

Thrust Into Spotlight

R.I. campus crime lab drawn into Ray case

By Michael Dorman

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

South Kingstown, R.I. — On the bucolic University of Rhode Island campus — where a 19th-Century farmhouse endures, where cattle graze in verdant pastures and aging white clapboard fraternity houses stand beside modern stone research labs — observers were saying yesterday that it was the biggest thing to hit town since Ernie Calverley's 1946 basketball shot heard 'round the world.

Students, faculty members, administrators and townsfolk, even on the university's graduation day, were talking about how the murder case against James Earl Ray in the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had descended on this unsuspecting college town. The university's crime laboratory has been the scene of ballistics tests intended to determine whether a rifle owned by Ray and bearing his fingerprint fired the bullet that killed King.

Ballistics experts from Rhode Island, Long Island and Connecticut, prosecutors, defense lawyers and law enforcement officers from Tennessee and reporters and photographers from across the country swarmed into town for the tests. Bystanders counted 17 television cameras and close to 50 reporters; nobody knew how many TV satellite transmitting dishes were there. URI, as the university is known locally, had become front-page national news in the most improbable way. The commotion tied up traffic and riveted attention on a murder case that, for most, had long seemed dis-

tant in miles and years.

"The college was under siege for a week," said one campus official, Dave Lavalley. "It's definitely the biggest deal here since Ernie Calverley's shot."

Fifty-one years ago, Calverley heaved a basketball 62 feet right through the basket at the final buzzer to move the University of Rhode Island toward to the finals of the National Invitation Tournament at Madison Square Garden. Pandemonium erupted on the campus and lasted for days — muted only slightly when the university lost the championship to Ken-

tucky. Madison Square Garden officials painted an X on the court that marked the spot of Calverley's shot until the old Garden was razed three decades ago. The story of the three-quarter-court shot became part of the university folklore.

The manner in which the Ray case came to the University of Rhode Island was, at the least, curious. Nine months ago, a man named William Pepper walked unannounced into the campus crime laborato-

ry and asked for criminalist Robert Hathaway, a firearms expert. Pepper told Hathaway that he was a lawyer from London looking for a ballistics expert and that he had heard Hathaway and the 48-year-old lab had excellent credentials. Pepper did not tell Hathaway that he was James Earl Ray's lawyer.

"Would you be interested in working on a high-profile case?" Pepper asked, withholding the name of his client.

"No," Hathaway replied, offering Pepper a list of other experts.

"I don't want anyone else," Pepper said. "I want you."

Eventually, Hathaway agreed to take the case — with the condition that he could assemble a team of experts. He chose George Reich of the Suffolk County crime lab and Marshall Robinson of the Waterbury, Conn., police department.

As the ballistics experts and others involved in the tests prepared to leave the crime lab Friday for test firings of Ray's rifle, John Campbell — the chief prosecutor in the Ray case — picked up a waterproof firefighter's coat and said: "This is the most important piece of equipment

here." It soon became clear why.

The group trooped to an old house nearby. A back door to a scruffy garage was swung open. Inside was a 900-gallon water tank. Robinson donned the firefighter's coat and picked up Ray's .30-06 Remington Gamemaster rifle. The stock and grip are made of walnut. A scope is attached to the rifle. An old evidence sticker bearing FBI markings is visible.

Robinson, wearing ear protectors, stuck the barrel of

American Scene

Kingston, RI



George Reich

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the rifle into a sleeve of the water tank. He fired, and there was a thunderous boom. Water splashed everywhere. Later, Robinson fired five more times — concluding the firing of 18 test bullets since Thursday.

Most of those involved in the evidence testing left during the weekend for further tests at a Pennsylvania lab. The campus turned its attention to graduation ceremonies. A blue and white banner — bearing a drawing of a diploma and the message “Congratulations, Grads” — hung across Upper College Road. Elie Wiesel delivered the commencement address as about 2,000 seniors and 700 graduate students received degrees in the university’s 111th commencement since its founding as an agricultural school.

But many in town were still talking about the case.

Jessica Thornton, 22, said: “I’ve been really interested. I saw the story on TV and went down to the crime lab to try to see the tests. They wouldn’t let me in. Still, I’m fascinated by the whole thing. It’s part of history.”

Town resident Cindy Fourhman, a nurse, said: “I’ve been following the crime-lab story very closely.” She added, “I can’t figure why it’s taken them so long to do these tests. I’ll be watching to see the results.”

URI President Robert Carothers confessed mixed feelings about the Ray case’s arrival on his campus. “In some ways, there’s a sense of pride that our lab and experts were picked,” he said. “We’re pleased to be a part of history. But then the community has to deal with all these big television trucks and satellite dishes. Watching it all, though, I sort of wished it had taken place a week earlier . . . It would have been a wonderful opportunity to teach all the students about Martin Luther King and the civil-rights movement.”