

Ray ends testimony

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'Alibi witness' recants account

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WASHINGTON — A former psychiatric patient sheepishly recanted the astonishing eyewitness story Friday that had made him James Earl Ray's "decisive alibi witness" in the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King.

The only presumed corroboration of the confessed assassin's claim to be in a

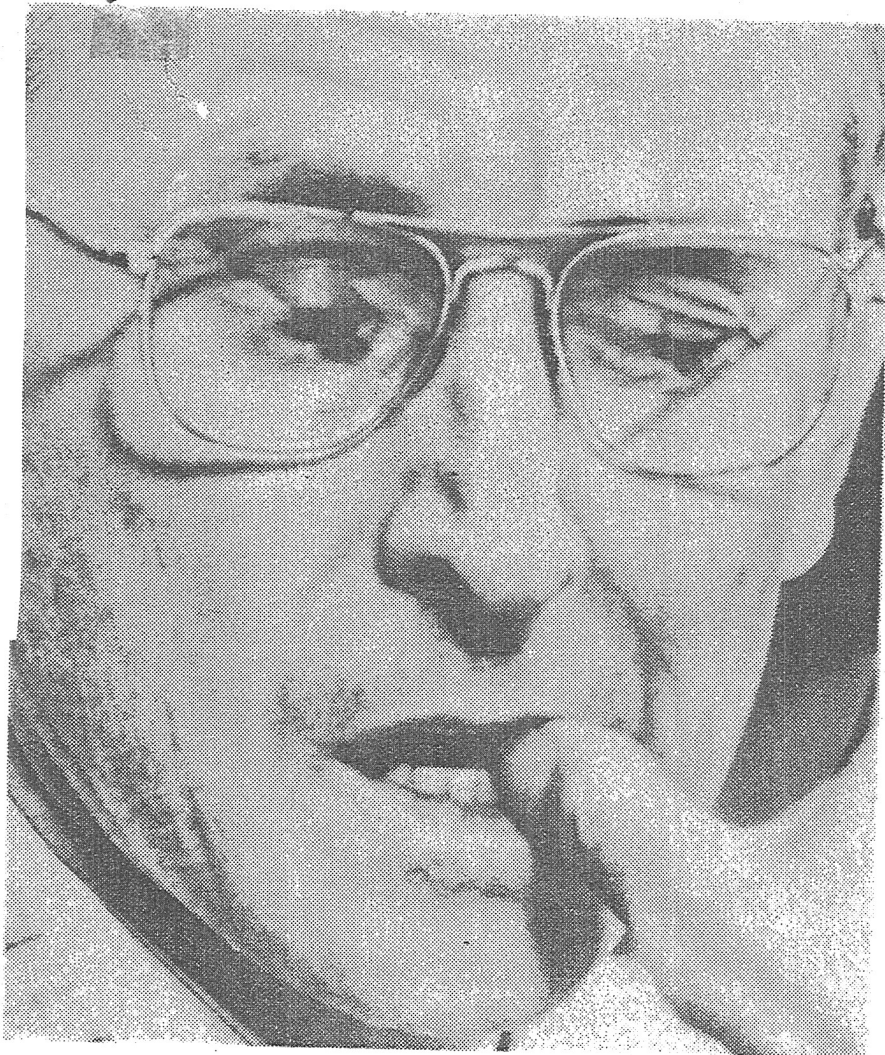
Memphis, Tenn., service station at the time of the shooting fell apart as commodities broker Dean Cowden admitted he lied about seeing Ray there.

In an embarrassed and frequently amusing appearance before the House Select Committee on Assassinations, Cowden confessed he could not have seen Ray at the Texaco station because he was in Port Neches, Tex., at the time

of the April 4, 1968, slaying in Memphis.

"The story is completely false," the panel was told by Cowden, who had been described by Ray lawyer Mark Lane as the "decisive alibi witness" establishing the assassin was not in the vicinity of King when he was shot. He

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James Earl Ray chews his finger during testimony

— AP photo

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said a friend had concocted the tale for money.

Before ending three days of testimony from Ray, who has recanted his 1969 guilty plea to the murder, and other witnesses, the committee also introduced a London police officer's statement that Ray admitted killing King after he was captured there.

Lane immediately protested the statement as "outrageous" and panel members emphasized they were not vouching for the veracity of the evidence, which Ray called "the most damning statement every made against me" regarding the slaying. The committee then dismissed Ray until public hearings resume in November on the King case.

In three days of hearings that have seen Ray's claim to have been framed in the killing virtually torn apart, little could have been more damaging than Cowden's testimony. Ray claims he could not have been at the seedy rooming house near King's Lorraine Motel because he was fixing a flat tire at the service station.

Lane, who quoted Cowden extensively in his book, "Code Name: Zorro," which contended the FBI killed King instead of Ray, had mentioned the unemployed broker this week as one per-

son who could authenticate Ray's story of innocence. Ray is serving a 99-year prison term.

"I think he fell for it hook, line and sinker," said Cowden, who acknowledged taking psychiatric treatment in Memphis. He said Lane did not press him hard for details of his assertions, which would have revealed he was more than 400 miles away from Memphis on April 4, 1968.

After Rep. Robert Edgar (D.-Pa) admonished Cowden of perjury penalties for his false testimony, the Memphis man testified a friend of his, Renfro Hays, cooked up the story in hopes of selling it to a publisher or film maker. While he never received any money, Cowden said both Lane and the National Enquirer published his account.

Cowden said he made statements about the matter out of a sense of obligation to Hays, a former investigator for one of Ray's attorneys, who Cowden said fed and housed him for four months while he was unemployed. He explained that Hays came up with the idea in late 1974 and they began trying to "market" the story.

Finally Lane, a consistent revisionist of the King case toward a more conspiratorial line, learned of the new "evidence" and made it the centerpiece of

his new book. Edgar asked about Cowden's dealings with Lane.

Q — "Did you tell the truth to Mark Lane?"

A — "No."

Q — "Then is it safe to say those portions of the book are all false?"

A — "Exactly."

"Renfro said, 'If I make a million dollars I'll always take care of you,'" Cowden said. "But I never had any faith he would make any money out of it."

Cowden said Hays apparently tried to come up with a second eyewitness so the story would have solid corroboration, and later testimony indicated he found one in Thomas I. Wilson, a former Memphis resident who is now deceased.

But a friend of Wilson's, Harvey Locke of Little Rock, gave committee investigators a sworn statement that Wilson, also a friend of Hays', had been with him in his shoe repair shop at the time of the assassination.

The damaging claim of Ray's alleged confession was obtained two weeks ago from Alexander Anthony Eist, a retired English policeman who now runs a bar

Eist, who guarded Ray in his cell during the weeks the confessed assassin was awaiting extradition to the United States, claimed Ray boasted of his actions and wanted to get to Africa "so he

could kill some more blacks."

"During the course of the conversation he definitely — he didn't actually come out with it, but it was there in the conversation — that he had done it. He was quite proud of it," read the key passage in Eist's statement.

The former policeman said Ray did not seem worried about his culpability in the shooting because Ray believed "they couldn't actually prove that he fired the gun because according to him, nobody saw him do it."

Authorities believe Ray fired the shot from a second-floor bathroom window of the boarding house, just across an open area from the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, where King fell. Only one witness, an acknowledged alcoholic named Charley Stevens, said he caught a fleeting glance of Ray as he left the building and escaped.

Ray, who reacted calmly to the statement from Eist, immediately denied he had confessed to the shooting. "I never discussed the case with any English policemen as far as I know," Ray said. Lane attacked the committee for introducing the statement without checking into the background of Eist, who Lane claimed had been kicked out of the force for fabricating evidence and other illegal acts.