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On the Crime Blotters, Ray Was Known as

a Solitary Drifter

It was 41 years ago Monday that James Earl Ray was born in the southern Illinois town of Alton, the eldest of three sons of a laborer.

Since that time and from that place Ray drifted in and out of school, in and out of jail and in and out of trouble, on a path that led him to the courtroom in Memphis.

Before he became the subject of an international man-hunt as the suspected killer of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ray was known to certain prison officials and probationary officers as an itinerant drunk who had spent about 13½ years in prison for theft, fraudulent check cashing and armed robbery.

Most of his crimes were the kind that fill the police blotters of precincts around the country on routine nights.

According to probationary reports, the baby-faced prisoner began his life of solitary drifting soon after quitting school in the 10th grade. The first stop was Hartford, Ill., and a job at the International Shoe Company for 77 cents an hour. That lasted a few months and then he was laid off. A few months later, in the spring of 1946, he joined the Army.

He served for more than two years, spending much of his time in Germany as an artilleryman and a military policeman. He served three months at hard labor for drunkenness and resisting arrest before coming out in December, 1948, with a general discharge because of "ineptness and lack of adaptability to military service."

After the Army he turned up in Chicago, where he

operated a rubber mold for \$45 a week. But soon he lost that job. By 1949, then 21 years old, Ray had moved on to Los Angeles.

There on Oct. 4 of that year, Ray was surprised by an assistant manager in the office of a cafe. A typewriter had been placed on the fire escape. Ray fled but was caught a few days later.

He was given a suspended sentence with the proviso that he spend at least 90 days in jail and stay away from alcohol.

By 1952 he was back in Chicago as a laborer at a publishing house. In May of that year he took \$11 from a cab driver after placing a gun to his head.

A passerby gave chase but Ray seemed to elude him by ducking into an alley. It proved to be blind, however, and as he tried to scale a wall, he was shot by the police.

Sentenced to 20 Years

For this crime Ray served a two-year term at Pontiac and Joliet. He was free for less than a year before being convicted of cashing forged money orders in Missouri, drawing and serving a three-year sentence.

After another year of freedom he was arrested in a 10-by-10-foot rented room in St. Louis and charged with a grocery store holdup. He was given 20 years.

He tried to leap down an elevator shaft in the courthouse but was recaptured. He also made two unsuccessful attempts to escape at the Missouri State penitentiary before he broke out in April, 1967.

Ray's movements since his

escape were for a long time shrouded in mystery. Then, while awaiting trial in the King case, he sold his story to William Bradford Huie, the Alabama writer, and shed some light on his activities in this period.

There were stints as a dishwasher and food server and a life style adhering pretty much to his old pattern until July 14, 1967, when he turned up in Montreal and signed a six-month lease on an apartment.

He said he had robbed a brothel of \$800 and met a blond Cuban named Raoul, who paid him for smuggling

some items, presumably narcotics, from Canada into the United States.

Raoul, he told Mr. Huie, gave him money several times and told him to go to Birmingham and await orders that would arrive by mail addressed to Eric Starvo Galt.

There were other meetings with Raoul in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, and in New Orleans, he said. On both occasions the Cuban reportedly gave money to Ray. In between Ray had been to Los Angeles, where he enrolled in a bartenders' school and took dancing lessons.

On March 15, according to

Mr. Huie, Ray got a letter from Raoul instructing him to go to Selma and Birmingham. He drove cross country, arriving in Selma on March 22. Dr. King had been scheduled to lead a march in Camden 30 miles away, but his appearance was canceled.

The next day Ray drove to Atlanta. A week later, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, he bought a 30.06-caliber rifle in Birmingham. On April 4, the F.B.I., said, he checked into the dollar-a-day rooming house across the street from the Lorraine Hotel and Motel, where Dr. King was staying.