

King Probe Questions 1st Witness

Charlie Stephens, a resident of the rooming house near the Lorraine Motel when Dr. Martin Luther King was killed April 4, 1968, was the first witness to be questioned in Memphis today by officials of the House Assassination Committee.

Stephens told investigators anyone inside the rooming house could get out through the back door, but because of a lock, no one outside could get into the rooming house through the back door.

Stephens was overheard to describe to an investigator what he was doing the day of the death of Dr. King when he heard a

noise in the bathroom that sounded like a rifle shot and later saw a man flee the room. A cab driver who had returned Stephens to the rooming house shortly before the slaying had told police and FBI agents that Stephens was drunk.

Federal court officials said they understood that some 20 witnesses were to be interviewed today and depositions taken.

No one with the committee, in keeping with their recent policy of not commenting to the press about their probe, would either confirm or deny what they were doing in Memphis.

James Earl Ray, now in a 99-year sentence in a Mississippi prison for the slaying of King, fled the scene of the shooting, officials said, after seeing from a back bathroom window of the rooming house with a high power rifle as he stood on the second floor balcony outside his motel room at the Lorraine.

The questioning was going on in the east of the Federal Office Building today. There was an list of witnesses for specific times during the day.

King Death 'Witness' Talks To Investigators

A man who may have seen the killer of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. only moments after King was shot spent nearly four hours yesterday in interviews with investigators from the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

Charlie Stephens, who was living in a rooming house near the Lorraine Motel when King was killed 10 years ago this month, told the investigators about a man he saw flee from a bathroom in the rooming house minutes after King was shot.

Stephens told the investigators that after the shots were fired, he saw the man's left profile as he fled the building.

The two-man investigative team took a deposition from Stephens yesterday morning on the ninth floor of the Federal Office Building downtown. The investigators, Assassinations Committee staff attorney Jerry Akers and an unidentified man, conducted the interview.

The only other persons present when Stephens testified were a stenographer and U.S. Magistrate Aaron Brown Jr. who swore in Stephens.

The investigators, who were scheduled to talk to some 20 persons concerning the King assassination, declined to comment on their visit to Memphis. They left the federal building about 1 p.m.

King was killed April 4, 1968, as he stood on the second floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel. James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the murder and currently is serving a 99-year sentence at Brushy Mountain Prison in Petros, Tenn.

In recent years, however, Ray has maintained he did not kill King, and followers of the slain civil rights leader, other black officials and Ray's attorney, Mark Lane, have demanded that Ray be tried for the murder.

Home With Son in H. Motel

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King Case Witness May Be Released

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A woman who may have seen Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassin only minutes after the fatal shot may be released soon from a Tennessee mental hospital, the hospital superintendent says.

"Grace Waiden is a patient here," Dr. Maurice Cohen, superintendent of West Tennessee Mental Health Institute near Bolivar, said in a telephone interview yesterday.

"She is free to go but she cannot leave... unless we can place her in a community. We are in the process of preparing to discharge her," he said.

Mrs. Waiden, 62, has been at the hospital since 1968—several months after the slaying of King. Her possible testimony about what she saw April 4 at the Math Sayer boarding house where the fatal shot was fired has been the subject of some debate.

Yesterday, a group of ministers called for Mrs. Waiden's release.

Cohen said Mrs. Waiden is suffering from "chronic brain syndrome. I suspect due to abuse of alcohol." He said she is also suffering from diabetes.

Cohen said she has been interviewed by investigators for the House Assassinations Committee, which is looking into the slayings of President John F. Kennedy and King.

"When she is interviewed, she has a vivid picture in her mind of the man she saw leaving the bathroom, but she can't say how long she's been hospitalized," Cohen said.

He said despite her mental problems, Mrs. Waiden is capable of functioning outside the hospital with some supervision. Hospital officials have applied on her behalf for Social Security payments to provide her with an income, he said.