

BC-The King Mystery, Adv14-1st Add,0843

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UNDATED: the truth."

Pepper named the man -- only as ``Raul'' -- as a defendant-conspirator in Ray's civil suit. ``We want to depose this guy,' he said. ``We think that's the case right there.'"

Prosecutors, however, disagree.

Of Mrs. Grabow, Pierotti said, ``She may be sincere.' But he said she is not credible in the face of other information he has seen about the purported Raul, which he declined to describe.

An assistant district attorney general, John Campbell, characterized the alleged Raul as ``a run-of-the-mill citizen,' and added, ``It's just a mistake.'"

While the new Raul chapter in the King mystery may be the latest, it is only one of many in recent years. There's the saga of Loyd Jowers, who at the time of the assassination owned Jim's Grill, a Memphis greasy-spoon whose backyard faced the Lorraine Motel balcony where King was shot.

In 1993, Jowers was under pressure because a former waitress at the restaurant, Betty Spates, implicated him in the killing.

``I remember hearing a sound like a firecracker going off and within seconds Loyd came running through the back door carrying (a) rifle. ... He looked like a wild man,' Ms. Spates said in one sworn statement. Jowers went to his lawyer, Garrison, in hopes of arranging immunity from prosecution in exchange for what he knew. When he did not get it, he went public with parts of his story on ABC's ``Prime Time Live,' saying he was part of a conspiracy that involved organized crime.

Is Jowers' story true? Garrison said he has lost his business and his wife since speaking out. ``He has gained nothing,' said the Memphis lawyer, declining an AP request for an interview with Jowers, who lives in an undisclosed location.

Is Ms. Spates' story true? No, say prosecutors, contending that she gave them a conflicting statement. Interviewed by the AP, Ms. Spates seemed eager to get off the phone. Before hanging up, she said, ``I've forgotten that whole year. It's gotten me into a lot of trouble.'"

Pepper, whose book detailed Ms. Spates' on-again, off-again willingness to tell her story, acknowledged in an interview, ``This woman is very nervous, very shaky. But she is telling the truth.'"

Even Pepper's admirers say the overlapping layers of plot he lays out are hard to follow -- and prosecutor Pierotti jokes that Pepper's approach is ``if you don't buy this, try this.''

Most complicated of all is his last puzzle piece: Pepper quotes with pseudonyms two men he says were members of an Army Special Forces unit who claim they received instructions to prepare to shoot King and his then-aide Andrew Young, who later was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Though they had weapons aimed, no order to fire ever came, he quotes them as saying. Instead, a civilian fired the fatal shot from another location, they say. A Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Col. Mike Wood, dismissed the claim. ``I sent it down to Special Ops (Operations) Command -- and, after they got done laughing a lot, they said it never happened. ... The military going out and murdering citizens -- that's not what we do.''

Pepper contacted the purported sniper team members, now living outside the United States, through former investigative reporter Steve Tompkins, who spent nearly two years preparing a story about Army intelligence operatives' intensive surveillance of King during the turbulent civil rights era.

In the story he wrote for The Commercial-Appeal in Memphis in 1993, he said he found no evidence the Army had a direct role in King's death.

But Pepper sketches such a role by supplementing the paper's findings with information from other sources -- among them, government and military officials he quotes anonymously. He also paid for Tompkins to travel to pose a series of prepared questions to the alleged snipers.

Tompkins said the men emphasized their primary mission was reconnaissance, with a ``contingency plan'' to shoot.

``They were observing. The place was bubbling,''' he said, recalling there had been violence in connection with a sanitation workers strike that King was in Memphis to support -- and race riots in other cities just months before.

``They were given verbal instructions that if all hell broke loose, and they were involved in a Detroit-type riot, they had orders to take out King and Young,''' Tompkins said.

When contacted about the new allegations in the 28-year-old case, Young, now co-chairman of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, said he did not doubt Pepper's assertion but voiced no alarm.

``I never got involved in this,''' Young said, ``because I thought it was important to carry on Martin's work. And you didn't do that by finding out who pulled the trigger. ... You don't get bogged down in the sickness of society.''