

The Moment Ray

The final excerpt from George McMillan's "The Making of an Assassin" depicts the scene as James Earl Ray draws a bead on the civil rights leader on a motel balcony and pulls the trigger of his rifle.

By George McMillan
Special to The Chronicle

Martin Luther King and his associates met in Atlanta to consider whether he should continue to identify himself with the Memphis garbage strike. On April 1, 1968, King announced that he was going to return to Memphis and he did so, on Wednesday, April 3, arriving at 10:33 a.m.

He went directly to the Lorraine Motel.

King was not the only new arrival in Memphis. At the very moment King was speaking at the Mason Temple, a man who signed the register as "Eric S. Galt" took Room 34 at the New Rebel Motel.

This was James Earl Ray. He had come to Memphis to murder King.

Ray drove to Memphis in a white Mustang. He stopped along the route at a place that seems from his description to have been Corinth, Miss., the site of the Civil War battle of Shiloh. Somewhere near Corinth, he drove off the highway to a secluded spot and test-fired his rifle. He had to do this to align the sight.

Any difficulty Ray may have had in fixing the exact spot where King was to be found in Memphis was settled when, on the nightly news broadcasts of April 3, Memphis TV stations carried a picture of King standing on the second-story balcony of the Lorraine in front of his room. The number 306 was plain. The next morning's Commercial Appeal, a copy of which was later found in Ray's belongings, also carried a photo of King on the Lorraine balcony.

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In the 12 months since his escape from Jefferson City, Jimmy had been in regular touch with Jerry, his brother. He had called Jerry as often as three or four times a month, says Jerry.

And now he made one last call from Memphis. It seems to have been on the morning of April 4. Jerry was in Chicago. What Jimmy said was:

"Jerry, tomorrow it will all be over. I might not see you and Jack for awhile. But don't worry about

Pointed the

Gun at King

me. I'll be all right. Big Nigger has had it."

The balcony of King's room looked out across a lot strewn with trash and garbage and up to the back of a row of old, two-story brick buildings that faced Main street. At 422½ Main street, Bessie Brewer ran a rooming house. The windows of Brewer's rooms looked down on the Lorraine.

At about 3:15 p.m. on Thursday afternoon, April 4, a man who called himself John Willard (and who was James Earl Ray) appeared at the top of the stairs where Brewer had her office and said he wanted a room.

She showed him Room 8, at \$10.50 a week her most expensive room. He turned it down. She showed him 5-B. With only a glance at the room, Ray told Brewer he would take it. Having made sure that it had a view of the Lorraine Motel (unlike the first room she had shown him), Ray was satisfied.

Ray drove to the York Arms Co. and bought a pair of \$40 Bushnell binoculars. He drove directly back to the rooming house.

It was now about 4:45 p.m.

Ray did not stir until five, when he got out of the car, went to the back, opened the trunk. He lifted out a bundle wrapped in a green-and-yellow bedspread, put the bundle under his arm, closed the trunk, walked to the door of the rooming house and went inside.

In the late afternoon all of

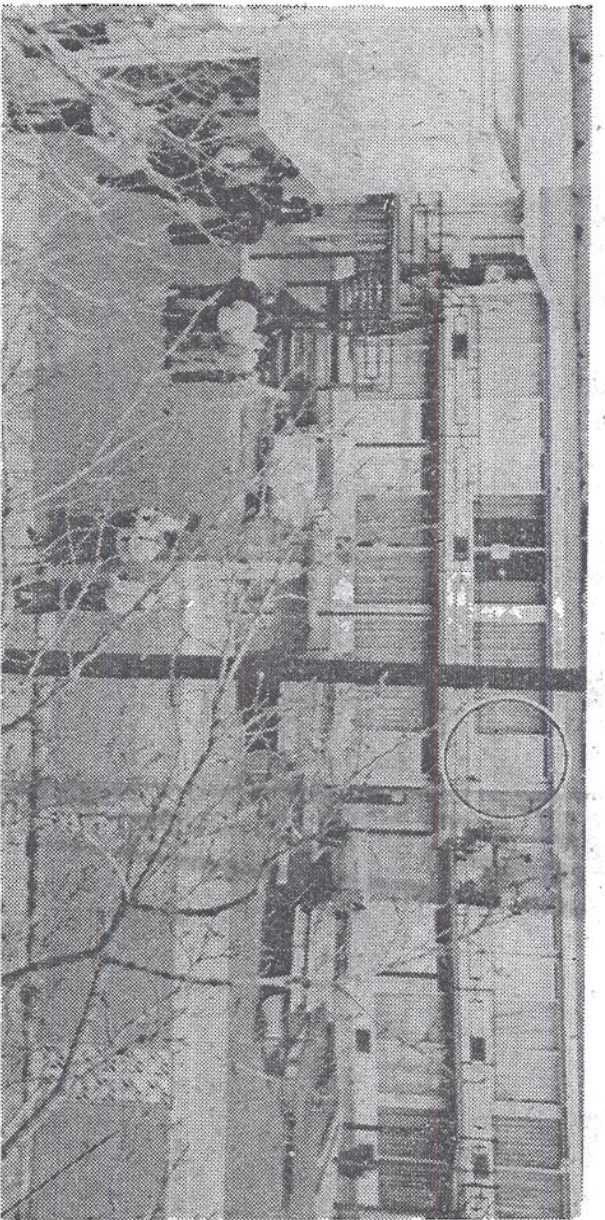
King's veteran staff began to gather around him at the Lorraine. They were primping to go with King (or "Doc," or "Martin" — as most of them called him) to a soul food dinner. Their host was to be the Rev. Samuel B. (Billy) Kyles, a local minister.

The Breadbasket Band, a soul music group, had come from Chicago to play for King's rallies in Memphis. Could they come to Billy Kyles's for dinner? No, there were too many guests already.

King came out on the balcony. One of the men standing below yelled up:

"Doc, this is Ben Branch who plays in our band."

Branch waved up to King, who was leaning over the balcony, look-



This is the view James Earl Ray had when he pulled the trigger. Circle indicates the balcony where Martin Luther King was standing.

ing down. King remembered Branch. He called out in that melodious and emotionally charged voice of his:

'Ben, I want you to sing for me tonight. I want you to sing 'Precious Lord.'"

That was the last sentence Martin Luther King ever spoke.

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Ray may have bought the cheapest pair of binoculars, but they were precisely what he wanted. The Bushnells were seven-power — exactly the same power as his Redfield sight, would give him exactly the same image. King would appear to be 30 feet away. Now, with the binoculars, Ray went directly to 5-B, put his bundle down on the bed, unwound the bedspread

from around the carton that held his rifle. He went to the window, pulled a chair over to it, looped the curtain back against the mantel, raised the shade, opened his binoculars, sat down to watch.

There was an even more direct view of the Lorraine from the rooming house bathroom and Ray decided to have a look from there.

It was probably on his second trip to the bathroom that Ray took his Gamemaster rifle. He was going to make his shot from the bathroom. He raised the small window as far as he could, and knocked out the rusty screen. He rested the rifle on the windowsill and aimed it.

To do so meant that he had to stand in the bathtub, lean one arm against the wall. There was something inglorious in that, and something fatefully typical of Ray and his crimes. He was going to carry out the most important single act of his life and he had to do it with his feet in the old, stained, rooming house tub.

He watched through his binoculars until King came out on the balcony. He aimed carefully and, at 6:01 p.m., he fired a single shot which hit Martin Luther King in his right jaw, shattering that side of his face, and which went on into his body to lodge in his vertebrae. King fell back on the balcony, mortally wounded.

Ray quickly went to his room, picked up the carton and the bedspread, wrapped the rifle in them, started down the hall. Willie Anschutz, another of Brewer's roomers, bound for the toilet, met Ray.

"Hey," he said, "that sounded like a shot."

"It was," Ray calmly answered and went on along the hall, down the stairs and out the door.

He barely got away. Within 15 minutes, the Memphis police radio broadcast a description of Ray and the white Mustang.

By that time, according to Ray's account, he was outside the city limits, driving south, in the gathering dusk, into Mississippi. He drove all night, east through Alabama, into Georgia.

He listened intently to his car radio as he drove. He was astonished at what he heard. The news broadcasts made it sound as if the killing of King was a national disaster.

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"Jimmy didn't dream there'd be that much heat on him," says Jerry Ray. "It seemed like even before he got out of Memphis, he heard the FBI was in it. The way Jimmy had it figured, Hoover would stay out of it. He figured Hoover hated King, that Hoover didn't want King to come to Washington on that march, and that Hoover wouldn't care if Jimmy did cut King off.

"As for Memphis, Jimmy had it figured before he ever went there, that things wouldn't go too tough for him there. He thought the Memphis police were up in arms about King.

Ray may have been surprised that the FBI was "in it," as Jerry said, but he did not panic. Some time during the morning — it seems to have been his last act in Atlanta — he took the pains to mail off the final lesson in his correspondence course in locksmithing.

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