

New Testimony in King Murder Case

St. Louis

A 46-year-old man has told the House assassination committee that late in 1966 or early 1967 he turned down an offer of \$50,000 to arrange the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Russell G. Byers, a former auto parts dealer, acknowledged in an interview with the New York Times that he had told the committee that two men from Imperial, Mo., had offered him the money on behalf of a group of businessmen to kill the civil rights leader, who was assassinated on April 4, 1968. Both men have since died, but their wives said that they did not believe the story.

The account has spurred an intense inquiry by investigators for the committee, largely because Byers' brother-in-law, John Spica, was serving a murder term at the time of the alleged offer in the Missouri State Penitentiary, where James Earl Ray, later convicted of killing King, was also a prisoner. The committee plans to administer a lie-detector test to Ray because of the Byers report.

Myers told the Times that he had rejected the proposal and had not informed Spica about it. But he said he had suspected that word of a bounty on King's life might have reached men inside the prison through other routes.

A three-month investigation by the House committee, and an inde-

pendent inquiry by a team of reporters for the New York Times, have uncovered a series of circumstantial connections leading from Byers and the two men from Imperial, Mo., into the state penitentiary, from which Ray escaped on April 23, 1967, almost a year before the fatal shooting of King in Memphis, Tenn.

Ray is serving a 99-year prison term in Tennessee for the murder of King. Ray, who pleaded guilty to the murder, has more recently denied from time to time that he fired the fatal shot and has repeatedly requested a new trial, which he maintains would place the blame on others whose identity has not been disclosed so far.

Although no evidence has yet been produced that establishes a direct link between the alleged proposal to Byers and the death of King, this is the first of many conspiracy allegations that leads directly into the Missouri prison. At the prison, it was widely rumored in 1966 and 1967 that a conservative business group was willing to pay a large sum of money to anyone who would murder King.

House investigators are reported to regard this trail of evidence as one of the most tangible avenues of inquiry in their explorations into the deaths of King and President John F. Kennedy.

The investigators have declined to comment on the allegations of Byers.

According to what Byers told the House committee — whose official name is the House Select Committee on Assassinations — a friend and business associate, John R. Kauffmann, who was 61 in 1966, invited him to a meeting with John H. Sutherland, a prominent St. Louis patent lawyer. At the meeting, Byers said, Sutherland told him that a group of businessmen would pay \$50,000 for the murder of King.

The widows of both Kauffmann and Sutherland said that they knew nothing about the alleged plot until they were questioned by House investigators this year. They also said that they did not believe that their husbands could have been involved in such a plot.

Sutherland, who died in 1970, had been a member of Governor George Wallace's American Independent party, a leader of the White Citizens Council of St. Louis and an official of the Southern States Industrial Council, a conservative group. One legal colleague said Sutherland had been a segregationist but not a "violent man."

Kauffmann and Sutherland were associated in the ownership of a small water company in Imperial and lived near each other in that small semi-rural community south of here.

New York Times