

Probers Find a Lead in Plot

N.Y. Times News Service

St. Louis — A 46-year-old man has told the House Select Committee on Assassinations that late in 1966 or early 1967 he turned down an offer of \$50,000 to arrange the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Russell G. Byers, a former auto parts dealer, acknowledged in an interview that he had told the committee that two men from Imperial, Mo., had offered him the money on behalf of a group of businessmen. Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis.

Both men have since died, but their wives said that they did not believe the story.

The inquiry into Dr. King's death has intensified, largely because at the alleged time of the offer, Byers' brother-in-law, John Spica, was serving a murder term in the Missouri State Penitentiary, where James Earl Ray, later convicted of killing Dr. King, was also a prisoner.

Although no evidence has been produced to corroborate the Byers story, this is the first allegation that leads into the Missouri prison, where it was widely rumored in 1966 and 1967 that a conserva-

to Kill King

tive business group was willing to pay a large bounty on Dr. King's life.

The committee plans to administer a lie-detector test to Ray as a result of the Byers report.

Byers told the New York Times that he had not informed Spica about the offer, but he said he had suspected that word of a bounty on Dr. King's life might have reached men inside the prison through other routes.

A three-month probe by the committee and an independent inquiry by a team of reporters for the Times have uncovered a series of circumstantial

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connections leading from Byers and the two men into the state penitentiary from which Ray escaped on April 23, 1967, almost a year before the shooting.

Ray is serving a 99-year prison term for pleading guilty to the murder, but he recently has denied that he fired the fatal shot.

Byers said he had been so "shocked and surprised" by the offer that after Dr. King was shot, he told several people about it, including an FBI informant who then handed details to the bureau.

The FBI, he said, never followed up on his report. FBI spokesman Homer Boynton would not comment specifically, except to say that "certain information" concerning the assassination of Dr. King was provided to the bureau's St. Louis office in 1973.

Spica, who was released on parole in 1973, now operates a fruit stand in St. Louis. When two Times reporters approached him at his store, Spica threatened: "I'll blow your head off."

According to what Byers told the committee, a friend and business associate, John R. Kauffmann, invited him to a meeting in 1966 with St. Louis patent lawyer John H. Sutherland, who then made the \$50,000 murder offer.

Sutherland, who died in 1970, had been a member of Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace's American Independent party, a leader of the White Citizens Council of St. Louis and an official in the Southern States Industrial Council, which strongly opposed civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

Kauffmann and Sutherland shared in the ownership of a small water

company in Imperial.

Byers said that Kauffmann had not been involved in racial politics. "His orientation was money," he said, suggesting that Kauffmann acted only as a go-between in this matter.

In 1967, Kauffmann was convicted on charges that he sold 100,000 amphetamine capsules to a federal narcotics agent and served a brief sentence at the federal medical facility at Springfield, Ill.

His widow, Beulah G. Kauffmann, said in an interview that she heard of the plot when House investigators came to her home in May, but she said it was "absolutely impossible" that her husband could have been involved.

She also said that on at least one occasion in 1966, Spica came to visit her husband with Byers. She said she remembered the incident because Spica made a rude remark about the difference between her age and that of her husband.

If Mrs. Kauffmann's memory is



James Earl Ray

... wants to shift blame

correct, Spica was able to make an out-of-prison social visit while serving a life sentence for murder. She said convicts had told her that Spica was able to take "furloughs" on holidays.

Although no solid connections have been found between possible outside conspirators and inmates, House investigators have found that Spica and Ray worked together in the prison's food service section at one time.

But records also show that when Ray escaped, Spica was assigned to the maintenance department.

But investigators presently are studying the complicated connections between Spica and the Ray family, hoping to find a link between outsiders Sutherland and Kauffmann and inmates Spica and Ray.

Their attention centers on the Grapevine Tavern, a small neighborhood bar in South St. Louis, Mo., on which Carol Pepper, Ray's sister, held the license between November 1967 and December 1968.

In 1968, tavern employe Neoma Regazzi introduced John L. Ray and Jerry Ray, James Earl Ray's brothers, to her former husband, Robert Regazzi, a St. Charles, Mo., seafood business operator.

In an interview, Regazzi said he met John Spica years earlier when both men were in the St. Louis County jail at Clayton, Mo. But he said that he had never heard from any source that a \$50,000 bounty had been offered to kill Dr. King.

Thus, House investigators are pursuing the casual links between the persons who allegedly made the proposal to Byers and the then-imprisoned James Earl Ray.

One possible tie to the prison is suggested in Sutherland's probate records in the Jefferson County, Mo., courthouse. An assassinations panel note attached to the records reads: "Do not destroy this file — may be subpoenaed by Congressional Committee."

Sutherland, the man alleged to have made the murder proposal, died eight years ago of a heart attack, leaving an estate valued at several hundred thousand dollars.

Sutherland's widow, Anna Lee Sutherland, declined to be interviewed, saying through her attorney that she was cooperating with the House investigation.

She reportedly told committee staff members that she had never heard of the alleged plot and that it was impossible that her husband could have been involved.

One of Sutherland's former law partners, Philip B. Polster, said that Sutherland was a conservative on race but that his personality was not of such a "violent" nature.