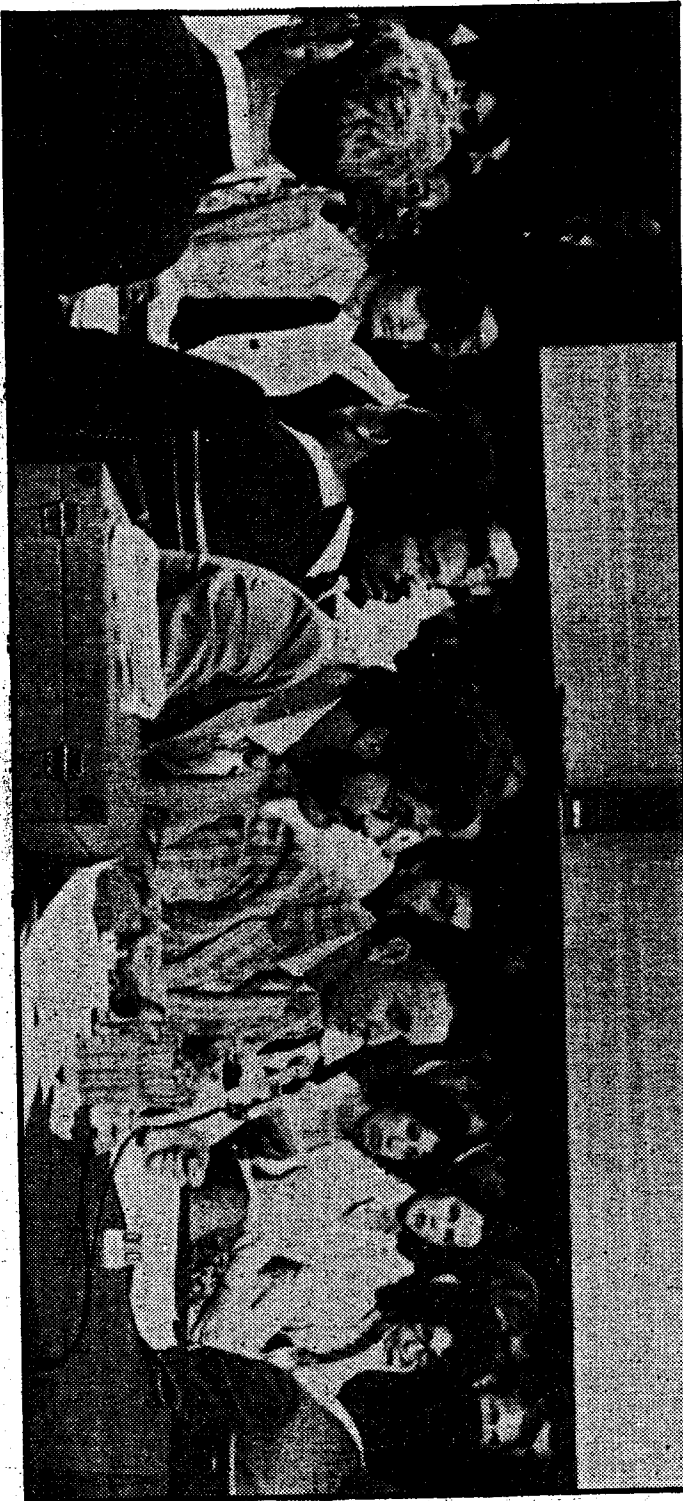


The Knoxville Tower



AP LASERPHOTO

James Earl Ray, on temporary leave from Brushy Mountain State Prison at Petros, sits with his attorney, Mark Lane, during testimony before the House Assassinations Committee Wednesday in Washington. Federal marshals form a ring around Ray and Lane, sifting with their backs to the table and facing the audience.

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Ray Finally Gets Day

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Journal Washington Correspondent

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WASHINGTON

Flanked by United States marshals amid super-tight security, James Earl Ray told a congressional investigating committee Wednesday he was a few blocks away getting a spare tire repaired at the time Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot.

Ray, convicted of assassinating the civil rights leader in Memphis April 4, 1968, claimed he was set up by a man named Raoul, with whom he thought he was entering a gun-smuggling business.

Reading from a 38-page statement in rasping, nasal voice, the 51-year-old Brushy Mountain convict traced his movements, in painstaking detail, from the time he escaped from Missouri state prison in April 1967, through the assassination and his subsequent capture and imprisonment.

"I did not shoot the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.," he said in his opening remarks. "If I would have had a lawyer to represent me, I would have offered conclusive proof in support of this denial." He maintained, as he has in the past, that his attorney, Percy Foreman of Houston, Texas, persuaded him to plead guilty in order to enhance the sales of a book about the King case.

"Maybe I should be in jail," he read from the typed statement, "although not for shooting anyone rather being foolish enough to return to a legal snake pit, even if the offer was Fort Knox and Charlie's

Angels to spend it on, once I reached Canada in 1967.

It was in Montreal, Canada, after his escape from the Missouri prison, that Ray said he met "Raoul," while he was on the waterfront trying to get seaman's papers in order to leave the country. Raoul, he said, eventually gave him more than \$5,000, including the money to purchase the 1966 Mustang in which he escaped from Memphis after King's death. He was returning to his rooming house, he said yesterday, when he was the street blocked by police cars and heard on the car radio that King had been shot.

Ray said he obtained another \$1,700 in Montreal by robbing a warehouse which he had patronized earlier. "I returned to the aforementioned night club," he said, reading from the legalese-styled statement, and "when she aroused the manager into opening the office door, I put the pistol on him."

Ray said that Foreman "maneuvered" him into a guilty plea by convincing him that "the press had already convicted me by inflaming the minds of potential jurors," that the government had bribed witnesses, that pleading guilty would be in his own best financial interest, and that the trial judge, W. Preston Battle, "wanted a guilty plea because he was concerned the blacks might burn the town down."

Battle, a Shelby County Criminal Court judge, died of a heart attack in his chambers a few weeks after sentencing Ray to 99 years on a plea of guilty. At the time of his death, he was at his desk

In Congress

reviewing Ray's recantation of his guilty plea and motion for a new trial.

Asked by committee member Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, what conclusive evidence he might have presented at a full-scale trial, Ray said he was referring to witnesses who might have seen him at the service station, or other business places in the Memphis area. He maintained that he did rent a room in the rooming house from which police theorized the fatal bullet was fired, but that he had given the rifle to Raoul, and had left various personal belongings in the room when he left to get the tire fixed.

The rifle, a pair of binoculars with Ray's fingerprints on them, and other effects including his prison radio with his name on it were found in front of the Main Street rooming house in Memphis moments after King was slain.

"Did you ever wonder why he (Raoul) wouldn't give you his real name?" Stokes asked Ray.

"Well, I assumed he was a crook," Ray answered. "And I never made no effort to get to know him too well. I don't try to mind other people's business . . . that's a good way to get killed."

Flanked by a dozen United States marshals when he entered the hearing room, Ray was dressed in a plaid sports jacket and striped tie.

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He carried a brief case containing his statement, which read with the aid of a pair of Air Force-style flight glasses.

Ray was visibly fatigued when he returned to the witness stand after the noon recess, and his attorney, Mark Lane, urged acting committee chairman Richardson Preyer, D.-N.C., to cut the afternoon session short to let his client rest.

Lane charged that Ray was kept awake all night Monday night in an undisclosed federal prison, and that he was punched out by a prison guard in a scuffle over fingerprinting.

Lane and a Memphis attorney, Duncan Ragsdale, went to Federal Court in Washington late yesterday to ask for a writ of habeas corpus in Ray's behalf, "for his safety and well-being, and removal of the lights" which they maintain rob Ray of his rest.

Ragsdale identified himself in the application for a writ as Ray's attorney, but told a reporter that he was merely "acting in Mr. Lane's behalf" while the lawyer stayed with Ray yesterday morning. Ragsdale later appeared in the committee room, carrying one of the scarce admission tickets issued to the "Ray defense team."

Ragsdale's role in the case, however, appeared clouded after he told reporters that he represents Ed Redditt, a former Memphis policeman who has been subpoenaed by the assassinations committee to testify today. Redditt reportedly has denied retaining Ragsdale as his counsel.

Ragsdale is also the Republican nominee for the Memphis congressional seat now held by Democrat Harold Ford, member of the assassinations committee.

"I don't think Ford has done the job he ought to do on this committee," Ragsdale said. "That's another reason I'm here."

Ford would not comment on Ragsdale's presence at the hearings other than to say that he understood

Ragsdale was representing Redditt. Redditt was one of the two black detectives who were assigned to guard King in Memphis, but who were pulled off the assignment a short time before the slaying.

Other members of the Ray "defense team" at yesterday's hearing were the Rev. James M. Lawson and the Rev. Jessie Jackson, civil rights leaders who were with King in Memphis and who have declared their belief that Ray is being framed by the FBI.

Lawson ticked off his own name and those of Jackson, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, the Rev. Solomon Jones and other black leaders who were at the scene of King's death, and said none of them have ever been questioned by the Memphis police department of the FBI.

In an emotional appeal to a press conference after yesterday's hearing recessed, Lawson asked the reporters to continue investigating the King case "as you did Watergate."

"On behalf of the black community, may I ask the press to go ask these questions," he said. "If the killing of Dr. King cannot be solved, if these questions (about FBI involvement) are not answered, then we're all in danger."

Lane also scored the press for not following up on the story of Ray's alleged mistreatment Monday night. The incident, he said, "would be a front page story in every newspaper in the country if it had happened to (Anatole) Scharansky in Moscow."

Lane's request for an abbreviated session was at first refused by Preyer, but Stokes and other committee members conferred with him in whispers, and he returned to the rostrum and agreed to the 2:15 p.m. recess. Ray will continue his testimony today, being questioned in turn by members of the committee and committee counsel.