

Nothing new here for you, but, this is how the deep south

PB

NATION

treats this history!!!

Memphis forever carries burden



AP photo

Visitors to the National Civil Rights Museum (formerly the Lorraine Motel) in Memphis listen as a recording of a bus driver "threatens" the figure of Rosa Parks, left. The vehicle — a real Montgomery, Ala., bus of the 1950s — is one of the displays.

Legacy of Rev. King, slain 30 years ago, doesn't die.

By WOODY BAIRD
The Associated Press

Just a 10-cent-an-hour raise. That's all it took, finally, to settle a strike by black sanitation workers three decades ago. In reality, though, the cost was too high to calculate.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had come to town to support the strikers, but in the flash of a rifle shot he lay mortally wounded. And from that day, April 4, 1968, Memphis would forever carry the burden of a martyr's death.

"This was a typical Southern city. Whether we realized it or not, our eyes were closed to what is now considered to be grave injustices," said Nicholas Vieron, one of a group of local clergymen who tried to settle the strike.

Eyes were opened, but at a terrible cost.

In the four months before King's death, the sanitation workers' strike had led to black boycotts of downtown businesses and set off a near-riot that brought the National Guard to town.

Protesters, many carrying the now-famous signs saying, "I Am A Man," were beaten or gassed by police as the city's white leaders stubbornly refused their demands.

Just 12 days after the assassination, the city ended the strike by recognizing the union and granting the dime-an-hour raise.

For the anniversary of King's death, many people are expected to join a "Pilgrimage to Memphis," a celebration of King's life and the accomplishments of the civil-rights movement.

"New life springs up from the blood that waters the soil," said the Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles, a friend of King's and an organizer of the pilgrimage.

Kyles was present when a single rifle slug struck King, ripping into his face and neck, as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. The site was transformed seven years ago into the National Civil Rights Museum. "The climate for his assassination was right in Memphis, no question about that," Kyles said. "But the climate was right in many cities in the nation. . . . I do think it was a quirk of history that it happened here."

But it did happen, and this city, for blacks and whites alike, has never been the same.

James Earl Ray, a prison escapee from Missouri, pleaded guilty to the killing and is serving a 99-year sentence at a Nashville prison. He has long sought

to retract his plea, saying others were involved — a conclusion reached by congressional investigators in 1978. But no one else has ever been charged.

"Now we speak of Memphis pre-King assassination and post-King assassination," Kyles said.

Charles Crawford, a specialist in Tennessee history at the University of Memphis, said the shock of King's death made it clear that traditional patterns of white paternalism had to change. "It was sort of a watershed that broke the Old South pattern of Memphis and began to bring — I'm not sure the proper word is cooperation — but a biracial approach to solving the city's problems," Crawford said.

Vieron, a Greek Orthodox priest who joined other white clergy in urging negotiations with the strikers, said the hard line taken by then-Mayor Henry Loeb and his associates could not happen now. "When you look back on it, it seems almost childish, and in a way it was," Vieron said.

Many changes have occurred in Memphis since then, said W.W. Herenton, the city's first elected black mayor. He beat a popular white incumbent in 1991 and won a landslide re-election in 1995. "I was born in Memphis. I remember riding on the back of the bus, drinking out of 'colored only' water fountains, not seeing any blacks in high political offices or in corporate boardrooms," Herenton said.

Today, Memphis has a growing black middle class, and many of its leaders are black. But blacks still make up a large portion of the city's poor. In 1968, Memphis' population was just under 40 percent black. Now it's more than 55 percent black.

Larry Moore, a University of Memphis business professor, said guilt over the assassination has weighed heavily on the city's black residents, because King died while trying to help them.

After the assassination, many blacks were ashamed of living in Memphis, and that view of their hometown "carried over to the next generation," said Moore, who is black.

Memphis will always be remembered as the city where King died, but that can be a badge of honor, not just a scar, the mayor said.

"Memphis has made tremendous progress as a Southern city that has this blemish of the assassination of Dr. King," Herenton said. "But as we approach the 21st century, we ought to focus on the legacy and the life of Dr. King."



AP file photo/SAM MELHORN

The Revs. Martin Luther King Jr., left, and Ralph David Abernathy lead a march on behalf of striking Memphis sanitation workers on March 28, 1968.

Ray keeps conspiracy claims alive

WOODY BAIRD
The Associated Press

James Earl Ray admitted killing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., no question. But that didn't end the questions. Ray has tried for 30 years to take back his guilty plea, which brought him a 99-year sentence.

The plea has been upheld eight times by Tennessee and federal courts. But his cries of frame-up have helped create a cottage industry for conspiracy theorists, who say he had help or may even have been a patsy, taking the blame for other conspirators.

Authorities say they have found no evidence to charge anyone else in the April 4, 1968, assassination. Bill Gibbons, chief state prosecutor in Memphis, sums up the official position this way: "James Earl Ray is the convicted killer of Dr. King. ... He's exactly where he belongs."

Ray, 70, suffers from terminal liver disease and has been in and out of a Nashville prison hospital in the past year, at times lapsing into a coma. His failing health has increased calls for him to go to trial.

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and son Dexter showed up in a Memphis courtroom last year to say they thought such a trial could help answer the conspiracy allegations.

Memphis prosecutors launched a new investigation into the murder after King's family got involved. But authorities were

trying to find out whether anyone else could be charged in the slaying, not whether Ray was innocent.

An investigation by a U.S. House committee on assassinations concluded in 1978 that Ray killed King but may have had help from others before or after the shooting.

Supporters describe Ray as a lifelong, small-time crook, and say it's hard to believe he alone could have pulled off the assassination and his two-month run from authorities, through Canada and Europe.

Ray did indeed commit numerous minor crimes, but he also has admitted several armed robberies. He bought the rifle identified as the King murder weapon in Alabama and brought it to Memphis. It was found near the murder scene, with Ray's fingerprint on it.

Authorities say Ray apparently stalked King to other cities and used an assumed name to rent a room in the flophouse from which the fatal shot was fired.

Among those convinced of Ray's innocence is the Rev. James Lawson, a black minister who helped bring King to Memphis for a sanitation workers' strike but who has worked with investigators over the years to try to find others allegedly involved in the killing.

During Ray's latest efforts to get a trial, Lawson said, "James Earl Ray did not do it, did not plot it and did not know about it on April 4, 1968."



AP file photo/MICHAEL McMULLAN

James Earl Ray, confessed assassin of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., appears in his cell at a Nashville prison hospital in March 1997.