in the chemical field but by then I had decided I'd had all of the chemistry I ever wanted, so I went to work with GMAC (General Motors Acceptance Corporation) and stayed with them for a year."

Hester said during that time he learned that the FBI needed to add on many more men and, as it does in such periods, had let down its requirements for hiring people only with law and accounting degrees.

"So I applied again and was accepted," he said.

His first assignment was in the Newark, N.J., office. Then he went to Boston, Providence and to New York — "where all I did was track down fugitives, dangerous work" — and finally to Memphis, where he has been for eight years.

He says the only "unpleasant" thing about working with the FBI is "all the transferring around and uprooting. But then I got to see some places I never would have. Had I had my choice, though, I would have preferred assignments in the South, Southwest or West rather than the ones I had in the Northeast."

One of his "lighter" duties as an agent was his assignment to view X-rated movies during the U.S. Attorney's recent crack-down on alleged pornography.

During all of his 24 years as an agent Hester said he has never had to shoot anyone.

"Basically our work, unlike a police patrolman, is not that dangerous. It has the potential for it, though," he said.

In his spare time, Hester said he likes to play tennis and do carpentry work. "Not woodworking, but building. I've built a garage, for instance. I sort of get that from my daddy. He loved to build things." He said when he retires he's thinking of building a house.

His son, Walker, is now majoring in journalism at Memphis State University and working in the FBI office in the summer as a clerk.

"He's thinking of becoming an agent and he just may," said Hester, "which would please me a lot. It's a great life."