

ST. LOUIS POST-

This appears to be early (SFAR) edition

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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1978

DISPATCH

FINAL

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498 PAGES

60¢

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Panel Focuses On South St. Louis As Scene Of Plot To Kill Dr. King

WASHINGTON — The House Assassinations Committee is focusing on a small group of south St. Louis segregationists — most of them now dead — in its investigation of the murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, committee sources say.

Committee investigators say the group may have been the link between James Earl Ray, who pleaded guilty of the murder, and a St. Louis lawyer who may have wanted King killed.

Committee sources say they consider this avenue of investigation the most promising explanation of a conspiracy theory in the assassination of the civil rights leader in Memphis in April 1968. But they acknowledge that thus far they have little hard evidence to prove it.

The theory revolves around St. Louis members of the Citizens Council and the George Wallace for President campaign of 1968. Investigators have learned that members of those groups lived and worked in the vicinity of the former Grapevine Tavern in the 1900 block of Arsenal Street. The tavern, which went out of business in December 1968, was operated by John Larry May, a brother of James Earl Ray.

Investigators believe that John H. Sutherland, a St. Louis patent lawyer

This article was prepared by William Freivogel, Gerald M. Boyd and Louis J. Rose of the Post-Dispatch Staff.

and segregationist, contacted a south St. Louis man involved with him in several right-wing groups conveying a money offer for King's murder. At the time the man was canvassing businesses in the neighborhood of the Grapevine for the Wallace campaign.

The committee's theory is that the man could have mentioned the offer to John Larry Ray, who could have passed it on to his brother. John Larry Ray denied to the Post-Dispatch that any such proposal was made. Sutherland and the other man are dead.

Gordon Baum, of St. Louis, field director of the Citizens Council, has been subpoenaed to testify before the committee, and sources said other subpoenas are likely.

Baum, who was active in the work of the council and the Wallace campaign in 1968, confirmed in an interview that the committee appears to be scrutinizing persons who were connected with both groups in that period.

He accused the committee of "a systematic purge of right-wing groups in St. Louis."

The committee has held hearings on the King assassination and plans to continue them in November. The panel has heard testimony from Russell G. Byers of Rock Hill that Sutherland and another man offered him \$50,000 in 1967 to arrange for King's murder. Byers said he turned down the offer.

Investigators believe that Sutherland then contacted his acquaintance with the Wallace campaign, who was canvassing around the Grapevine.

The committee also has learned that a woman who was a top official of the Citizens Council and the Wallace campaign lived in the 2100 block of Arsenal Street, within 100 yards of the Grapevine.

The woman, who also is dead, often had planning meetings of the two groups at her home. The Wallace canvasser was a good friend of hers and together the two shouldered most of the responsibilities of the Wallace state headquarters. The woman generally ran the office, near Gravois Avenue and Morganford Road, in the day and the man ran it at night.