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King family gets jury verdict on conspiracy<P>

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) _ The family of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. finally has what it has sought for years _ a jury verdict saying the civil rights leader was the victim of a murder conspiracy, not the lone gunman.

"I'm just so happy to see that the people have spoken. This is what we've always asked for," King's son, Dexter, said Wednesday after a jury ruled in his family's favor on a wrongful death lawsuit.

The Kings had sued Loyd Jowers, a retired Memphis businessman who claimed six years ago that he paid someone other than confessed killer James Earl Ray to kill King.

The trial, which began Nov. 15, for the first time gave a jury the opportunity to hear theories of a murder conspiracy in the 1968 assassination at a Memphis motel.

Ray pleaded guilty to the murder in 1969, so he did not go to trial. He tried for 30 years to take back the guilty plea and died in prison of liver disease last year. His plea was upheld eight times by state and federal courts.

The six blacks and six whites on the Chancery Court jury deliberated only about three hours before returning Wednesday's verdict and awarding the Kings \$100 in damages.

The Kings has asked for minimal damages, saying they were more interested in a verdict that would support their belief of a conspiracy.

The suit named Jowers and other "unnamed conspirators," so the verdict did not identify anyone else who might have been involved. A civil court jury finding a defendant like Jowers at fault relies on a standard of a preponderance of evidence. In a criminal case, a defendant must be found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

King said the family has no plans to take legal action against anyone else.

"This is kind of a final chapter ... as far as legal remedies go," he said. "We hope to put this behind us and move on with our lives. This is a time for reconciliation, healing and closure."

William Pepper, the Kings' lawyer, told jurors that Jowers, 73, was part of a vast conspiracy involving the Mafia and agents of the federal government. He said King was targeted because of his opposition to the Vietnam War and plans for a huge "poor peoples' march" on Washington.

A cover-up following the assassination involved the FBI, CIA, the news media and Army intelligence, as well as many state and city officials, said Pepper, who represented Ray for years.

He told jurors they could rewrite history with a conspiracy verdict.

"We're asking you to send a message ... to all of those in power that you cannot get away with it," Pepper said during closing arguments.

Juror Robert Tucker said the assassination was too complex for one person to handle.

He noted Pepper's assertions that King's police guard was pulled back shortly before the murder and that Army agents had King under surveillance at the time he was felled by a single rifle shot.

"All of those things added up, it wasn't just one guy acting alone," Tucker said.

A U.S. House committee concluded in 1978 that Ray was the killer but may have had help before or after the assassination. The committee did not find any government involvement in the murder.

Jowers owned a small restaurant, Jim's Grill, across the street from The Lorraine Motel, where King was killed. On the day of the murder, Ray, a prison escapee from Missouri, rented a room under an assumed name in a rooming house above Jim's Grill.

In 1993, Jowers said on ABC-TV that he hired King's killer as a favor to an underworld figure who was a friend. He did not identify the purported killer, but said it wasn't Ray.

Jowers was sick for much of the trial and did not testify.

Lewis Garrison, Jowers' lawyer, told jurors they could reasonably conclude King was the victim of a conspiracy but said his client's role was minor at best.

He said it was hard to believe that "the owner of a greasy spoon and an escaped convict" could have pulled off King's assassination.

Pepper said King's opposition to the Vietnam conflict and his support of the poor angered big-money defense contractors and threatened to redistribute wealth in America.

"This was about money," Pepper said.

The order to kill King, Pepper said, came from the head of organized crime in New Orleans to a Memphis produce dealer who got Jowers to handle the payoff and murder weapon. An Army sniper squad was in place to shoot King if the Mafia hit failed, Pepper said.

John Campbell, a state prosecutor who investigated the assassination, said his office has never turned up evidence to charge anyone other than Ray with the murder.

"I've still seen nothing that would change my opinion" that Ray was the gunman, Campbell said.

Last year, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno ordered a limited investigation by the Justice Department into two allegations of a conspiracy in the **King** murder. One was Jowers' claim. The other was a statement by former FBI Agent Donald Wilson that he found papers in Ray's car that might support a conspiracy.

Justice Department spokeswoman Carol Florman said "our review is still ongoing." She would not comment on the Memphis case.

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