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FIRST ABOUT 5/11/18

MEMPHIS, Tenn. _ Jury in civil trial finds that conspiracy was involved in Martin Luther King Jr. slaying
- AP-ES-12-08-99 1655EST

BC-King Assassination,0131<P>

URGENT<P>

Jury decides Martin Luther King was victim of conspiracy<P>

Eds: Loyd is cq<P>

By WOODY BAIRD<P>

Associated Press Writer<P>

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) _ A jury found Wednesday that the Rev. Martin Luther King was the victim of a murder conspiracy, not a lone assassin.

The King family had filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Loyd Jowers, a retired Memphis businessman who claimed six years ago that he paid someone other than James Earl Ray to kill King. A jury of six blacks and six whites needed only three hours to reach their verdict.

The Kings were seeking unspecified damages, but what they wanted most was for the jury to find evidence of a conspiracy and lend support to the family's call for a new investigation into the killing.

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BC-King Assassination, 1st Add,0530<P>

MEMPHIS, Tenn.: the killing.<P>

The Kings were awarded \$100 in damages.

"I'm just so happy to see that the people have spoken," King's son Dexter said. "This is what we've always asked for."

William Pepper, the Kings' lawyer, told the jury 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 march on Washington.

A cover-up following the assassination in Memphis in 1968 involved the FBI, CIA, the media and Army intelligence, as well as state and city officials, said Pepper, who also represented Ray in his efforts to recant his confession and get a trial.

Pepper told the jurors they could rewrite history with a conspiracy verdict.

Juror David Morphy said he believed the assassination was too complex to be carried out by one person.

"We all thought it was kind of a cut-and-dried case, with the evidence that Pepper brought forth that there were a lot of people involved, everyone from the CIA, military involvement in it _ Jowers was involved in it, we felt," he said.

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

Ray confessed to killing King and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He spent the rest of his life claiming to be innocent and trying to get a trial. He died from liver disease last year.

Ray's guilty plea was upheld eight times by state and federal courts. A congressional committee concluded in 1978 that Ray was the killer but he may have had help before or after the assassination. The committee did not find any government involvement in the murder.

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, who has never repeated the claim but not recanted it either, was sick for much of the trial and did not testify.

At the time of the killing, Jowers owned a small restaurant, Jim's Grill, across the street from The Lorraine Motel, where King was killed. On the day of the assassination, Ray, a prison escapee from Missouri, used an assumed name to rent a room in a rooming house above Jim's Grill.

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

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, testified that her family believes Ray did not act alone.

"If we know the truth, we can be free and go on with our lives," she said on the trial's opening day.

In his closing argument, Pepper said King was killed because of his opposition to the war and his planned "poor peoples' march" on Washington.

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.

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