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The \$7,000 Question: Where Did Ray Get The Money?

By Priscilla Johnson McMillan

Where did he get the money? During the decades since James Earl Ray first renounced his guilty plea and demanded a trial, conspiracy theorists and others have contended that there was no way a habitual felon who had served a succession of prison terms for bank robbery could have saved the money it cost him to stalk Martin Luther King Jr. during the spring of 1968, escape the murder scene in Memphis, travel by bus to Canada and by air to England and Portugal and back to England, and live in London until his arrest at Heathrow airport on June 8, 1968.

The implication is that someone else must have financed Ray's activities. But in fact, Ray had accumulated the money he needed on his own.

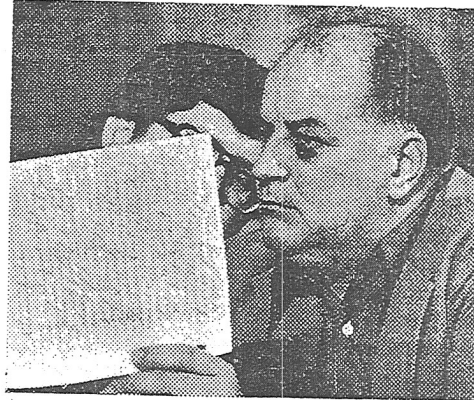
I learned about the events surrounding King's assassination when my late husband, George McMillan, was writing a book about Ray. George spent hundreds of hours with Ray's father, George "Speedy" Raynes, his brothers, Jerry and John Larry, and his sister, Carol Ray Pepper. Through interviews with the Rays and three men who had served time with Ray in prison, my husband pieced together the story of how Ray acquired his funds and explained it in his book, "The Making of an Assassin: The Life of James Earl Ray," published in 1976.

Ray had become a successful prison entrepreneur during a seven-year stay in the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. He first ran a



FILE PHOTOS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Ray brothers Jerry, above, and John Larry, at the hearings in 1978. The committee said they aided James while he plotted to kill King. In later years, Jerry Ray put forth conflicting stories about who killed King.



library in his cell, renting books for cash and cigarettes. He made beer in his mattress cover and peddled eggs for a dollar a dozen, \$30 a crate.

In 1963, he became friendly with a guard on his cellblock who smuggled in drugs, mostly speed, known as "splash," which Ray sold to fellow prisoners. After skimming his share, the guard mailed the remainder in \$100 bills to Ray's brothers and sister. When Jerry got his money, he would write "OK" on a piece of paper and mail it back.

Ray escaped from the prison in a bread truck on April 23, 1967. Shortly after, the Ray brothers met at the Atlantic Hotel in Chicago—the first time in 20 years that all three had been out of prison at the same time. Jerry handed James eight \$100 bills and John gave him \$3,800. His sister later gave him money she withdrew from a bank account after his escape.

After Ray was arrested in London and brought to Memphis, county prosecutor Philip Canale estimated he had \$7,000 available to him from the time of his jail break until he was arrested for murdering King.

By following Ray's path for those 14 months, George McMillan figured his expenses—in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Birmingham, Atlanta, Toronto, Lisbon and London—at \$6,800. Running out of cash, Ray robbed the Fulham Branch of the Trustees Savings Bank in London on June 4, taking away about 100 pounds, or \$240. At the time of his capture on June 8, he was carrying \$123.54 in cash.

During the brothers' meeting in Chicago, they discussed the future of "Jimmy," whom the family had long before singled out as the smartest and most likely to succeed. They considered kidnapping a public figure for whom there would be a big reward, maybe the governor of Illinois or a well-known sports broadcaster. Jimmy said the three should get false passports in Canada and that he eventually wanted to go to the white-ruled nation of Rhodesia. In the end they decided to go into the "porno business" because it was legal. But the brothers weren't sure how hard Jimmy was willing to work at it, as he seemed to be preoccupied with another job. Before they got down to pooling their money that day, Jimmy announced, "I'm going to kill that nigger King. That's something I've been working on."

Indeed, he had been working on it. In 1963 and '64, King was appearing on television almost daily. As Ray watched in his cellblock, fellow prisoner Raymond Curtis recalled, his face would tense. "Somebody's gotta get him," he would say, clenching his fists.

Ray took it hard when President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, but not in the way most

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people did. "He stood up and got angry," Curtis said. "He said he had two plots to kill Kennedy himself." After that he would sit on his bed, high on speed, and analyze the mistakes that led to Oswald's capture.

When rumors swept the prison that a group of businessmen in Mississippi had put up a \$100,000 bounty on King, Ray would address an imaginary King in Curtis's presence. "You are my big one," Curtis remembers Ray saying. "One day I will collect all that money on your ass, nigger, for you are my retirement plan."

But as the months passed, Ray seemed to forget the money. He would simply say, "If I ever get to the streets I am going to kill him." He and Curtis talked endlessly about how to pull off the murder and escape to a foreign country. As my husband summarized Ray's thinking: "If there was a bounty for King, and he had passed the stage of caring whether there was or not, he would wait until after the job was done to collect it."

In its 1979 report, the House Select Committee on Assassinations said that if a conspiracy existed, it likely involved members of Ray's family. From the outset, George told the Rays that he believed James was the assassin. At first they were enraged. But they talked to him anyway. Many a night the telephone rang about 10; it would be Jerry Ray or Carol Pepper in St. Louis, wanting to talk with George and often reversing the charges. Sometimes Jerry grew abusive. He would recant what he had confided to George earlier and say that he had only been stringing him along. Over time, however, Jerry grew so attached to George that he offered to come live with us, "to mix drinks and drive" us around.

(Just after the book was published, Jerry wrote to The Washington Post calling it "fiction." James filed a libel suit based on excerpts which ran in Time magazine; the suit was thrown out of court.)

One day, when he had flown to Missouri to interview Speedy Ray in his shack, George saw that the pistol Ray's suspicious father had kept beside him during their previous conversations was no longer there. That time or shortly afterward, Speedy asked: "Well, why do you think Jimmy did it?" Without waiting for a reply Speedy added: "Do you realize that if Jimmy hadn't done it, King would be president today?"

Meanwhile, Jerry and James have tirelessly exploited public confusion over the killing and made it worse. Ever the jail house lawyer, James has baited his many pleas for a trial with the tantalizing suggestion that he has more to say.

But apart from his family's complicity, James won't take any secrets with him when he goes to his grave. What he knows is in the confession he signed and the stipulations he agreed to when he pleaded guilty nearly three decades ago.