

Ex-TBI chief doubts claims in King killing

Man who escorted Ray in car 'surprised' by tell-all stories

By **Charlie Appleton**
Banner Chief State Writer

The man who escorted James Earl Ray from Nashville to Memphis — where he pleaded guilty to murdering Martin Luther King Jr. — stands by his belief that the G-men got their man.

W.E. (Bud) Hopton, head of the then-Tennessee Bureau of Criminal Identification, says he and the late Safety Commissioner Greg O'Rear sat on each side of Ray in the back seat of a patrol car as they drove him to Memphis, where he entered the plea instead of standing trial for the King slaying. A state trooper was at the wheel of the car.

"Ray wouldn't talk at all the whole trip," says Hopton today from his Brentwood home.

The retired director of what is now the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation says he has never heard of any of the people suddenly coming forward and claiming to have had a hand in the murder of the civil-rights leader on the balcony of a Memphis motel in 1968.

He admits "surprise" at the the revelations coming 25 years later.

"I was at the TBI until 1971, and I was there when Dr. King was killed. So, I've been following some of this stuff coming out now," he says.

"It surprises me. It's hard to believe. I keep coming back to the same question: Why would he plead guilty if he was innocent?"

"It was mostly a federal investigation involving the FBI, but we lended then assistance. That's why Commissioner O'Rear and I ended up driving him over to Memphis. I haven't seen anything that would make me

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Assassin: Ray still claims 'Raoul' set him up to take the blame

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change my mind. I think they got the right man."

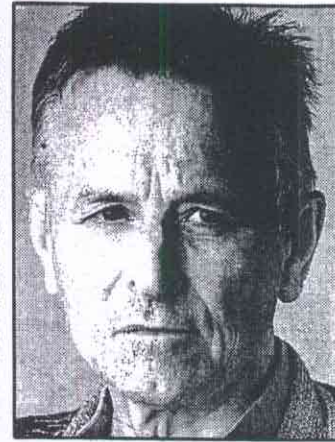
Conspiracy claims

Meanwhile, the businessman

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James Earl Ray
Serving 99-year prison sentence

who claims he hired a gunman to kill King says no one will know the whole story of the conspiracy unless he is granted immunity from prosecution.

"I just felt like the people should know what really happened, and if we get immunity they will know, believe me they will," Lloyd Jowers said in an interview Thursday on ABC News' *PrimeTime Live*.

Accounts of the interview with TV personality Sam Donaldson were carried worldwide by the *Associate Press* today.

"If we can't (receive immunity from prosecution), they may never know," Jowers told the TV audience.

District Attorney General John Pierotti said he will not grant Jowers' request, calling it "ludicrous," the AP reported.

"There's a guy who says that he is guilty of a capital crime and I'm supposed to give him immunity?" he said.

Pierotti has said he will not call a grand jury to look into the conspiracy claims, which he terms a "sham." He said he does plan to interview Jowers and four others allegedly involved in the plot.

Jowers, 67, who lives in the West Tennessee city of Martin, said that Ray, currently serving a 99-year prison sentence for the murder, was not the assassin.

"I know who was paid to do it," Jowers said.

According to the Associated Press story, when Jowers was asked whether he found someone to kill King, he replied: "Yes, sir."

But he said he was not motivated by hatred of King or blacks.

'Favor to a friend'

"Any involvement I might have had in it was doing a favor to a friend" — now-dead Memphis produce dealer Frank Liberto, Jowers said.

"Liberto has done me several large favors, so I owed him a favor, or at least I thought I did," he said, according to the AP story.

"He asked me to handle some money transaction, hire someone to assassinate Dr. Martin Luther King."

He said a "large amount" of money was delivered to his Memphis restaurant, located near the Lorraine Motel where King was killed on April 4, 1968. Later, a man whose name sounded like "Raoul" delivered a rifle to Jowers.

Jowers said the conspiracy to kill King was "set up where it would look like someone else done the killing."

Ray, Jowers said, "was part of it (the conspiracy), but I don't believe he knew he was part of it."

Ray, who confessed to killing King, is serving his prison sentence in Nashville.

Ray maintains innocence

The U.S. House Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978 that Ray was the killer but that a St. Louis-based conspiracy of racial bigots was behind the slaying. The committee's records are sealed until the year 2029.

King was killed while in Memphis to help lead a strike by sanitation workers. He was shot while on the balcony of The Lorraine Motel.

At one time since being imprisoned, Ray claimed he was promised between \$12,000 and \$15,000 to be a decoy and lead police away from the site of the King slaying.

Ray has often claimed he was set up to take the blame for the killing by a shadowy figure he knew only as "Raoul."

At Ray's hearing in 1969, prosecutors said the FBI used fingerprint matching, handwriting examination and chemical analysis to prove that Ray was the gunman.

And, for his part, Hopton has no doubt the correct conclusion was reached.