

'They got the wrong man'

Woman waits in hiding to tell her version of who assassinated King

By Molly Burrell
Staff Writer

Who is Grace Walden? What did she see April 4, 1968, in Memphis?

Why is she sequestered and why is she dying now?

Why does she come forward at this time to tell a story apparently uncorroborated in official documents?

The answers could illuminate hearings of the House Select Committee on Assassinations — if she's invited to testify. They are scheduled to open Aug. 14.

They could also be a part of new evidence being readied for the motion for a first trial of the man

Research assistance for this story was provided by Scott Ed-ling.

A week before a congressional hearing into Martin Luther King's assassination, a cartoon sketch of a woman, sequestered by the state of Tennessee for 19 years, has emerged from seclusion to tell her eyewitness story of that fateful day in 1968.

Grace Walden readily grants to the House Assassinations Committee, but so far no one has asked her.

As recently as two weeks ago the committee chairman, Rep.

who has already served 10 years for the crime of assassination.

Grace Walden is a plump, matronly woman who walks with a

Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, didn't even know who she is.

The state attorney general of Tennessee, who was the chief prosecutor in the case against James Earl Ray, says she never gave a written statement of her story and was not questioned by his staff.

Yet, if her story is true, she is a waitress who could cast doubt on the summary conviction of Ray as the lone assassin.

limp. She is scarred in face, body and mind.

She lives in seclusion in Orange County, waiting to tell her story, a story that starts: "They got the wrong man." Her face is lined with the fur-

rows of worry, poverty and despair.

Her nose, her leg and the back of her head are etched with deep scars from the Coke bottle her roommate broke over her head and slashed over her body — a roommate who was one of the state's prime material witnesses next to Ray.

Grace Walden has survived 10-31 years, but she has not been gentle with her.

She finished three years of college, worked as saleslady and bookkeeper in Memphis, drew blueprints, ran a rooming house, and had four unsuccessful marriages, one of them to a man who was murdered.

She grew old and was unemployed. She met a man named (Turn to Back Page, Col. 3)



GRACE WALDEN, who claims to be an eyewitness in the Martin Luther King assassination, is interviewed in her secret Orange County hideaway by Independent Press-Telegram reporters. — Staff Photo by LEO HETZEL

SUNDAY

Independent Press-Telegram

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA, AUGUST 6, 1978

VOL 27, No. 3

King assassination witness walls

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Charles Stephens in a beer bar and became his live-in companion in a rundown rooming house a block away from where Martin Luther King was to be murdered.

That was 11 years ago. But her memory seems undimmed today, her recall consistent.

And she insists she remembers what she saw that April 4 in Memphis.

She says today as she has said since 1968: "They got the wrong man."

She remembers that man, the one who emerged from the spot which is pinpointed as the site where King's assassin fired the fatal bullet. The spot was a bathroom next door to her room, the room she shared with Charles Stephens.

She is sure that man was not James Earl Ray.

After 10 years in the Tennessee mental hospital, a confinement apparently ordered without hearing, certification or consent, she remembers this fact.

After years of large doses of drugs and "no visitors" orders, years when she was told she was "hallucinating," she says she remembers details of this fact with clarity.

Last week she told her story in the Venice apartment of attorney Mark Lane, longtime investigator and critic of official assassination conclusions. Lane has claimed repeatedly that both the King murderer and that of President John F. Kennedy were conspiracies.

He is the author of "Rush to Judgment," an assessment of the Warren Commission report on the Kennedy assassination, and "Code Name Zorro," on the murder of Martin Luther King. Both are controversial, as is the author.

Grace Walden talks quietly in a slow Arkansas drawl as she recalls the day of assassination.

She is in the tiny ocean-front apartment of Lane, her attorney and temporary guardian, who rescued her from Tennessee and sheltered her for two months before she moved in with his friends in Orange County. She says:

"It was late in the afternoon and I was lying on the bed with the door open to the hall when I heard the shot.

"Then, in a minute, I saw him. "The man came out of the bathroom next to my room and I had a clear look at him.

"He was short and thin, about 5 feet 4 or 5 feet 5." He had dark hair with some gray in it and a dark complexion. He looked like he was in his 50s or early 50s.

"He carried something long and dark in his right hand. It was about a yard long.

"He was wearing a wind-breaker kind of jacket, tan colored, and a plaid shirt and dark pants. He wore a tan cap like a baseball cap.

"I saw him from the side view. There was nothing prominent about his face that I can remember, but I do remember the strong impression that there was something sort of sneaky about the way he moved.

"I remember all this very clearly because I was so startled by the loud shot. I don't know where it came from but it was so loud it sounded like it came from the wall right next to my room.

James Earl Ray is 5 feet 10, medium build, has a light complexion, dark hair, and was 39 in



ATTORNEY Mark Lane says he has a witness to the Martin Luther King assassination who can identify James Earl Ray. Staff photo by LEO HETZEL

1968. He has a sharp, prominent nose.

Lane says three witnesses have placed Ray at a service station eight blocks from the rooming house at the time the fatal shot was fired at 6:01 p.m.

Several hours after the shot, Grace was taken to the police station and questioned. So was her roommate.

They didn't pay much attention to Grace that night. They didn't pay much attention to her at all until two months later when they took her to a mental hospital. As she tells it:

"Charlie was drunk that afternoon. He was most always drunk on beer. He was drunk when he hit me with the Coke bottle the week before during an argument. "Charlie had tried to get into the bathroom next door but it was locked so he went downstairs to relieve himself just before the shot. (Official reports say this bathroom was locked from the inside from 5 to 6 p.m. April 4, 1968.)

"He told police he seen a man come downstairs after the shot, and I think he described a man. But Charlie couldn't have done that because he couldn't see that well. He didn't have his glasses. They were on the bed."

Lane says Stephens had a reputation as an alcoholic, according to Attorney General Phil Canale, the state's chief prosecution attorney.

Lane says Stephens was reportedly so drunk that afternoon that a cab driver named James McCraw who came to pick him up around 5:55 p.m. said in an affidavit that Stephens "couldn't get up from the bed."

Lane says Stephens initially told police that night "I saw him. It was a nigger." Later, according to Lane, he told them the man he had seen was cab driver McCraw.

Two weeks later he signed a statement identifying James Earl Ray from FBI photos as the man he saw near the stairway and was jailed in protective custody.

Canale said in Memphis Saturday that Stephens' statement was a part of the stipulations included at Ray's hearing.

Canale added: "Both Stephens and Grace Walden were questioned by Memphis police and the FBI at the time of the assassination, and we questioned every witness they questioned.

"However, Grace Walden's written statement to police did not indicate that she saw anything that night. I don't think we questioned her to any extent. I have no independent recollection of her identifying anyone she saw emerging from that bathroom," he said.

Two weeks after the assassination, the FBI identified Ray, and on June 8 Scotland Yard picked him up outside London. The rest of the story about Ray is public record for the most part.