



LIFE

THE ACCUSED KILLER
RAY alias GALT

The
Revealing Story
of a Mean Kid

James Earl Ray, age 10,
in third grade in Ewing, Mo.
(under red arrow)

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The story of the accused killer of Dr. King

This account is written by Associate Editor William A. McWhirter, from reports by LIFE Correspondents Gerald Moore, Richard Woodbury, John Pekkanen, Frank Leeming Jr. and Ron DePaolo.

His name was Galt. Eric Galt. ERIC GALT. If you did not hear the name the first time, that was all right because Eric Starvo Galt was more than likely to repeat it, again and again, as if he were still trying to memorize the thing himself. It seemed new, out of place, like his manner, nervous and friendly and quickly withdrawn, like his \$150 alligator shoes which did not go with the mismatch of blue pants, brown coats and Redi-Ty bow ties, like his puffy stomach which he rubbed worriedly as if it didn't quite belong to him. "I knew he was lying about his name," says a bar acquaintance, a songwriter who traveled with him from Los Angeles to New Orleans. "I just knew he wasn't an Eric. He was too country to be an Eric."

That is also what the Federal Bureau of Investigation concluded when it identified Eric Starvo Galt, the accused killer of Martin Luther King, as no more than a lean, battered wild-hair, a punk who was a local nuisance in half a dozen Mississippi River towns, a convict who had escaped a year ago in a bread truck from the bakery of the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, just plain James Earl Ray.

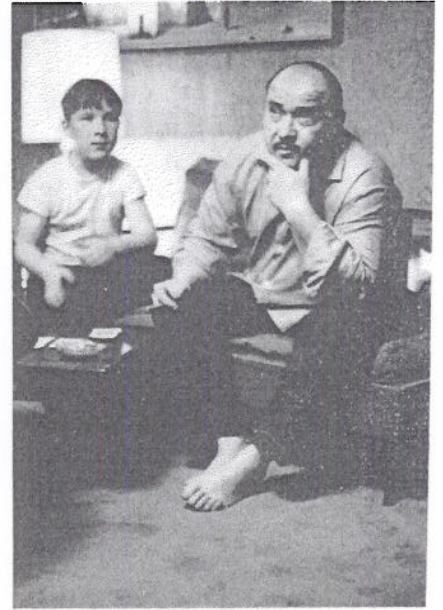
Jimmy Ray was a child whose nose ran all winter, who missed anywhere from 25% to 30% of a school year, flinched when a teacher dared so much as to reach out an arm and sat painfully aware that to the other students in the Ewing, Mo. elementary school he was just another member of the family "out there on the side of that hill without enough to eat."

He had grown up mean in the thinnest of times and the toughest of places. Born March 10, 1928

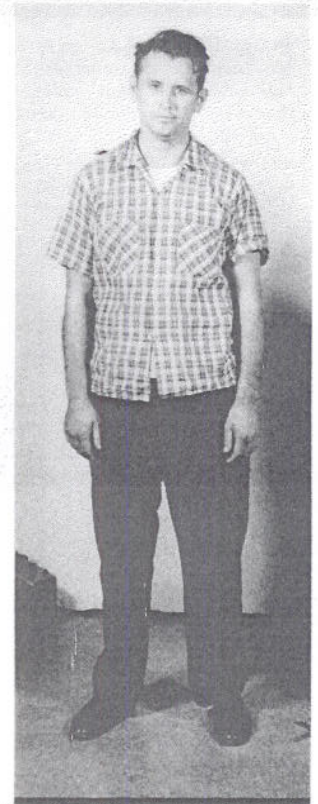
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A Character Shaped

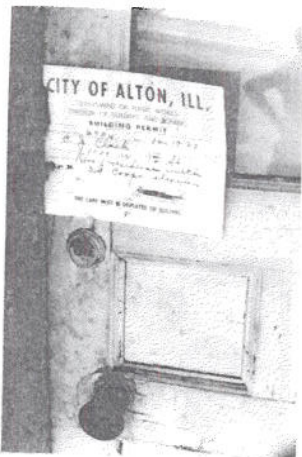


When the Ewing, Mo. grade school gathered for the picture at left in 1938, third-grader James Earl Ray (in third row at left of girl in polka-dot dress) peered half-hidden over a classmate's head. Among the two-dozen former schoolmates and teachers who identified Jimmy Ray was Carlisle Washburn (front row, far right), who once broke Ray's leg playing football. Today Washburn (above) is Ewing's postmaster; Ray is shown below after his 1959 arrest in St. Louis for armed robbery.



by a Mean Life

Growing up

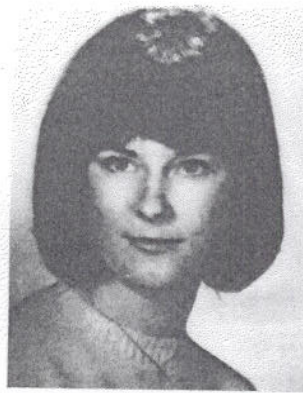


James Earl Ray was born in 1928 in the house at right in Alton, Ill.—the first of many shabby dwellings occupied by the indigent Ray family as they drifted from one Mississippi River town to another. The present owner recently got a permit (above) to have the roof fixed.

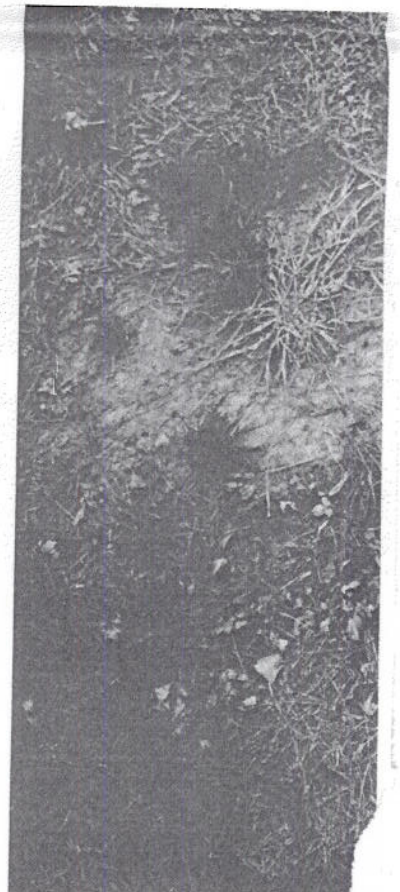
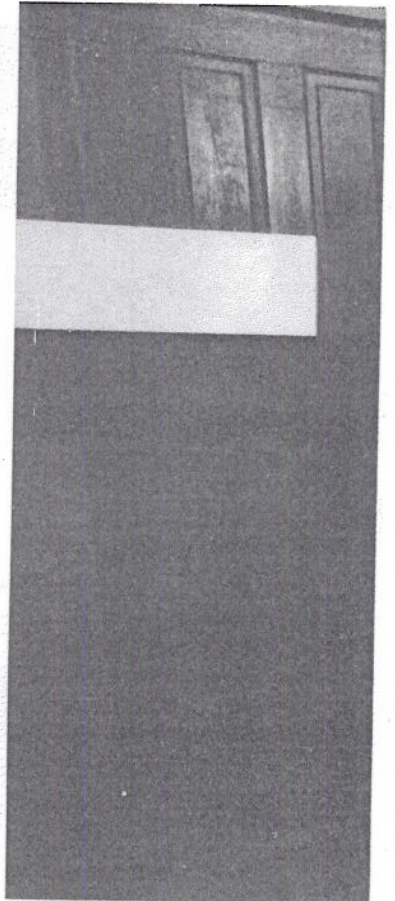


Ray spent his boyhood in Ewing, Mo. (pop. 324), a somnolent village where grass now grows on the abandoned railroad (above),

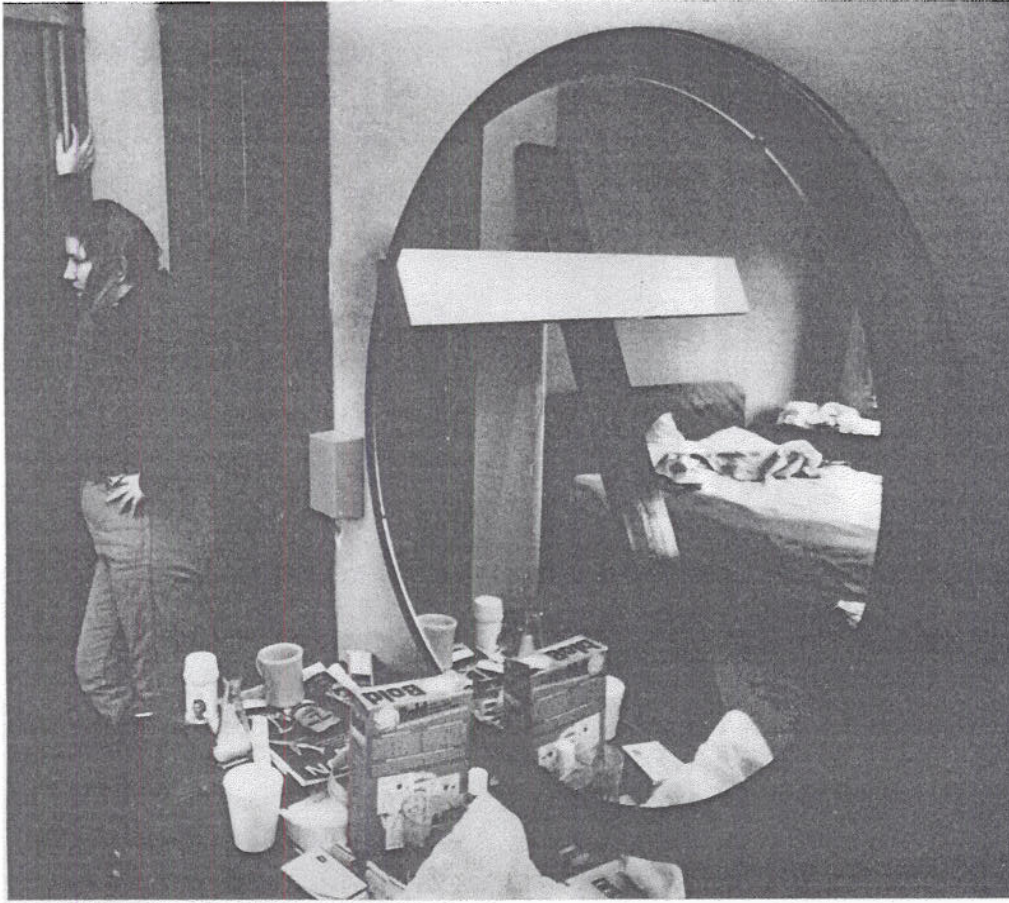
and main street (below) looks pretty much as it always has. In 1944 the family moved to Quincy, Ill. and Ray, then 16, quit school.



Ray's sister Susan, shown above in her high school yearbook, is now 21 and a North Chicago housewife. Another sister, Melba, 29, lives in a \$1-a-day room in Quincy, where she keeps a large wooden cross (above, right). Their mother, who took the name Ryan after her husband died, lies in a pauper's grave (right) in North Alton.



in a series of ramshackle river towns



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in Alton, Ill., he was the eldest of nine children of George and Lucille Maher Ray, a Catholic family that was to drift from river town to town throughout the Depression. When he was one year old, the family moved upriver to Quincy, Ill.; when he was 6, they moved across the river to Ewing, Mo., and when he was 16 and out of the eighth grade, they moved again to Quincy. The sight of the large, shiftless family coming where work was scarce was hardly a welcome one for communities with already too little to share. The family even began to think of itself with the same carelessness as the towns themselves had: they were identified as the Rayns, the Raynes or the Raines, either because of the way Ray was drawled out or from confusions with past families. The children cared little in any case and often went to school under different names.

Jimmy was the eldest, but he already seemed to be wearing hand-me-downs; in rural poverty, no age is ever old enough; there is always someone before you. Virgil Oscar Graves, who was principal of the Ewing school, recalls Ray: "He was a rebel. He rebelled against authority and his approach to most of his teachers was very bad. He always seemed to have trouble getting his assignments in on time. But he was a sensitive boy. I remember he came up to my desk one day wearing patched overalls and asked whether I thought the other kids would pay attention to his appearance."

The school record was considerably more brusque. James Earl Ray was only in the second grade by the time he was being judged a menace to the Ewing community. The record declared:

"Attitude toward regulations—violates all of them.

"Honesty—needs watching.

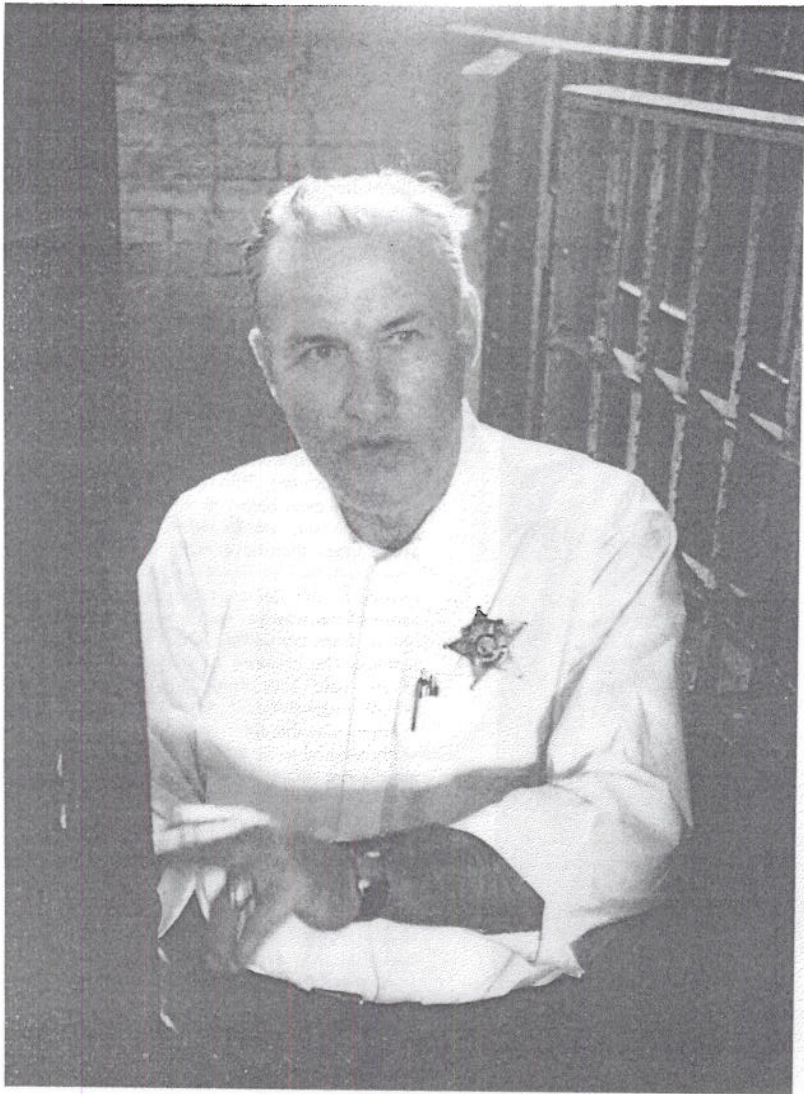
"Appearance—repulsive.

"Courtesy—seldom if ever polite."

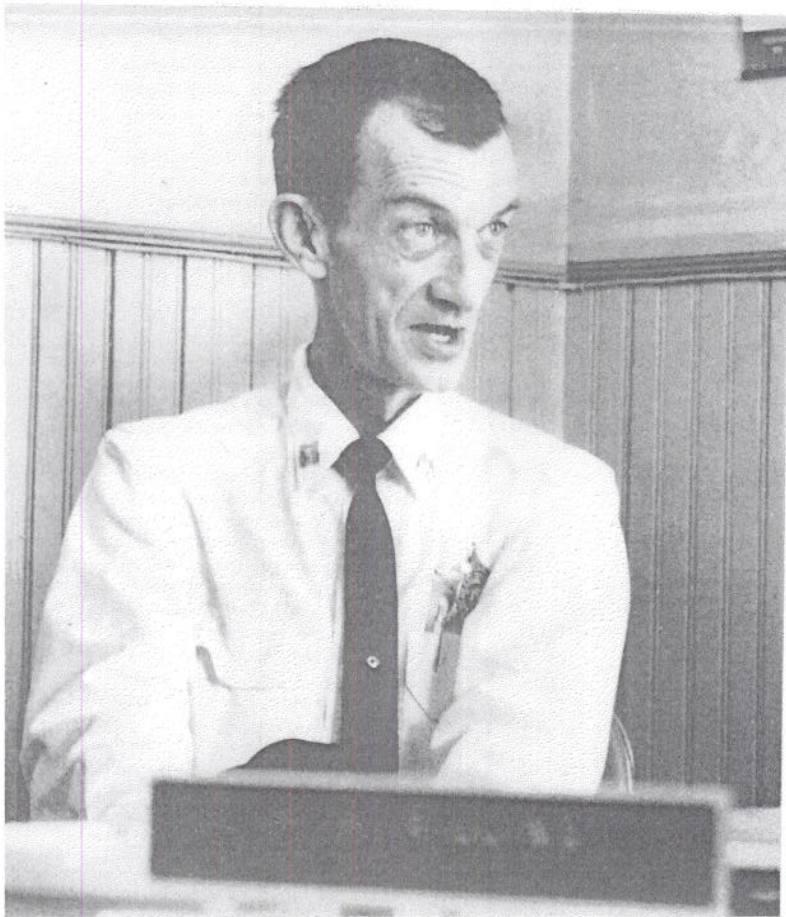
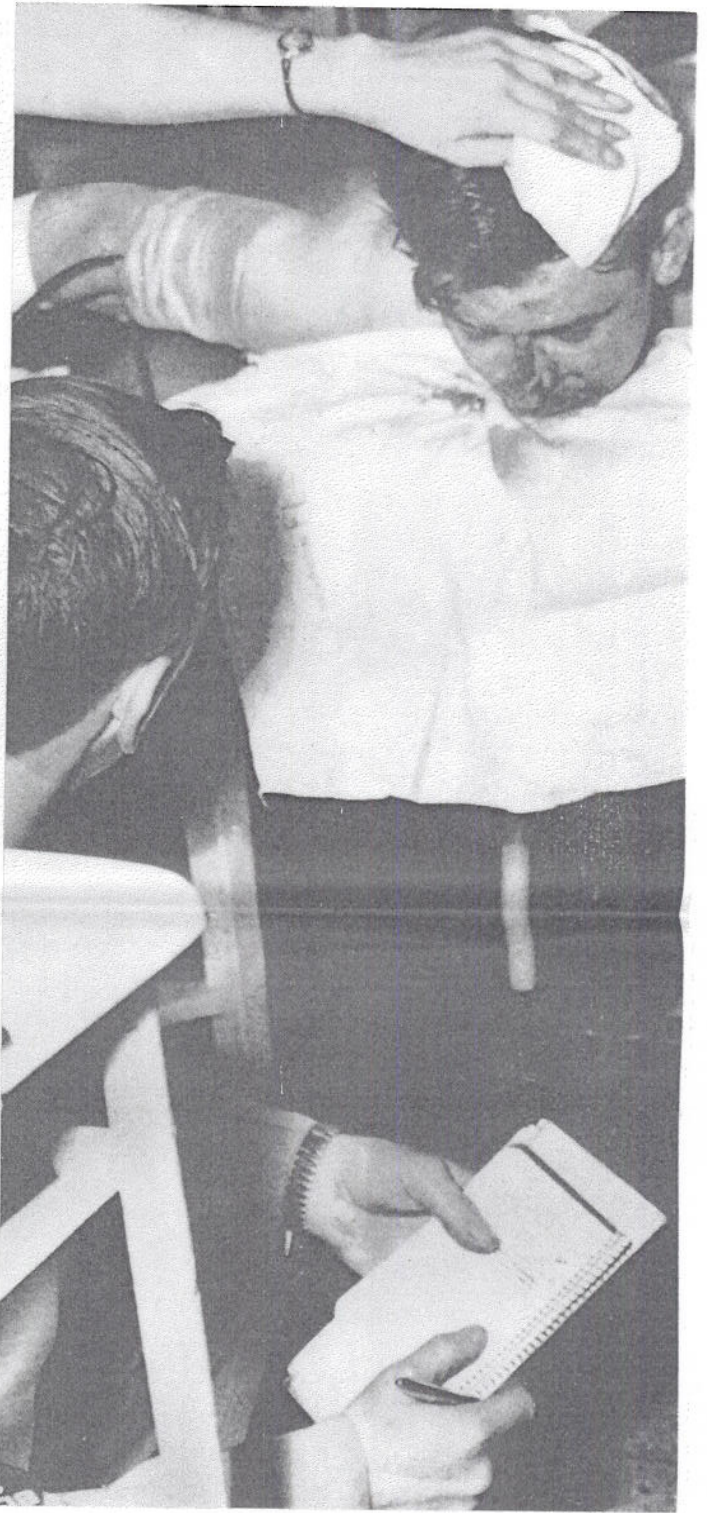
The Ewing school system also took note that his teeth were defective. By the time he was 14, Ray was still in the seventh grade and had slipped so far behind so many classes that everyone's sorriest predictions were confirmed. Ray only tried in endless scraps to make up for what the students, as much as five years younger, were doing to him in the classroom. He was an unmanageable bully. Once, in a fight over a piece of meat in the cafeteria, he ran a knife through his brother Jack's ear. In the sixth grade, he was caught stealing the class's hot-lunch money.

"The family had it pretty poor,"

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One head-on encounter



Wounded and captured minutes after he robbed a Chicago cabbie of \$11 in 1952, Ray received emergency treatment (above). Trying to escape, he had run into a dead-end alley, was shot in the arms

and fell through a basement window. After his release in 1954, Ray tried to rob a dry cleaner's in East Alton, Ill. This time he lost his shoes breaking out through the front window. Police had disabled

with cops after another



his getaway car so Ray ran five miles home in badly cut stocking feet—only to be arrested anyway. East Alton Police Chief Harold Riggs (top left, standing in front of cell Ray occupied) recalls Ray's

habit of flinching when he told a lie "as though he'd been slapped around a lot and was afraid of being hit." Captain Ebert Grimes (left) remembers him as "a man who had no use for anything."

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remembers a local resident. "I've seen the time when they had a sack of potatoes to eat—that's all, just a sack of potatoes."

As they grew up, the Ray children were either to drift off or to be routinely placed in foster homes, seldom again seeing another member of the family. Even today, Gerald Ray, a brother, insists their father's name was George, while Jimmy Ray's birth certificate shows it was James. An uncle, William E. Maher, of Alton, says of the Rays: "We tried to stay away from them. They always seemed to want something."

Besides Jimmy, there were Marjorie Ray (who died as a child after setting herself on fire with a box of matches), John, Melba, Carol Jean, Gerald, Franklin "Buzzy" Delano (who was killed in 1964 when he and a girl friend ran their car off a bridge into the river at Quincy; the funeral provided one of the few Ray family reunions), Susan Jane and Max. The father died in 1951, most probably of chronic alcoholism; the mother in 1961. Of the other surviving Rays of Quincy, Melba Ray was in a succession of foster homes and today spends most of her time in the lobby of the decaying Virginia Hotel on Oak Street. Occasionally, she goes to her \$30-a-month room upstairs to fondle a giant wooden cross which she has painted red, white and blue and lettered "rugged cross." She once walked it down Maine Street in Quincy. "I made it," she says, "to keep my sanity. After what happened to Kennedy and the war and all . . . I had to turn to Jesus."

Susan Jane, who will be 21 this week, never bothered to see Melba, although she lived only a few miles away from the Virginia Hotel until 1965. She was a hospital cafeteria worker, secretary and gogo dancer until marrying an ex-bandleader who now manages a hamburger drive-in in North Chicago. Susan failed even to recognize Jimmy's picture in the newspapers.

John, the next eldest after Jimmy Ray, has also served prison time, for burglary. So far, he hasn't been heard from. Carol is now a St. Louis housewife who called a relative to say she was horrified and too ashamed to think of even leaving her home. Max, 17 years old, is living with foster

parents. He has only his brother's example.

Susan Jane, John and Carol have now been joined with the rest of the scattered Ray clan in a kind of common notoriety. Behind their locked screen doors, they give their laments of pride and offense against Jimmy Ray. But it is not clear which the family members hate most: that Ray may have been responsible for such a hateful act or that their neighbors may now learn the truth of their past lives in Ewing and Quincy. Or that, perhaps, after years of obscurity and estrangement, this event may force the Rays together again.

Then there is Gerald (Jerry) Ray, who says simply, "Jimmy is my brother." Over the years, Jerry has been in trouble as often as Jimmy. But Jerry, who lives in Wheeling, Ill., today has grown accustomed to their separations and of the family is probably closest to his brother. "After we were grown," he says, "about the only times I could see him was when he was visiting me in jail or when I would visit him. One or the other of us was in jail most of the time. Jimmy wrote me a lot."

Jerry is, with his brother, a fellow professional ("A grocery

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In 1959 Ray and a partner held up Mrs. Mary Wegener (above) in her Alton grocery. "I can still feel his gun in my back," she says. "He was a vicious guy." The partner was caught but Ray got away.

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store," he says, "is worth maybe \$200, but a supermarket is worth about \$1,500"), so he can be coolly analytical about the King case. As he told the FBI when discussing his brother's motives: "Well, look at it this way. Jimmy escaped. He had served seven years of a 20-year sentence. Because he escaped, he would be facing flat time if they caught him plus more time on him for escaping. He would have to steal while he was out to support himself so he knew he would get rapped extra for that. A deal with a lot of money would have looked pretty good to a man in that circumstance. He sure didn't have any love for colored people, but I know he wouldn't have put himself in a spot like this unless there was something in it for him."

In their last winter in Ewing, the Ray children had spent most of their time in bed for lack of heat in the home, which had only a dirt floor. They began tearing out the inside of the house to use for kindling until, in early spring,

the remainder of the building simply collapsed around them. The Rays left Ewing soon afterward and James Earl Ray, who was then 16, little more than a town nuisance and an uneducated school bully, drifted off to join the Army.

Ray's service record is erratic but blunt enough about the failure of the following two years. If there was anything more miserable for Ray than competing with boys five years younger, it came in dealing with men his own age. There were enough battles to make his Army career look like a Golden Gloves circuit instead of a tour of duty spent mostly in Germany, as an infantryman and military policeman. Finally he was handed a general discharge in December 1948 that cited Ray's "ineptness and lack of adaptability to military service."

He lost a factory job in Chicago, had a car repossessed in St. Louis and used up a bank account in Alton before heading for Los Angeles in the fall of 1949. It was there that he began to commit an almost clownish series of crimes, angry and desperate. As a hapless

and headstrong victim of a depression that seemed to be hitting everywhere but where he was, James Earl Ray would have been as effective if he had settled for kicking tires. As it was, he chose to hold up grocery stores.

Ray first tried to steal a typewriter from a cafeteria office in L.A., but was discovered by an assistant manager. He got away but only after dropping his Army discharge papers and a bank savings book. Even so, he stayed around the neighborhood until a parking lot attendant recognized him and called the cops. With no record, only 21 and an Army veteran, Ray was given a 90-day term.

"Every time he came back here, he got into trouble," says his uncle, Bill Maher, in Alton. And the Alton police chief, William Peterson, remembers the passing through of James Earl Ray with a special loathing: "He was a dirty neck, the kind of criminal who gets into all kinds of trouble, hates and has no respect for the law." But if Ray blundered, got caught and returned only to lose another day, he did so with persistence.

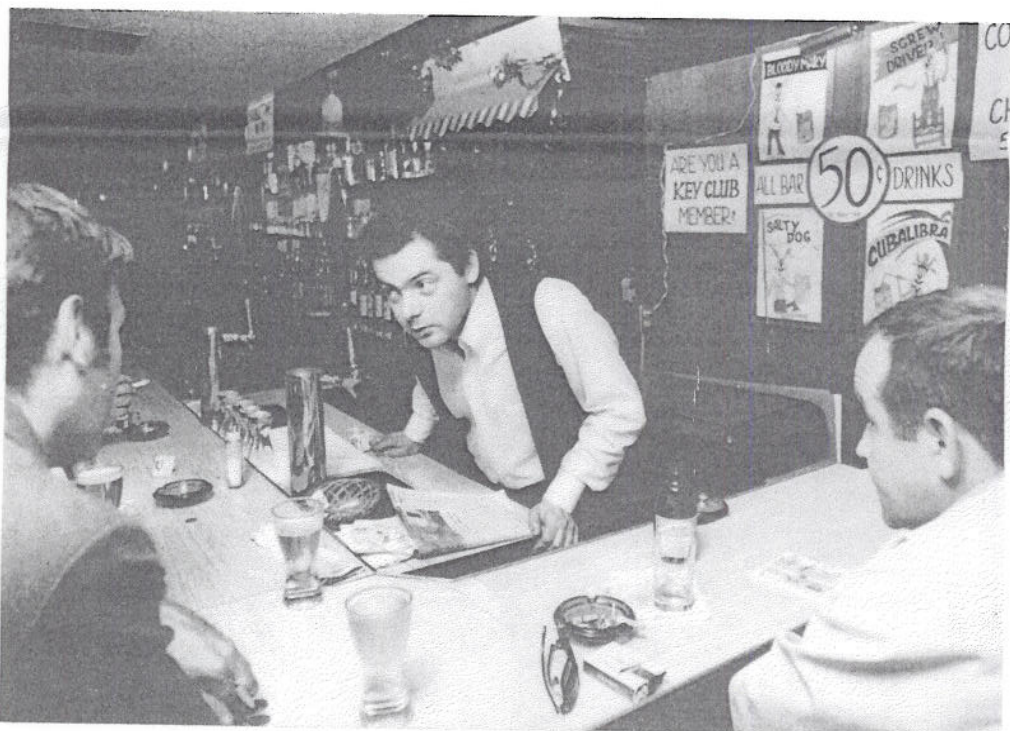
On May 6, 1952 he tried robbing a cab driver in Chicago of \$11 but was again discovered, chased by policemen down a one-way alley; when he refused to surrender, one of the patrolmen fired a shot, hitting him in both arms. Ray fell through a basement window, cutting his face open. He was found guilty and sentenced to two years in the state prison. On March 12, 1954 he was released.

Attempting to break into a dry cleaner's in East Alton, Ill. on Aug. 28, 1954, he lost his loafers as he kicked out the front windows. The police began arriving and Ray turned, in stocking feet, to run across the broken glass, through thickets and over the railroad tracks. The police stopped to dismantle the distributor on the engine of his parked car. Ray circled back and tried to start the motor, but he took off again as the police converged. He tried again and then a third time to return to the car, both times failing to start it; finally, with his feet slashed and bleeding, he ran some five miles to a relative's house.

A spell of high living with a roll of 20s



Those in Los Angeles who get to know James Ray as Eric Galt last winter remember him as a loner with plenty of cash. Songwriter Charles Stein (bottom left) describes how "he kept pulling out



those fresh 20s and never counted his change." Tomas Reyes Lau (top left), to whom Ray paid \$245 for a four-week bartending course, found him an apt pupil: "Self-confident with good hand coordina-

tion." By contrast Kathy Norton (right), one of his dancing instructors, remembers him as "clumsy" and socially inept. Bo Del Monte (above), bartender at the Rabbit's Foot Club where Ray often spent

his evenings drinking 50-cent screwdrivers, calls him "a meek kind of man"—except for the night he got into an argument with a woman about the race problem and loudly denounced all Negroes.

In March 1955, Ray was arrested with a partner for passing forged money orders and sentenced to Leavenworth Penitentiary, where he was released two years and nine months later, in early 1958.

It was not until Aug. 7, 1959 that Ray had his first success—an \$800 grocery store holdup in St. Louis. He and his partner both escaped. Encouraged, two weeks later they chose a market in Ray's old neighborhood in Alton. It was hardly a smooth operation. The wife of the market owner remembers: "At first, I thought he was fooling around and so I started telling him about God and then he pulled the gun. That was all there was. He chased people all around the store. He just ran around like a wild man." But the pair got \$2,200. Their escape, however, was so rushed that Ray forgot to shut his car door and fell out as he swerved the car sharply around a corner. The car crashed and Ray fled, leaving his partner behind.

In October, Ray returned to St.

Louis with a new accomplice to hold up a second market there. But this time, they got only \$190 from a cashier and then were followed by a customer who gave police a running account as they switched cars. Their new car was later seen parked in front of Ray's rooming house. As the police entered the building, they spotted Ray and ordered him to halt. He turned and ran to his room; one of the cops followed and hit him over the head with his revolver. Another boarder happened by and, taking advantage of the distraction, Ray stood up and began to run. A patrolman fired a single shot and Ray surrendered. It took a jury only 20 minutes to sentence him to 20 years in the Missouri State Penitentiary. That was the last time James Earl Ray stood trial.

Ray, however, was not quite spent. After the verdict, Earl A. Riley, a deputy sheriff, remembers that he "had taken the handcuffs off one of his wrists when Ray suddenly grabbed my arm and swung me around against the cell bars. While I was on the floor, he tried to kick me in the head, then he

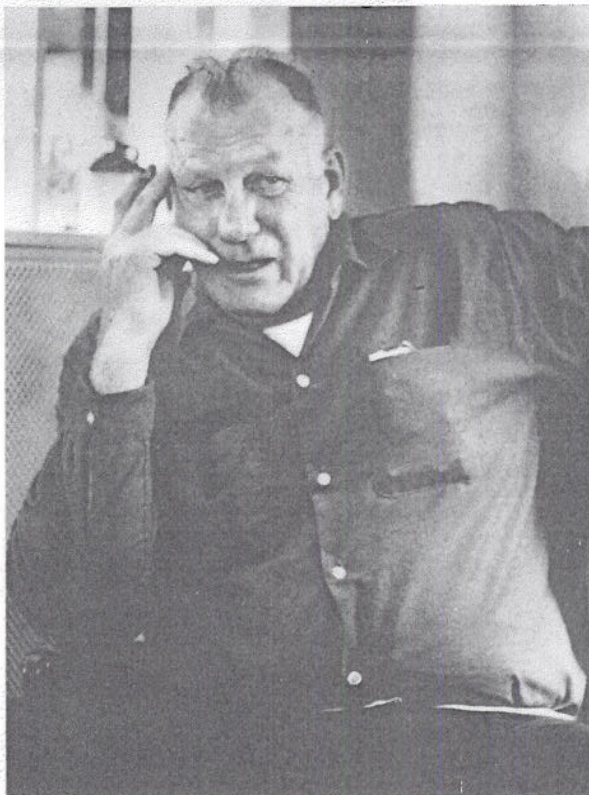
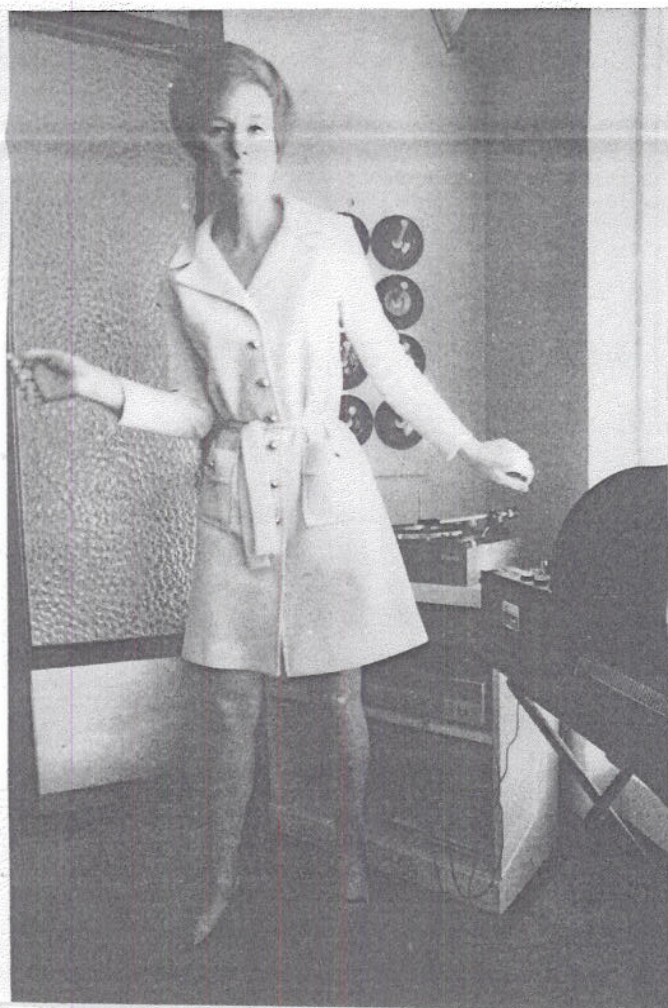
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Warden Harold Swenson (above) of the Missouri penitentiary from which Ray escaped a year ago rates him as "strictly a small-timer." But Ray's brother Jerry, 32 (left), is convinced his brother "had a deal" after he got out and was "onto a lot of money." Jerry, himself an ex-con, was also a prime FBI suspect in the King case until he established that he was at work in Wheeling, Ill. when the murder was committed. The Rays' uncle, William Maher (below), an Alton painting contractor, remembers James as "the kind of guy who only turned up when he wanted something—like bail money."



and an assumed name



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broke loose and ran to an elevator," where he was caught.

For the next seven years in prison, Ray distinguished himself only by a series of solitary escape attempts which earned him the nickname "The Mole." For this quiet, angry figure the ventures were perhaps a source of amusement, per-

haps a way to do precisely what the skinny schoolboy in Ewing, Mo. had always wanted to have happen—to rebel, be recaptured and revolt again. "Hey, kids, it's THE MOLE!" Once he tried to scale a wall and was knocked unconscious when his makeshift ladder collapsed; another time, in

1966, he hid for two days in a ventilator shaft, then crawled to a rooftop only to have a guard spot his hands coming up over the top. He was trying to escape with \$4.15, razor blades, a broken mirror and a bag of assorted pills. Then, exactly a year ago, he finally did it.

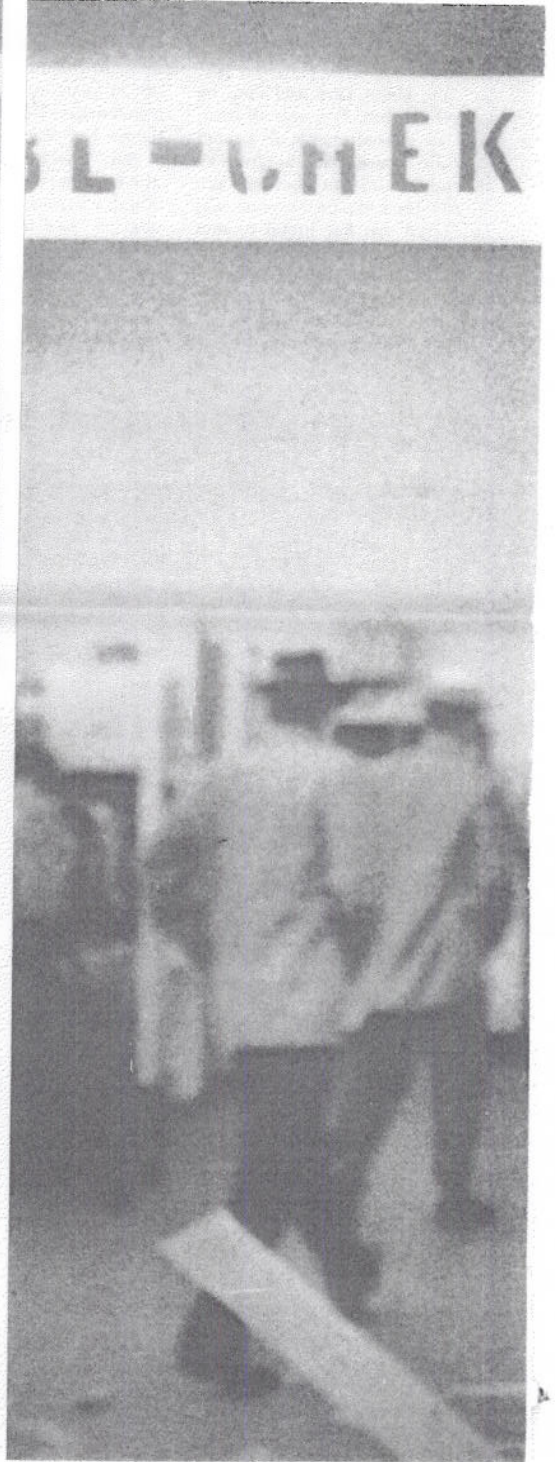
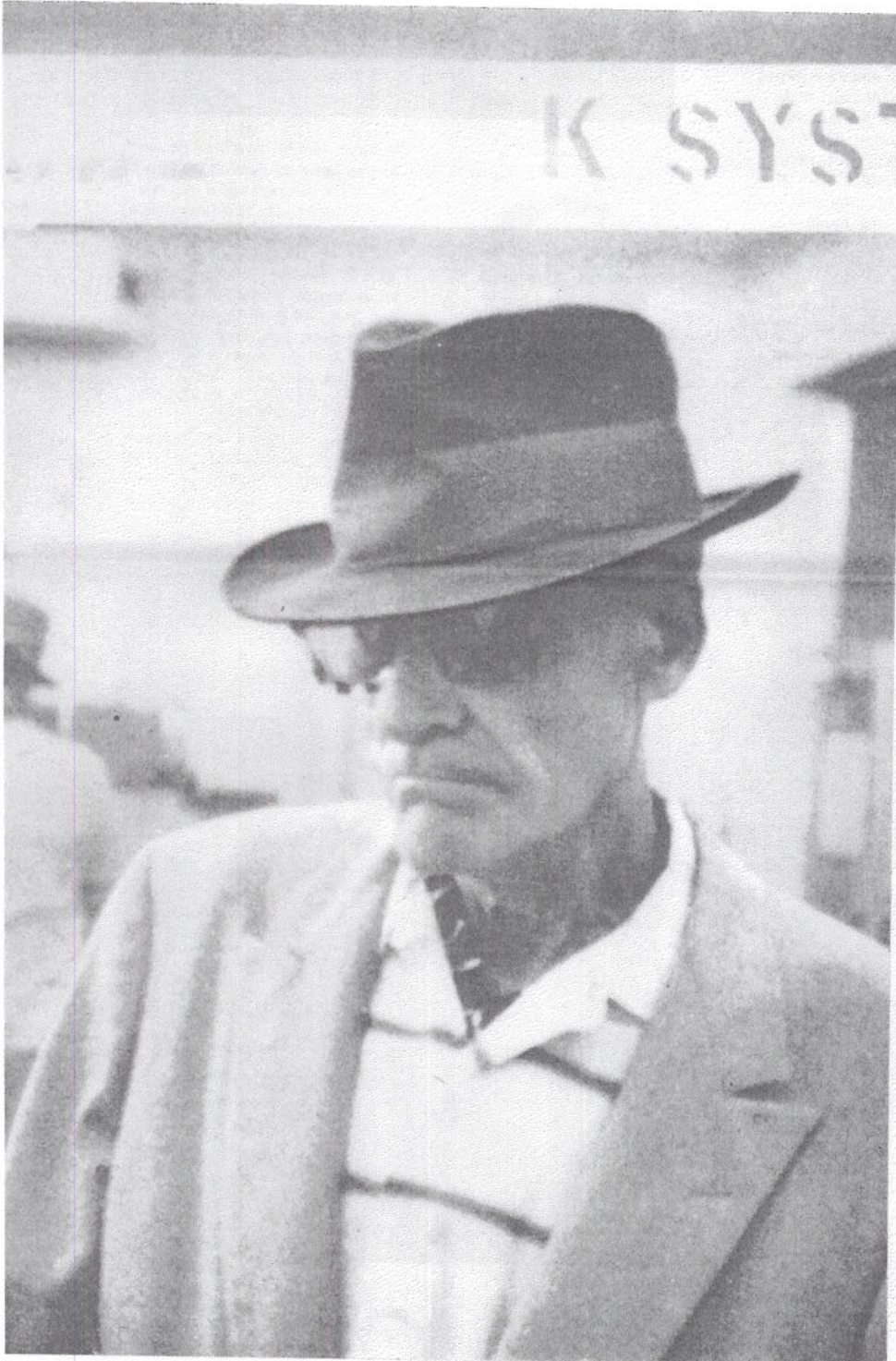
In the curiously lit world that includes a sleek, bleached strip of North Hollywood, Eric Starvo Galt might have seemed 34 or even 28 years old, depending on the shade, the time of day or how close he was sitting to the bar lamp at the Rabbit's Foot Club. Galt, who was 40, looked like a man learning to

From a grocery store bandit caught by a hidden

In the act of holding up a St. Louis grocery in 1959, Ray and accomplice Joseph Austin were pho-

tographed by a fixed-focus camera normally used to identify check cashers. Austin unknowingly

stood in front of the camera (left) before he and Ray rifled the cash register of \$1,200. Then he fol-



swing; last November, he went on a marijuana-buying junket to Mexico. "Sharon," one of his ballroom dance instructors, had suggested to the girls at the National Dance Studios in Long Beach that her pupil had developed a crush; he trembled, she said, when he stood too close. But Galt fled in

his white Mustang after only an hour on Go-Go Night, and for \$245, paid in advance, enrolled in bartending school instead.

James Earl Ray had never had his picture among the "big dealers" in the warden's album in the Missouri State Penitentiary. In Prison, like any kid from Alton or

Quincy or Ewing or Shelbina, Mo., he had never mixed with the big boys from Kansas City and St. Louis. "He's innocuous," said the warden. "He's penny ante."

That is, James Earl Ray, slight and round-shouldered, who flinched, smiled a crooked, private grin and sometimes even

seemed to walk on a slant, was once penny ante. But, says the FBI, on April 4 in Memphis, at the moment Martin Luther King died, all the bills for the Mustang, the shoes, the dancing lessons and a \$150 30.06 Remington —and maybe the bitter childhood —came due.

camera to the most hunted man in the country

lowed Ray out (center) as both stuffed their pockets. At right, a policeman holds their hats, lost in

the escape. Arrested two months later for another robbery, Ray was convicted and sentenced to 20

years in the Missouri penitentiary. He was serving this term when he escaped last year and vanished.

