

The King mystery

Two more parts to come

James Earl Ray -- Was he the killer?

By Robert Gruenberg
Of Our Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Four years after the murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the greatest black leader of his time and teacher of nonviolence, the questions refuse to die with him.

Who killed him and why?

Is James Earl Ray — the 44-year-old ex-convict, stickup artist, auto thief and general miscreant now serving 99 years in Tennessee's Brushy Mountain State Prison — guilty as he has pleaded?

Did he have accomplices? Who planned the actual slaying, pulled the trigger, provided the escape scheme and offered shelter? If Ray didn't do it all himself, why doesn't he say who did?

All those questions were presumed settled — and are still so regarded by the FBI and Shelby County (Tenn.) authorities — at a hearing that took only 144 minutes in a Memphis courtroom, on March 10, 1969. It was Ray's 41st birthday, and by evening he was behind prison walls.

TODAY, EVEN to raise the issue of his guilt, or the guilt he may share with others, irritates — if not downright angers — the Justice Department and the FBI, which spent a reported \$1.6 million to catch him.

Speculating on these questions, and scores of others in the case, is as disturbing as the queries themselves. They lead only to further puzzles over who fired the shot that left



Dr. King



Ray

First in a series

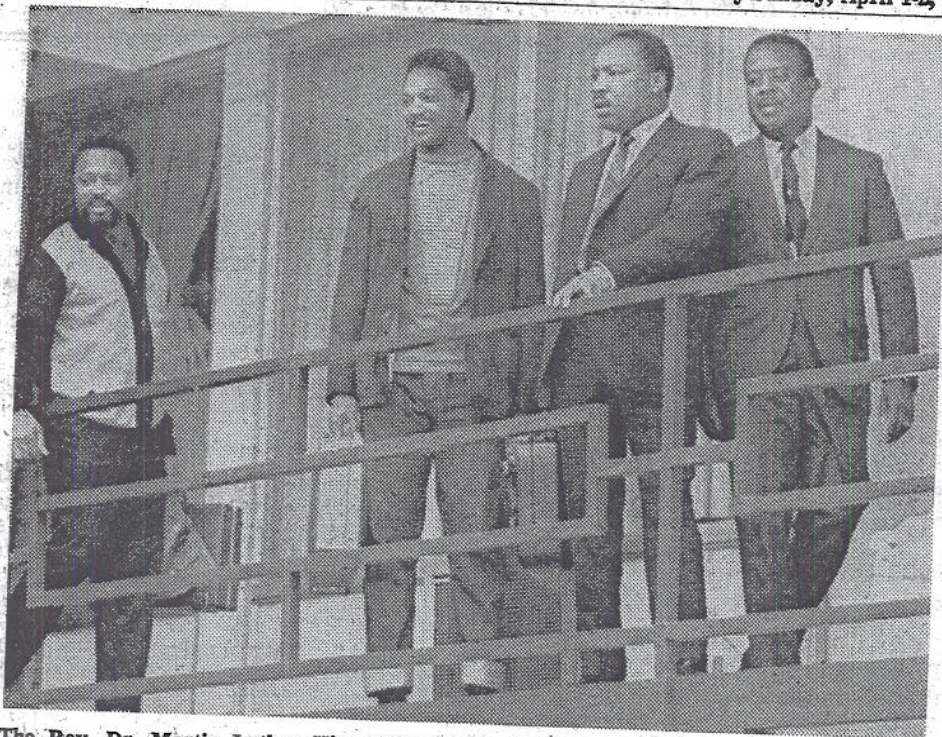
America shaking and sparked fires, riots and killings across the nation.

The questions were not explored in depth at the hearing before the Shelby County jury of 12 men, two of them black. All had agreed beforehand to abide by the "guilty" plea worked out by Ray's lawyers and the prosecution and approved by the judge, in exchange for 99 years.

AN ESCAPEE from the Missouri State Penitentiary on April 23, 1967 — he hid in a bakery truck's oversized bread box — Ray

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The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King (second from right) stands on the balcony of the Memphis hotel where he was shot in approximately the same spot where the bullet struck him. This photograph was taken the day before the assassination, and Dr. King is flanked by the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson of Chicago, with whom he spoke as the fatal shot was fired, and by the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, who later became head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Man at far left is unidentified.

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traveled to Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Mexico and Canada.

(Ray subsequently is reported to have denied the "breadbox escape," saying he scaled the prison's walls by using a 13-foot window pole to reach a prison-building roof and dropped from there to freedom.)

Seemingly never short of money, a good deal of which came from holdups, according to the FBI and his biographer, William Bradford Huie, he was able to buy a white Mustang car for \$1,995 only four months after his jailbreak.

Eleven months after fleeing prison, on March 29, 1968, a man whom salesman Donald F. Wood of Aeromarine Supply Co. in Birmingham, Ala., identified as Harvey Lowmeyer — and who so signed a sales slip — bought a Remington model 700, caliber .243 "pump action" Winchester rifle, had a Redfield telescopic sight mounted on it, and also picked up 20 rounds of ammunition.

THAT SAME afternoon, Wood said, "Someone identifying himself as Lowmeyer called on the telephone and stated that he had a conversation with his brother and had decided that he wished to exchange the rifle . . . for a Remington model 760, 30.06-caliber."

(Although Lowmeyer appears as the signature on the gun sales slip, the receipt was made out to "Lowmeyer." Subsequent extradition papers for Ray use both spellings.)

(The reference to the "conversation with his brother" was to become a vexing part of the Ray case for the FBI. It was the peg for the FBI conspiracy complaint, secured 20 days after Dr. King's murder, against one "Eric Starvo Galt," identified later by the federal agents as "Lowmeyer" and Ray, besides several other aliases.

(It was the only time U.S. officials termed Dr. King's slaying the result of a conspiracy. The action was taken while the FBI and then Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark were insisting — as they have since — that no conspiracy existed.)

LOWMEYER, Wood said, returned the next day, received the new rifle in exchange for the first, had the scope transferred, and also got 30.06-caliber ammunition for it.

(A week later, on April 16, Wood viewed seven photos, selected one, and told two FBI agents: "I can't say exactly at this time, but I think this is the man. To the best of my memory I believe this is the man who bought the gun." The man he identified, according to the FBI, was Ray.)

Between 3 and 3:30 p.m. on April 4 — five days after the rifle purchases — a neatly dressed "John Willard" showed up at a cheap rooming house at 422½ S. Main St. in Memphis and rented room 5B (\$8.50 weekly) after rejecting a \$10 room in an adjacent wing.

The shabby bedroom's window faced the opposite wing's brick wall, but one could — by leaning out — see the Lorraine Motel, more than 200 feet diagonally and behind the rooming house and across a street, where Dr. King was staying in Room 306. But an even better view was available from the bathroom at the end of the hall.

SHORTLY AFTER renting the room, according to the prosecution, Ray — who later was identified as "John Willard" — drove his white Mustang several blocks down Main St. to the York Arms Co., where he bought a pair of binoculars, paying \$41.55, and returned to his room, after parking the Mustang on Main St. near the rooming house.

Once upstairs Ray made "two or three" trips to the bathroom, according to one of the chief prosecution witnesses, Charles Quitman Stephens.

Stephens, with his wife, Grace, occupied 6B, a two-room unit next to the bathroom. A pensioned, tubercular war veteran, he swore in an affidavit two months after the slaying of Dr. King that he "assumed" the footsteps he heard leaving Room 5B next door were those of the man he had glimpsed earlier when the landlady, Mrs. Bessie Brewer, was showing "John Willard" Room 5B.

STEPHENS WAS repairing a small radio, he said, when "sometime between 5 and 6 p.m." he heard a shot. "I could tell it came from the bathroom because it was very loud and the partition between my kitchen and the bathroom is thin plyboard."

Against a background of "yelling and hollering" that came from the Lorraine — where Dr. King lay dying, or dead, on the balcony of the motel — Stephens said that he opened his door and "looked toward the bathroom."

"The (bathroom) door was open and it was empty," he declared in his affidavit. "Then I went to the banister and looked the other way. I saw a man running near the end of the hallway. . . . He was carrying a bundle in his right hand . . . at least three or four feet long, and six or eight inches thick. (It) appeared to be wrapped in what looked like newspaper."

AT THE HALL'S opposite end the man turned left (toward the exit stairs). "Although I did not get a long look at him before he turned left, I think it was the same man I saw earlier with Mrs. Brewer. . . . (He) had on a dark suit, the same as the man I saw earlier."

A few moments later, Guy Warren Canipe Sr., owner of a juke box and record company at the street level of the rooming house, "heard a thud" at his store's front door. He and two customers, according to the testimony stipulated to at the hearing, looked up and saw a bundle dropped by a white man in the doorway.

It was wrapped, not in newspaper, according to his affidavit, but "some type of green cloth," with a gun barrel protruding from it. He said he did not know if the man who dropped it also sped off in the white Mustang parked a few feet away, but he did not see him walking on Main St.

THE FBI IDENTIFIED the items in the bundle through fingerprints on the rifle, the telescopic sight, the binoculars, the beer cans, the newspaper — which had located Dr. King's room as No. 306 in the Lorraine — and other items, and tied them to Ray.

The Mustang, which was located six days later near a housing project in Atlanta, had been parked there, Atlanta police said, since the morning after the slaying.

Ray, the FBI said later, fled to Canada and, using an illegal Canadian passport, made his way under the name of Ramon George Sneyd to England and Portugal. Because his name on the passport was misspelled "Sneya," sources at the Canadian embassy in Lisbon changed it to "Sneyd" at Ray's request.

He came back to England and was on his way to Brussels, police said, when Scotland Yard closed in on him at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8, 1968 — two months and four days after the shot that was heard around the world.

(Next: Ray pleads "guilty, but —")