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Man Tells of King Murder Offer; Tie to Prison Probed

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ST. LOUIS — A 46-year-old man here has told the House Assassination Committee that late in 1966 or early 1967 he turned down an offer of \$50,000 to arrange the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Russell G. Byers, a former automobile parts dealer, acknowledged in an interview with The New York Times that he had told the committee that two men from Imperial, Mo., had offered him the money on behalf of a group of businessmen to kill the Civil Rights leader, who was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Both men have since died, but their wives said they did not believe the story.

The account has spurred an intense inquiry by investigators for the committee, largely because Byers' brother-in-law, John Spica, was serving a murder term at the time of the alleged offer in the Missouri State Penitentiary, where James Earl Ray, later convicted of killing King, was also a prisoner.

Byers told The Times that he had rejected the proposal and had not informed Spica about it. But he said he had suspected that word of a bounty on King's life might have reached men inside the prison through other routes.

A three-month investigation by the House committee, and an independent inquiry by a team of reporters for The New York Times, have uncovered a series of circumstantial connections leading from Byers and the two men from Imperial, Mo., into the state penitentiary, from which Ray escaped on April 23, 1967, almost a year before the fatal shooting of King in Memphis.

Ray is serving a 99-year prison term in Tennessee's Brushy Mountain State Prison at Petros for the murder of King. Ray, who pleaded guilty to the murder, has since denied that he fired the fatal shot and has repeatedly requested a new trial, which he maintains would place the blame on others whose identity has not been disclosed so far.

Although no evidence has yet been

produced that establishes a direct link between the alleged proposal to Byers and the death of King, this is the first of many conspiracy allegations that leads directly into the Missouri prison. At the prison, it was widely rumored in 1966 and 1967 that a conservative business group was willing to pay a large sum of money to anyone who would murder King.

House investigators are reported to regard this trail of evidence as one of the most tangible avenues of inquiry in their explorations.

Some sources familiar with the inquiry agree that Byers' allegation is uncorroborated and that the lines into the prison may be no more than the casual relationships among persons who live in the same area. But, they argue, the situation merits the intense scrutiny that it is now receiving.

They also note that Byers did not offer, on his own, to cooperate, but testified only after the committee tracked him down. And they appear to believe that his account is buttressed to some extent by the fact that he told it to several persons at the time, and was not coming forward now, after the death of the persons who allegedly made the offer.

not been common."

fact, last February."

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Judge gives Ray permit to testify for House panel

By The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A U.S. District Court judge signed papers Wednesday to permit James Earl Ray to be brought to Washington to give public testimony before the House Assassinations Committee.

The committee previously had set Aug. 16 as the date for testimony from Ray, now serving a 99-year prison sentence for murdering the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Attorneys for the House committee had asked for a writ of habeas corpus so Ray could be turned over to U.S. marshals and be brought here. Judge William B. Bryant signed the writ after hearing 20 minutes of arguments from the committee attorney and Mark Lane, the attorney representing Ray.

Lane argued that the court did not have jurisdiction in the case and even if it did, the petition was not in accordance with the law.

Lane said Ray has testified in secret

session before committee investigators who went to the Brushy Mountain Prison in Tennessee.

"He wants to come to Washington," Lane said. "He wants to testify publicly before the select committee." But, Lane said, he is concerned for the safety of Ray, being brought here by U.S. marshals.

Lane said the federal district court in Tennessee has jurisdiction in Ray's case. He also said that if a writ is granted, the custodian of the prison should be the one to bring Ray here.

G. Robert Blakey, attorney for the House committee, argued that the district court here did have jurisdiction and the petition for a writ of habeas corpus was made according to law.

Bryant said he presumed a lot of people in custody have been summoned to testify before congressional committees and asked if anybody had raised questions about the previous cases. Blakey replied, "Not to our knowledge," and said that the "undisturbed practice has been to issue the writs."

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New King Assassination

By Paul Scott

WASHINGTON—James Earl Ray, the convicted killer of Dr. Martin Luther King, is going to finally get his chance to tell his story over nationwide TV and radio — that is if he still wants the national forum.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations is offering Ray the top billing in five days of public hearings set to begin on August 14 into the King assassination and the handling of its investigation by the FBI and local and state law enforcement officials in Tennessee.

Since his public admission of guilt and life sentencing in a Tennessee State Court, Ray personally has hinted in letters to members of Congress, including Sen. James Eastland, D. Miss., chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, that others were involved in the King Assassination.

When contacted in the past, however, Ray has refused to testify unless allowed to come to Washington and appear publicly before a Senate or House Committee without having first to reveal his proposed testimony in advance of the hearing.

With no way to check out the accuracy of what Ray

might say in advance of his public appearance, members of Congress including Senator Eastland have shied away from giving the convicted killer a national forum.

Rep. Louis Stokes, D.O., chairman of the Select Committee on Assassinations, has now sent word to Ray that he can testify on his terms. Although Committee investigators have questioned Ray in his prison cell, they still don't have any idea of what he will say.

The Committee's invitation to Ray was indicated in a memorandum which Representative Stokes is circulating to members of Congress. In detailing plans for a series of public hearings in the fall, Representative Stokes reported:

"The schedule now contemplates holding approximately 20 days of hearings into each assassination. The first five days of the public hearings planned are on the assassination of Dr. King. These hearings will commence on the 14th of August. The hearings will be concerned with Dr. King's activities in Memphis in 1968, his assassination and the involvement if any, of Mr. James Earl Ray in the assassination. An effort will be made to secure the testimony of Mr. Ray in public sessions at that time. Other hearings will involve the assassination of President John Kennedy."

OTHER INVOLVED IN SLAYING — By including the words "if any" in the sentence regarding the involvement of Ray in the assassination, Representative Stokes has raised



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Hearings To Be Televised

speculation that his committee may be planning to show that others were responsible for the killing of King.

When questioned by several of his colleagues, Representative Stokes refused to confirm or deny whether Committee probers have uncovered new evidence that would involve others in King's assassination. All the Cleveland Democrat will say is that field investigations are continuing.

The Committee's inquiry already has ranged over three continents with investigators retracing Ray's travelings abroad following the King assassination. Ray was arrested in London after returning from Portugal. The Committee's inquiry already has cost more than \$2.5 million.

While Committee probers have reviewed all of the FBI's investigative reports on the King assassination, they still have not sought permission to examine hundreds of other FBI's documents and tapes on the 1968 activities of King and associates which a federal judge ordered sealed in February, 1977.

A number of these documents and tapes deal with known secret communists, who were closely associated with the Civil Rights leader shortly before his assassination. Since these persons were deeply involved in the planning of King's activities and knew his movements in Memphis, the documents should be examined for possible new leads in the tragic slaying.

The U.S. Federal Court here was petitioned to have these

documents and tapes sealed by officials of the Southern Christian leadership conference, which King headed at the time of his slaying. The reasons they gave for their request was that the information involved King's private life and contacts and was gathered by FBI monitoring.

If the Committee is to thoroughly explore the activities of King and these associates in Memphis during the period before his assassination, FBI sources say the lawmakers must obtain permission from the Court to examine these documents and tapes because of the information they contain.

THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION — The Stokes Committee has scheduled 18 days of public hearings in September to consider evidence uncovered in the assassination of the late President Kennedy.

While Chairman Stokes isn't saying anything publicly, other committee members reveal privately that none of the new information obtained by their staff so far upsets the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin.

The investigations of both the Kennedy and King assassinations by the Stokes Committee is expected to be completed by the end of the year. A final report is expected to be made to the full Congress early in 1978.

James Earl Ray's public testimony could be a major factor in shaping both the tone and content of the Committee's final report on the assassination of King.