

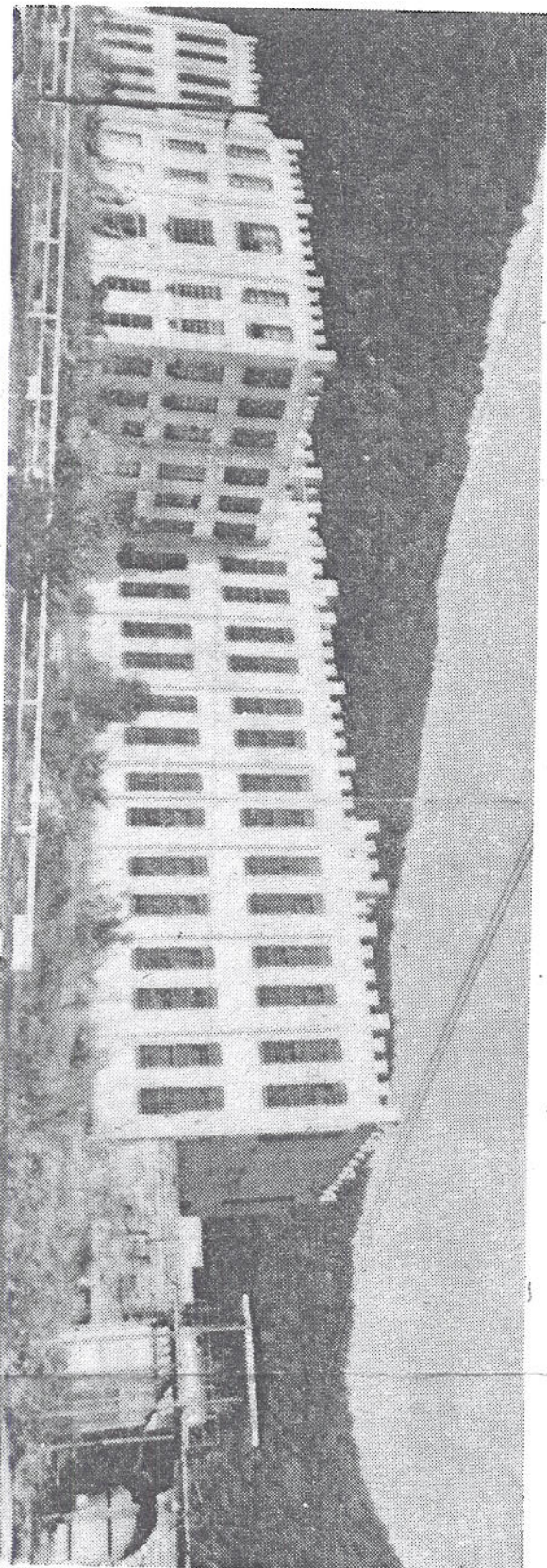
SFChronicle

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Dramatic Prison Breakout

James Earl Ray Escapes



UPI Telephoto

Brushy Mountain State Prison in northeast Tennessee, from which Ray and five others escaped

Convicted Killer of Dr. King

Petros, Tenn.

James Earl Ray, the admitted assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., scaled a state prison wall last night and escaped in a hail of gunfire with five other prisoners into the Tennessee hills.

The prisoners went over the wall about 8 p.m. EDT during the evening recreation period using a makeshift ladder made of lightning conductor rod.

Prison officials said the escape was covered by a mock fight between two prisoners — not involved in the escape itself — in the yard of Brushy Mountain State Prison, the state's maximum security facility.

One of the inmates involved in the mock altercation feigned a broken leg, officials said. As guards went to break up the disturbance, they saw the last of the seven escaping inmates, Jerry W. Ward, going over the wall and they shot him.

By that time, officers said, Ray, 49, and the other five had disappeared into the rugged, wooded mountains behind the prison, 40 miles west northwest of Knoxville.

Ward was taken to an Oak Ridge hospital for treatment of a minor gunshot wound. The hospital supervisor said he was yelling:

"James Earl Ray got out! Ray got out!"

State troopers set up roadblocks near the prison and 125 prison guards, FBI agents, agents of the Tennessee Bureau of Criminal Identification and sheriff's officers from at least six counties joined in the search for the state's most famous prisoner.

Ray was serving 99 years for the 1968 assassination of King at Memphis.

Bloodhounds were on the trail of three of the fugitives late last night, prison authorities said, but it

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AP Wirephoto
JAMES EARL RAY
Serving a 99-year sentence

RAY

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was not certain if Ray was in that group.

The Tennessee Highway Patrol said it had reports that "several unidentified subjects were seen in two different freight trains that left the Brushy Mountain area, one headed toward Danville, Ky., and the other toward Chattanooga."

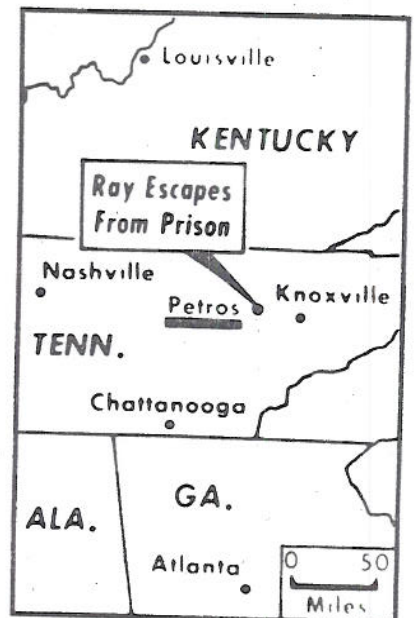
But assistant warden Herman Davis said the men fled on foot into the mountains and "they would have had to have a fast car to get a train because it is miles to the nearest tracks."

A state patrolman at the main gate said the breakout appeared to be "rather well organized."

The other five prisoners still at large were identified as David Lee Powell, serving 99 years for murder; Earl Hill Jr., serving two life sentences for murder; Douglas Shelton, serving sentences for murder, felonious assault and grand larceny; Donald Ray Taylor, serving 51 years for armed robbery and other convictions, and Johnny Hacker, serving 99 years for murder.

A White House spokesman said last night that "President Carter talked to Attorney General Griffin Bell, who in turn talked to FBI Director Clarence Kelley, who ordered the FBI to join in the search."

Ray has a history of jail escapes, attempted and successful, and recently boasted: "There's not a jail in the country that can hold me."



Brushy Mountain State Prison is 40 miles from Knoxville

at least four other escape attempts when he was an inmate at the Missouri prison.

A.P. & U.P.

Ray was sentenced eight years ago in King's death.

King was felled by a single shot as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on the evening of April 4, 1968.

An investigation soon focused on Ray, then a fugitive from the Missouri state prison. He was arrested at London's Heathrow Airport on June 5.

On March 10, 1969, after shuffling through several attorneys and winding up with noted defense lawyer Percy Foreman, Ray entered a guilty plea and was sentenced to 99 years. No testimony was presented.

Almost from the moment he entered prison, Ray began protesting his conviction, saying his attorneys railroaded him. He claimed he was working for a man named "Raoul," who he thought was a gunrunner, and had been set up to fake the blame for the killing.

The government claimed he killed King with a rifle aimed through the bathroom window of a flophouse. The rifle was found in a bag by the door of the building.

Ray's efforts for a new trial were rejected by one court after another, although there were many unexplained facets to the case — such as where he got the money to flee to Europe after the killing.

He told investigators from the House Assassinations Committee in five meetings at the prison this year that he never fired the shot that killed King.

He claimed the mysterious "Raoul" had told him to go to a movie that afternoon. When the shot was fired, Ray claimed, he was getting the spare tire of his car fixed.

In May 1971, Ray left a dummy in his cell bunk, hacked through a bar, broke fan blades and crawled into a ventilation tunnel. He reached the prison yard behind his cell block, removed a manhole cover from a steam tunnel and tried to crawl through it.

But it was 400 degrees inside and guards, alerted by the noise of his escape, were waiting when he came out.

On Feb. 5, 1972, Ray crawled from his work area, with a makeshift hacksaw in hand, and was trying to saw a hole through the ceiling of a room to reach the roof when guards found him.

Authorities said Ray had made