

Ex-convict brands story of

Compiled from wire reports

A St. Louis man who was in prison with James Earl Ray shortly before the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. denies claims that his brother-in-law was offered \$50,000 to kill King.

An contract offer allegedly made to John Paul Spica's brother-in-law, however, was investigated by the House Select Committee on Assassinations because of "circumstantial connections" leading to the Missouri State Penitentiary, where Ray was incarcerated in 1967,

the New York Times has reported.

In an interview Wednesday with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Spica said he knew nothing of the matter and called his brother-in-law "a liar."

The Times also reported today that the FBI waited five years to check the reported plot to kill King because of an "administrative error" in the handling of the information.

The report was transmitted to the FBI's St. Louis office by an informer in 1973, five years after King's death, the

Times said, but it lay unnoticed in the agency's files until discovered a few months ago.

Spica and Ray shared the same cell block and for a short time worked together in the bakery at the prison in Jefferson City, records there show.

Spica's brother-in-law, Russell G. Byers, told the Times he turned down the \$50,000 offer "in late 1966 or early 1967" to kill King.

Spica, who was paroled in 1973, was serving a life sentence for murder. Ray

King contract offer as false

escaped in April 1967 and later pleaded guilty to King's April 4, 1968, slaying.

The Times story said Byers had told the House committee that two men from Imperial, Mo., had offered him the money on behalf of a group of conservative businessmen to kill King.

Byers could not be reached for additional comment Wednesday.

"Byers is a liar," Spica told the Post-Dispatch from his fruit stand here.

"The investigators in Washington know all about Byers' story and they

have checked it out and they know there's no truth in it," he added. "At no time did I ever convey an offer of \$50,000 to James Earl Ray to kill Martin Luther King Jr.," Spica said.

Ray, serving a 99-year prison term in Tennessee, is seeking a new trial.

The Times quoted Homer Boynton, chief FBI spokesman, as saying the agency's failure to act immediately came about because an unidentified St. Louis agent prepared a report and filed it rather than following regulations and

forwarding of information to agents working the case.

The report was found about four months ago when an FBI agent checked the file on Byers, who had been implicated in the theft of a statue from a St. Louis museum, the newspaper said.

The Times said the delay in following up the report was crucial because the second of the two men said to have made the \$50,000 offer died in 1974, a year after information on the alleged plot was received. The first died in 1970.