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Section: National Desk

Hidden Evidence Claimed in King Slaying

By KEVIN SACK

The lawyer for James Earl Ray maintained today that a retired F.B.I. agent concealed evidence he collected in the initial search of Mr. Ray's car 30 years ago, and that the long-hidden papers provide verification of Mr. Ray's assertion that he was set up to take the blame for the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Prosecutors in Memphis, where Dr. King was killed on April 4, 1968, quickly cast doubt on the claim. Even if it were true, they said, it would only reinforce the notion that Mr. Ray, who confessed to the killing and later recanted, was at least part of a murder conspiracy.

At a meeting here this morning, Mr. Ray's lawyer, William F. Pepper, asked the Fulton County District Attorney, Paul L. Howard Jr., to open an inquiry into the evidence supposedly hidden by Donald Wilson, a former agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Mr. Ray's abandoned Ford Mustang was found at an Atlanta housing project on April 10, six days after the killing, and Mr. Pepper said Mr. Wilson was involved in the search of the car. Mr. Ray was arrested in London nearly two months later.

At a news conference after the meeting with the District Attorney, Mr. Pepper said Mr. Wilson found an envelope in the car bearing two scraps of

paper. Both pieces of paper, he said, contain the name Raul, and one of them details "a laundry list of payments to other people and other entities." Over the years, Mr. Ray has asserted that a gunrunner whom he knew only as Raul guided his movements before the assassination and then framed him to take the blame for the killing.

"In the course of his examination of the vehicle, he obtained from the car certain documentation," Mr. Pepper said of Mr. Wilson. "That documentation he did not turn over to the field office, but he kept."

Although Mr. Pepper and Mr. Wilson declined to show reporters any documents, Mr. Pepper said the evidence pocketed by Mr. Wilson "indicates quite clearly the existence of the man who James Earl Ray has always said was his controller, his handler."

Mr. Ray, an escaped convict from Missouri, pleaded guilty to Dr. King's assassination in 1969. Three days later he recanted, saying his lawyer had pressed him to plead guilty to avoid the death penalty. He has maintained his innocence ever since.

Last year, with Mr. Ray deteriorating from terminal liver disease, members of Dr. King's family announced that they had been convinced by Mr. Pepper that Mr. Ray was innocent. Dexter Scott King, one of Dr. King's sons, said he had come to accept Mr. Pepper's theory that the assassination was carried out through a vast conspiracy involving agents of the Mafia and the Federal Government, with the knowledge of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The Kings have sought a new trial for Mr. Ray, but that effort has been crippled by legal jousting, discord within Mr. Ray's legal team and the disqualification of a judge. Another problem has been the credibility of Mr. Pepper, whose assertions about some elements of the alleged conspiracy have been disproved by news media investigations.

Mr. Pepper and Mr. Wilson said today that they would have preferred to reveal their evidence in court. But with Mr. Ray's case stalled and with his health continuing to decline, they said they thought it was time to go public.

John Campbell, a Shelby County assistant district attorney in Memphis who has been reinvestigating the case officially, said he had expected a surge in strange assertions about the assassination with the approach of the 30th anniversary.

If Mr. Wilson's revelation does help prove a conspiracy, Mr. Campbell said, "then it also proves that Mr. Pepper's client was part of the conspiracy."

Mr. Campbell said he would issue a report at the end of the week saying he had found no credible evidence to support Mr. Pepper's assertions about the existence of Raul or about Loyd Jowers, a Memphis restaurateur who has said he was paid to have King killed by a man with Mafia connections.

Mr. Wilson, who is now a 55-year-old career management consultant in

Chicago, said little during today's news conference, but did not dispute Mr. Pepper's depiction of his activities. He declined to explain why he confiscated evidence from the car or why he waited three decades to reveal that he had done so.

Mr. Pepper said Mr. Wilson grew disenchanted with the F.B.I. early in his 10-year career with the agency. "He had grave concerns about whether or not the Bureau itself was not going to obstruct justice in this case," Mr. Pepper said.

Mr. Wilson said he hoped to address those issues in a meeting he plans to request with Attorney General Janet Reno. Bert Brandenburg, a Justice Department spokesman, said the Attorney General would not respond to that request until the F.B.I. had examined Mr. Wilson's assertions.

An F.B.I. spokesman, Frank G. Scafidi, said that Mr. Wilson was an agent from 1967 until his resignation in 1977, but that his name "just doesn't appear on anything involving that vehicle, any of the search records, any of the reports of investigative action." He said Mr. Wilson's name did show up in prosecutorial files concerning the investigation of a money order related to the case.

He also said that if Mr. Wilson's assertions were true, the former agent might have obstructed justice. "The way I understand it," Mr. Scafidi said, "that's clearly an obstruction of the investigation and therefore an obstruction of justice."

Mr. Howard, the District Attorney here, said that he agreed to meet with Mr. Pepper and Mr. Wilson at the request of Andrew J. Young, the former Atlanta Mayor and a close colleague of Dr. King who has also questioned Mr. Ray's role.

Mr. Howard said in his statement that his ability to investigate aspects of a Tennessee crime was "tenuous at best." He suggested that the investigation of Mr. Wilson's assertions should be handled by the Justice Department.

Coretta Scott King, the widow of Dr. King, also urged investigations by the Justice Department and by prosecutors in Memphis. "This is compelling evidence that further strengthens Mr. Ray's appeal for the trial he never had," she said.

Organizations mentioned in this article:

Federal Bureau of Investigation

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