

Tells Panel of \$50,000 Offer

Slaying

Man Says He Rejected Setting Up King

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ST. LOUIS — A 46-year-old man here 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 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 to kill the civil rights leader, who was assassinated April 4, 1968.

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

The account has spurred an intense inquiry by investigators for the committee, largely because Byers' brother-in-law, John Spica, was serving a murder term at the time of the alleged offer in the Missouri State Penitentiary where James Earl Ray, later convicted of killing King, was also a prisoner. The committee plans to administer a lie-detector test to Ray as a result of the Byers report.

BYERS SAID HE had rejected the proposal and had not informed Spica about it. But he said he had suspected that word of a bounty on King's life might have reached men inside the prison through other routes.

A three-month investigation by the House committee and an independent inquiry by a team of reporters have uncovered a series of circumstantial connections leading from Byers and the two men from Imperial into the state penitentiary, from which Ray escaped April 23, 1967, almost a year before the fatal shooting of King in Memphis, Tenn.

Ray is serving a 99-year prison term in Tennessee for the murder of King. Ray, who pleaded guilty to the murder, has more recently denied he fired the fatal shot and has repeatedly requested a new trial, which he maintains would place the blame on others.

Although no evidence has yet been produced that establishes a direct link between the alleged proposal to Byers and the death of King, this is the first of many conspiracy allegations that leads directly into the Mis-



JAMES EARL RAY

souri prison. At the prison, it was widely rumored in 1966 and 1967 that a conservative business group was willing to pay a large sum of money to anyone who would murder King.

HOUSE INVESTIGATORS are reported to regard this trail of evidence as one of the most tangible avenues of inquiry in their explorations into the deaths of King and President John F. Kennedy.

The investigators have declined to comment on the allegations of Byers, but it is clear, from interviews with some of the persons that they have questioned, and from some of the public records that they are known to have checked, that they are trying to determine whether the information adds up to a true conspiracy, or whether they have merely come across a chain of casual acquaintanceships in a criminal setting.

Byers, who has been granted immunity from prosecution in this case and has testified under oath in Washington, said he could give no reason why the two men from Imperial should have presented him with such an offer. He has given no documentary corroboration for his allegation, but acknowledged in an interview that 10 years ago he had told others about the alleged plot.

HE SAID HE HAD been so "shocked and surprised" by the offer that after King was shot he told two lawyers and other unnamed persons about it.

One of those he told, he said, was an informer for the FBI and he said that the bureau had been given the details of the matter. Byers said the FBI had never followed up on his report nor had anyone in the bureau talked to him about it. He said he suspected that the FBI would now be "embarrassed" by its failure to investigate the matter fully.

The FBI's chief spokesman, Homer Boynton, yesterday would not comment specifically on the allegations except to say, without identifying any of the parties involved, that "certain information" concerning the assassination of King was provided to the bureau's St. Louis office in 1973.

A bureau source, however, said that the agents who received the information had simply filed it under the name of the informer and under the name of Byers, had never made it a part of the assassination case file and had never questioned Byers about it. "It just sat there for the past five years," he said.

BOYNTON SAID THE information came to light in March of this year when the files in St. Louis were being reviewed in connection with a separate matter. "It was forwarded to FBI headquarters and to the Department of Justice for transmittal to the House Select Committee," he said.

He said the information was "limited in nature," and that, because of the way it had been filed in St. Louis, "it was not retrievable to anyone requesting information about Martin Luther King."

House investigators have been looking into the question of whether a plot was concocted to help Ray escape and to finance his stalking of King in the months that followed.

House investigators have also been trying to determine whether Byers transmitted the offer to his brother-in-law, Spica, who in 1967 was serving a life sentence at the prison following his conviction in the contract killing in 1963 of a wealthy St. Louis real estate man.

SPICA REPORTEDLY occupied a cell near Ray — it was six cells away — and at one point worked with Ray in the prison bakery.

Byers said in an interview that he

had not told Spica about the \$50,000 bounty until "just a little while ago" and that there was no record of his visiting Spica in prison prior to King's death.

Spica, who was released on parole in 1973, now operates a fruit stand here. When two reporters attempted to interview him about the matter, Spica threatened "I'll blow your head off" if they did not leave his store. He angrily declined to answer any questions.

According to what Byers told the House committee, a friend and business associate, John R. Kauffmann, who was 61 years old in 1966, invited him to a meeting with John H. Sutherland, a prominent St. Louis patent lawyer. At the meeting, he said, Sutherland told him that a group of businessmen would pay \$50,000 for the murder of King.

THE WIDOWS OF BOTH Kauffmann and Sutherland said that they knew nothing about the alleged plot until they were questioned by House investigators this year. They also said that they did not believe that their husbands could have been involved in such a plot.

Sutherland, who died in 1970, had been a member of Gov. George C. Wallace's American Independent Party, a leader of the White Citizens Council of St. Louis and an official of the Southern States Industrial Council, a conservative group. One legal colleague said Sutherland had been a segregationist but not a "violent man."

Kauffmann and Sutherland were associated in the ownership of a small water company in Imperial and lived near each other in that small, semi-rural community.

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

HOUSE INVESTIGATORS are pursuing a number of leads that suggest at least casual links between the persons who allegedly made the proposal to Byers and James Earl Ray.