

U.S. Asked to Take Custody Of Ray — 'He's a National Issue'



AP Wirephoto

A muddy, exhausted James Earl Ray (center) was escorted back to prison by Warden Stonney Lane and Deputy Warden Herman Davis

Plea from Tennessee

Brushy Mountain, Tenn.

James Earl Ray, captured after two days on the run, was back in Brushy Mountain Penitentiary yesterday but Tennessee's governor asked the federal government to take charge of the prisoner.

At a news conference in Nashville, Governor Ray Blanton said he was asking President Carter by letter and telephone to take custody of the convicted assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Since James Earl Ray is a national issue and has come up with national connotations and national concerns, we feel like rather than expending more of Tennessee taxpayers' money, the federal government should take custody of him," said Blanton.

"So, I'm offering him to the President."

The governor said he talked by phone with U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell shortly after Ray's capture and made his wishes known.

As the governor made public his letter to Carter, Charles Steele, a spokesman for the governor at Brushy Mountain Penitentiary said, "The governor is mad because the courts interfered with the state of Tennessee."

The reference was to a 1973 U.S. District Court decision that Ray could not be held in isolation without specific cause.

Ray refused to tell prison officials anything of substance about the escape at dusk Friday, when he and six other prisoners clambered up a ladder made of plumbing pipe, slipped under a barbed wire charged with 2300 volts of electricity, and went over the prison's north wall.

A disciplinary hearing and possible state escape charges held no terror for the convicted assassin. The worst he could get is loss of "good time" from his 99-year sentence, which bars parole until near the turn of the century, when he will be 72 years old.

Prison officials said that Ray and a former cellmate who was among the escapers, Earl Hill Jr., were cellmates again last night.

After a routine checkup in the prison infirmary, Ray and Hill were placed in a cell in the maximum-security D Block because of a shortage of cell space at the 300-inmate prison.

Ray will remain in "administra-

Back Page Col. 4

From Page 1

tive lockup" — not in solitary confinement but separate from other prisoners and restricted in his movements at the prison — for at least a week.

With the capture of Ray and two other fugitives in a ten-hour span, only one of seven men who escaped Friday remained at large. Warden Stonney Lane said at midday he was confident that Douglas Shelton would be captured in a matter of hours, but later he said tracking dogs had lost the scent.

Shelton's capture would leave intact the Brushy Mountain Penitentiary's record of no successful escape.

At about 11 p.m. Sunday officers with bloodhounds captured Hill, a murderer, in the New River area about eight miles east of the prison. A bloodhound named Sandy and her 14-month-old sister, Little Red, picked up Ray's scent from that spot, and prison officials were so confident of an imminent capture that they announced they were in pursuit of Ray.

"We struck a track that turned out to be James Earl Ray. I was handling one dog," said Donald Saugherty, a guard who trains the prison's dogs.

As Daugherty stayed in radio contact with a dog team, the dogs coursed through the woods in pursuit, at times so close that Ray could be heard crashing through the brush.

For three hours Ray ran, the dogs baying in close pursuit, six armed men behind them. Other officers, moved by radio, shuttled to likely exit points.

"It's like running a rabbit," said Daugherty. "You try to go where the rabbit will run, or if you want a shot at him — or in this case, to capture your man — you go where there are chances of him coming out."

Finally, exhausted, scratched from the frush and the briars, having gone without food for 54½ hours, James Earl Ray could run no longer. He fell to the earth but would not relent. He covered himself with leaves.

Soon, the dogs came, and then the men.

After the dogs sniffed him out, the officers asked Ray if he was hurt, and he said he was not.

They put handcuffs on him, arms in front in case he fell, and James Earl Ray, assassin and escaper, was marched slowly down the mountain.

C. Murray Henderson, Tennessee's corrections commissioner, said Ray "was in good shape . . . nothing wrong except he was completely exhausted."

Warden Lane was asked whether Ray had said anything about the escape since his recapture and he replied, "No. Nothing at all."

Another prison spokesman said when Ray was asked "What did you do?" he replied with one word:

"Nothing."

On the ride back to the prison, Lane told Ray that photographers were waiting at the prison and asked whether Ray would accommodate them.

Ray, who has been selling interviews at newspapers at \$2000 each, said he preferred not to.

But as the car sped through the gates, a reporter shouted, "Is that Ray?" and the convict replied, "I'm not his mother."

In the infirmary yesterday morning, Ray was given a glass of juice and ate one egg, a biscuit with grape jelly and a glass of milk.

At his news conference, Blanton noted that since the federal court ruling that the state could not keep Ray in solitary confinement, Ray had made two previous escape attempts at Brushy Mountain Penitentiary — on May 3, 1971, and on Feb. 5, 1972.

He was a fugitive from the Missouri State Penitentiary at the time of the King assassination on April 4, 1968.

Brushy Mountain Penitentiary is surrounded on three sides by 3000-foot-high hillsides, thickly green with lush foilage that is almost impenetrable by all but the surest footed.

The re-taking of the state's most celebrated prisoner ended one of the largest manhunts in Tennessee's history, costing upward of \$200,000 — perhaps as much as a half-million dollars, said Brooks Parker, press secretary to Governor Blanton.

The search involved at least eight helicopters at one time and 200 law enforcement officials with six teams of bloodhounds. In addition, hundreds of area residents went into the hills with shotguns for the excitement of the chase and the possibility of collecting the \$25 bounty for each fugitive. However, all the fugitives were caught by badged officers.

Meanwhile, the chief investigator of the House Assassinations Committee, Robert Lehner, and Edward Evans, head of a subcommittee investigating the King assassination, arrived at the prison to continue their look into the escape.

Lehner had told the committee early in the day that there was no evidence Ray had received any help from the outside.

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Ray's strange attitude
about kids, Page 4