

Ray doesn't need a trial to talk



E.R. SHIPP

CALL it James Earl Ray's last con job. Ray has persuaded a family that has never recovered from the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to join him in a

bid to win a new trial in Tennessee.

In the process of using Coretta Scott King and her children to legitimize his latest demand to reopen the case, he obviously hopes his newfound prominence will persuade someone to donate a liver to him. It is his terminal liver disease that, in the eyes of the Kings and others in the civil rights community, has given urgency to Ray's latest effort to persuade Tennessee authorities to grant him the trial he chose to forgo in 1969.

Ray is, by his own admission, the man who killed King, the 39-year-old leader of this century's American civil rights revolution. At the time he was gunned down on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, King was in Memphis to lend support to striking sanitation workers.

In the book "The Making of an Assassin: The Life of James Earl Ray," the author, George McMillan, recounted a conversation with Jerry Ray, who claimed that his brother had called from Memphis on April 4, 1968 — the day King was killed — to say that he planned "to get the big nigger."

In pleading guilty, Ray admitted buying the hunting rifle that was found at the scene of the assassination and that bore his fingerprints. Law enforcement authorities have said it was the murder weapon; and after an exhaustive investigation two decades ago, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that Ray, with perhaps the help of family members, was most likely the killer.

There are for sure lots of unanswered — and probably unanswerable — ques-



JIM WILLIS DAILY NEWS

tions about King's murder. How, we ask, could a two-bit criminal like Ray commit such a history-altering act all by himself? And how did Ray escape to Europe before eventually being apprehended and sent to prison for 99 years?

Through the years many people have more than casually wondered about a possible connection between King's civil rights and anti-war protests and J. Edgar Hoover's obsession with destroying both movements through his Cointelpro operations.

Feeding their suspicions, Ray has long insisted that King's death resulted from an elaborate conspiracy by persons unnamed. He says he is an innocent who was duped by some mysterious guy named Raoul, who instructed him to buy the rifle.

Now Ray is seeking new tests on the rifle as a prelude to taking back his guilty plea and going to trial. After a hearing in Memphis yesterday, a judge recommended the gun tests.

But as a Tennessee prosecutor told reporters yesterday, "There might have been other people involved; but to say because others were involved Ray should

be released from jail is just nuts."

Just as some conspiracy buffs believe the mob or Fidel Castro, rather than Lee Harvey Oswald, assassinated President John F. Kennedy, others are buying Ray's claim of being a small fish in a big scheme.

Dexter King, who with his mother, Coretta, attended Ray's hearing yesterday, has said that the family decided to "confront the inevitable with the terminal illness of Mr. Ray: It's now or never." Through a trial, he said, "a lot of information will be shared that not only will vindicate Mr. Ray, but point to others."

Coretta King, testifying on Ray's behalf, said, "A trial for Mr. Ray is our last hope to reveal the truth about my husband's assassination and bring about at least some sense of closure to the pain we have endured."

I think the King family and others in the civil rights community are grasping at straws.

If Ray, who at 68 has already lived nearly 30 years longer than he permitted King, really wants to clear his conscience, he doesn't need a new trial. He just has to talk. Believe me, the world will listen.