

Suspect Described as a Drifter Who Was Failure at Everything



James Earl Ray at Missouri Penitentiary Jan. 4, 1966.

Constantly in Trouble, Often Because of Drunkenness, Ray Left Trail of Violence

James Earl Ray, the man suspected of killing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was described yesterday as a drunken drifter, prone to theft and violence, a failure at everything.

Ray was born March 10, 1928, in Alton, Ill., a manufacturing town of 53,000 persons along the Mississippi River 20 miles north of St. Louis.

His father, James Ray, was born in Carthage, Ill., and worked mainly as a laborer. His mother, the former Lucie Maher, was born in Alton. Both parents are dead.

Records of Madison County show that James Earl Ray was one of several Rays, believed to be either brothers or other relatives, who constantly caused trouble.

Oldest of 3 Brothers

The oldest of three brothers, he grew up in Alton and Quincy, Ill., and left school in the 10th grade.

"I just didn't want to go any more," Ray told a probation officer in Los Angeles years later.

According to the probation report, Ray began a life of drifting that took him first to Hartford, Ill., where he went to work at the International Shoe Company for 77 cents an hour. He was laid off in December of 1945 and several months later joined the Army.

Ray served for more than two years, mostly in Germany, as an infantryman and military policeman. He was given a general discharge in December, 1948, because of "ineptness and lack of adaptability to military service."



Associated Press
Ray in a 1959 St. Louis police photo. Later he was convicted of armed robbery.

While in service he spent three months at hard labor for drunkenness and resisting arrest.

Losses His Job

Ray was no more able to adapt to civilian life. After five months, he took a job operating a rubber mold in the Dryden Rubber Company in Chicago for \$45 a week but soon lost it.

A 1947 Mercury he had bought in St. Louis was repossessed and a bank account in Alton of more than \$1,000 was used up by June of 1949.

Ray then moved on to Los Angeles, and on Oct. 4, 1949, Ray, then 21 years old, was surprised in the office of Forum Cafe by the assistant manager. A typewriter had been placed on the fire escape.

He dashed away, but in trying to elude a parking attendant, he dropped his identification. Several days later he was seen in the same area by the cafe manager and arrested.

He was convicted on one count of second-degree burglary and sentenced to eight months in the County Jail, but the term was suspended on the condition that Ray spend at least 90 days in jail and stay away from alcohol.

'I Had Some Beers'

He told a probation officer that he had not entered the

Forum Cafe to commit a crime. He said he knew nothing about the typewriter or about why he had been arrested.

Asked why he had entered the building he said:

"I guess I had some beers or something."

Ray told the officer that several times in Illinois he had tried to enter houses after drinking too much, but never knew what he was doing.

Ray then returned to Chicago, where he worked as a laborer at a publishing company. On May 6, 1952, he entered a taxi and after several blocks put a gun against the driver's head and fled with \$11.

A passerby gave chase, but Ray seemed to be escaping. Then he ducked into an alley, which proved to be a dead end. He tried to climb a wall but was shot by the police.

Robert Everhart, the man who chased Ray, recalled yesterday that Ray had said when he was captured, "What the hell are you getting out of this?"

Ray was sentenced to one to two years and released from the State Reformatory in Pontiac, Ill., on March 12, 1954. He also served time in Joliet, Ill., before next appearing in Kansas City, Mo., where he was convicted in 1955 of cashing forged money orders.

Arrested Again

After three more years in prison, Ray moved to St. Louis, where he lived in a dilapidated boarding house in the once fashionable Lafayette Park area. He was arrested in his 10-by-10-foot room in 1959 after a grocery store hold-up.

The armed robbery conviction carried a 20-year sentence. He was also facing charges for robbery and auto theft at the time, and the jury deliberated just 20 minutes.

As he was led away from court Ray tried to escape by jumping into an elevator, but he was recaptured and sent to the Missouri State Penitentiary. Twice he tried to escape, the second time by hiding in a ventilator shaft.

He was confined for a time in the maximum security ward at the state hospital in Fulton, Mo., but was back at the penitentiary last year when he finally succeeded in escaping by hiding under a batch of bread.

Ray's travels since his escape are uncertain.