

Timely jail cell interview: 'I always went for the money'

(Timothy McNulty, Chicago Tribune correspondent in Atlanta, interviewed James Earl Ray Monday in prison. This story was written before Ray escaped Friday night).

By Timothy McNulty
Chicago Tribune

PETROS, Tenn. — "It seems like most people are interested in power and money," said James Earl Ray, who has settled into the blue denim pallor of prison life.

"Me, I always went for the money. Power wouldn't do me any good in jail."

"Everything he ever did was for money," said Jerry Ray in a strange defense of his brother a day earlier. "King never did affect him. James was out stealing. He was a thief."

"But the government didn't say he was a 'hit man' because then they would have to say something about a conspiracy. They don't want to do that. But James was always interested in money. I bet if they let him out that's what he'd go back to — thieving."

No one is about to let James E. Ray, No. 65477, out.

Only nine years into a 99-year sentence for the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ray spends all his hours in the maximum security section of Brushy Mountain Penitentiary.

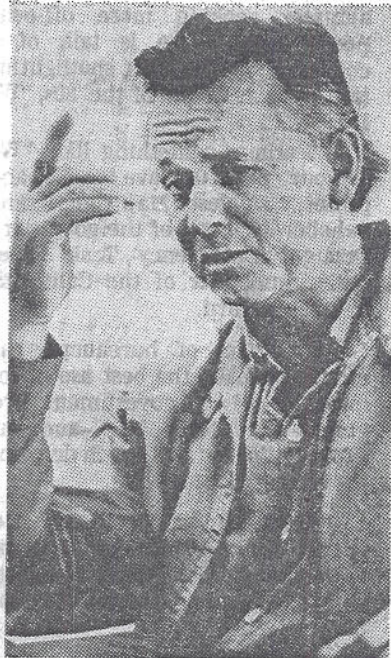
At the foot of a range of broad, green hills, it is said that escape attempts through the woods usually end in minutes after the prisoners find themselves hopelessly lost. They wait for the bloodhounds to find them.

But Ray still hopes to escape another way — through the growing public doubt that he acted alone in the April 4, 1968, sniper attack on King, and the pressure that puts on Congress and the Justice Department to open their classified files on the investigation.

Though he pleaded guilty, later recanted and then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court and lost, Ray is now adding to the public confusion and doubt with fragmentary "evidence" giving congressional investigators phone numbers in New Orleans and mysterious names such as "Raoul" and "Rosen."

Now 48 years old, he has been in prison about half his life.

His pale blue eyes wander from the interviewer to his brother when he answers questions and his hands absently smooth out wrinkles in the paint-splattered work slacks and gold windbreaker he wears in the visitors' galley and to work in the prison laundry.



JAMES EARL RAY
'He was a thief'

Jerry Ray, 42, is one of the few outside people who ever see Ray. A night watchman at a suburban Chicago country club, Ray's younger brother regularly drives his old red Cadillac the 13 hours to the prison 30 miles northwest of Knoxville.

Though he calls his brother a "four-time loser" for his stays in various jails for armed robbery and the King killing, Jerry keeps an unspoken loyalty, helping photocopy new lawsuits, and sharing new theories from books and newspaper articles.

Thicker and less expressive than James Ray, Jerry also knows what life is like in prison. He spent several years there for burglary and other charges.

They meet in a second-floor room, barren except for a dozen or so tables and cheap frame chairs. Several guards watch over them

from behind bars painted a creamy institutional brown as the brothers talk strategy.

The Tribune was allowed inside to talk with Ray in exchange for the cost of his brother's two-day visit.

Ray insists he never felt and doesn't feel now any hatred toward the slain civil rights leaders. "It's like the Greeks, the Zionists, the Koreans, all have people representing them. He was like representing the NAACP."

"They weren't representing me, but I wasn't hostile to him, I never had too much opinion of him."

The brothers, who have met many times in the last nine years, used almost the same words for answers. Jerry, speaking in a motel bar before seeing his brother, said of Ray's feelings about King, "He never had too much opinion of him one way or the other."

Ray said he doesn't "know enough" to write a book about the assassination and both Rays claim they are not interested in getting money for their view of the case.

"Money doesn't do him no good in jail," said Jerry. He claims they earlier turned down interviews offers of \$10,000.

If someday released, James Ray says he would probably leave the country, not out of fear of reprisals from black or white citizens, but to avoid "harassment" from the FBI.

And both brothers eagerly discredit the FBI for their handling of the murder investigation. Neither accuses federal agents of taking part in the murders, but each hints at unusual actions that day in Memphis.

Much of their doubt comes from free-lance assassination buffs or investigators, such as author Mark Lane, and leaks from the faltering House Select Committee on assassinations.

They are also buoyed by public statements, such as U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young's interview in the next Playboy Magazine where Young says, "I am convinced it was not a one-man assassination." Young was standing next to King on the motel balcony when the shots were fired.

Ray doesn't associate himself with those convicted of other assassinations, such as Sirhan Sirhan. "I don't like to talk about other people's cases," he said. He claims to have read only one book about Lee Harvey Oswald and excerpts from a book about the King murder.