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Judge Knew Of Plot

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WASHINGTON — A St. Louis judge, Murry L. Randall, knew about a possible conspiracy to murder the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as long ago as 1968, the year the civil rights leader was assassinated, the News has learned.

Randall, a judge of the St. Louis Court of Criminal Correction since 1974, was in private law practice in 1968 when a client, Russell G. Byers, told Randall after King's assassination that he had been offered \$50,000 to kill King.

Byers told Randall that he thought he might be questioned about the offer by the FBI or a grand jury, and he sought Randall's legal advice on what to do.

But Byers apparently was never officially questioned, and the incident did not come up again until 1974, when Byers mentioned it again to Randall, who apparently had kept the information confidential throughout the

entire federal investigation of the King assassination.

Randall and Byers are expected to testify today or tomorrow before the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which is winding up its investigation of the King murder. Randall was not available for comment yesterday. A secretary said that he had left

his St. Louis office for the day. He could not be reached at home.

Committee sources say Randall maintained that he never took the statements by Byers seriously.

Even if Randall gave credence to the information, however, he might have felt that his attorney-client relationship with Byers

required him to keep the information secret.

Byers, a Rock Hill police character and a former auto parts dealer, has told committee investigators that he was approached in either 1966 or 1967 by John H. Sutherland, a leader of the White Citizens Council of St. Louis, and asked to find a gunman who

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would murder King for \$50,000.

Besides Byers and Randall, the committee hopes to question the brothers and sister of James Earl Ray, the convicted assassin of the Rev. Dr. King. They are Jerry and John Ray and Carol Pepper.

John Ray was jailed in St. Louis yesterday for disorderly conduct. Federal marshals in St. Louis said that they intended to deliver him to Washington to comply with a subpoena by the committee.

A Clayton lawyer, Lawrence N. Weenick, also has been called to testify about a possible conspiracy to kill King. Weenick who reportedly represented Byers at one time, was also told of the possible conspiracy, the News learned.

On Monday, the Assassinations Commit-

tee sharply criticized the FBI for failing to pursue what role, if any, Ray's St. Louis relatives played in his plan to murder King.

A 106-page staff report for the committee said that the FBI was so busy trying to capture Ray that it ignored the possibility of a conspiracy. The report said that the bureau failed to act on evidence, including Sutherland's \$50,000 offer for King's death, that may have indicated other participants in the crime.

The report says:

"Given the significant amount of direct and circumstantial evidence received by the FBI during the months following the assassination . . . that strongly suggested more contact among the brothers than any was willing to admit, the failure to pursue this area more aggressively constitutes a serious defect in the overall investigative effort."

The committee is expected to conclude

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that Sutherland, a right-wing St. Louis lawyer, probably did offer \$50,000 on behalf of a "secret Southern organization" to have King murdered, committee sources say.

The offer may have been made to John Larry Ray by south St. Louisans active with the lawyer in the 1968 presidential campaign of Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama. The Wallace campaigners frequented a South St. Louis tavern, The Grapevine. The tavern was run by John Ray.

Byers is expected to tell the committee that Sutherland offered him \$50,000 to kill King on behalf of a "secret Southern organization . . . with plenty of money."

To support Byers' claim, the committee intends to disclose that a former law enforcement agent has testified that he heard a group of petty thieves in Jefferson County, Mo., say that a friend of Sutherland, John R. Kauffmann, was offering money to have

King killed. Kauffmann is the man who Byers says took him to Sutherland's home in 1966 or 1967 to hear the offer to kill King.

Both Kauffmann and Sutherland are now dead.

The law enforcement agent, whose name will not be disclosed, said that he told the Jefferson County sheriff's office about the assassination talk before King was killed in April 1968.

This is the first evidence that a law enforcement agency knew about a plot to kill King before the assassination.

The committee's staff report says that circumstantial evidence suggests that the mysterious "Raoul," whom Ray has repeatedly identified as the mastermind of the scheme, was in fact Ray's brother Jerry.

It criticizes the FBI for not investigating that possibility, when there seemed to be ample evidence to support it.