

# St. Louisan Confirms That Byers Told Him About King Killing Offer

By WILLIAM FREIVOGEL  
and CARTER STITH

A reputable St. Louisan confirms that Russell G. Byers told him that he had been offered \$50,000 by two Imperial, Mo., men to arrange the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King.

Byers twice mentioned the plot, first in generalities shortly after the assassination in 1968 and later in more detail in about 1974, the St. Louisan told the Post-Dispatch. He said that in the latter conversation Byers told of a stockbroker taking him to the Imperial farm of a patent lawyer to discuss the plot.

Byers did not use names, the promi-

nent citizen said, but he apparently was referring to stockbroker John R. Kauffmann and lawyer John H. Sutherland, whom he has accused of the plot in recent testimony to the House Assassinations Committee.

Previous accounts of the alleged assassination plot have said that Byers has said that he told two lawyers and other unidentified persons about it some years ago. But this is the first direct confirmation from one of those persons.

In another development, a Clayton lawyer, who has been questioned by the House Assassinations Committee staff, told a reporter he had seen Byers and Kauffmann meeting several times in the

late 1960s. The lawyer represented both Kauffmann and Byers on separate legal matters.

The lawyers said Kauffmann had introduced him to Byers during a lunch in about 1966. He got the impression that Byers and Kauffmann knew each other from growing up in the same part of south St. Louis and that they had some kind of business dealings in the 1960s.

Byers was particularly close to Kauffmann's late brother Gil Kauffmann, who was a deputy St. Louis County coroner before his death in 1962, the lawyer said.

Asked whether Byers had told him

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about the alleged assassination offer, the lawyer said he could not respond because the confidential relationship between an attorney and his client. He said he had give the same answer to the House committee's staff.

The lawyer's account adds new detail about Byers' relationship with Kauffmann.

Both sources agreed to talk with the Post-Dispatch only after they were given assurances that their names would not be revealed. One insisted that the newspaper not even identify his occupation, apparently because he feared reprisals from Byers or other.

The House Assassinations Committee is conducting an intensive investigation into Byers' allegations. It held closed hearings on them last week. Byers was reported to have told the committee that he turned down the offer from Sutherland and Kauffmann, which he says was made in late 1966 or early 1967. Sutherland died in 1970, and Kauffman died in 1973.

The St. Louisan said that Byers told him shortly after the King assassination in 1968 that he might know something about it, and that the Ku Klux Klan or some organization was behind it.

"That's all he said. I thought it was just street talk," the St. Louisan said.

Later, in about 1974, Byers mentioned the plot again. The St. Louisan gave this account of what he said: A stockbroker who had lost his license, apparently Kauffmann, approached Byers with the \$50,000 offer. Byers asked him whom he had to kill. Kauffmann took Byers to a St. Louis patent attorney who lived on a nearby farm in Imperial who said King was the target. Byers said he never had

intended to follow through on the plot but had gone along out of curiosity.

Sutherland, the patent lawyer owned a farm in Imperial near Kauffmann's Imperial home. Sutherland was a segregationist and the organizer of the Citizens Council in St. Louis, a states rights group formed in 1964 that distributed anti-black literature.

The St. Louisan said his recollection of the conversation with Byers differed in one way from the recently published accounts of Byers' testimony to the House committee.

"From what I read, Byers seems to be saying now that he thinks Ray (James Earl Ray, who pleaded guilty to the King assassination) is a fall guy. But that's not the impression I got then. I thought Russell thought they probably approached Ray through some friend of Kauffmann, a doctor who worked at the prison."

Dr. Hugh W. Maxey, the former chief physician at the Missouri State Penitentiary, was a friend of Kauffmann.

The St. Louisan said Byers had not mentioned his brother-in-law, John Paul Spica, who was serving a murder sentence in the Penitentiary at the time Ray escaped from the institution. Byers too, in his recent statements reportedly told the House committee that Spica was not involved. But press accounts have speculated whether he could have transmitted word of the \$50,000 offer to Ray.

The St. Louisan said he believed Byers in 1974. "I mean you do believe someone if you don't have any reason to think they lied," he said. But in the wake of Byers' arrest in connection with thefts of statues from St. Louis Art Museum last

DR. HUGH  
W. MAXEY

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witer, he said he wondered whether Byers might then have been in trouble too and put out the assassination story to get the Federal Bureau of Investigation or the police to ease off him. Byers was not prosecuted for the museum thefts.

The St. Louisan refused to say whether the House committee has questioned him.

The Clayton lawyer knew Kauffmann quite well in the late 1950s and early 1960s when Kauffmann was a stockbroker in Clayton and a client. Kauffmann also entertained the lawyer at his Jefferson Countyhome.

The lawyer said tht Kauffmann, long active on the periphery of Democratic politics in St. Louis and Jefferson counties, had been involved in the presidential campaign of Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace in 1968. Sutherland also was a leader of the Wallace campaign here.

The lawyer said he thought only money or the promise of it would hav motivated Kauffmann to get involved in Wallace's campaign or the King plot. "John was not a racist," he said.

"He was growing old and a little scared, maybe, and he wanted money," the lawyer said. He said the same fears may have led to Kauffmann's federal conviction in 1967 for illegally selling

500,000 amphetamine pills: In the 1940s, by contrast, Kauffmann had been an aircraft executive, stock broker and member of the St. Louis Stock Exchange. But when he died his estate was worth only \$40,000.

Kauffmann made his living in the 1960s by selling so-called "penny stocks," the lawyer recalled. For example, Kauffmann would start a company with capital of about one-cent per share and then sell stock for \$1 per share.

There was nothing illegal about that when Kauffmann was involved, the lawyer said, but changes in the securities laws in later years put an end to penny stocks and to Kauffman's main source of income.

The lawyer said he always found Byers to be truthful and could see no advantage to Byers in telling about the alleged plot. The lawyer said he thought the plot was plausible. He represented Byers in a civil case about five years ago.

So far, there has been no corroboration of Byers' allegation or any credible link to Ray. The wives of both Sutherland and Kauffmann have told the House committee that they knew nothing about such a plot and branded as incredible the idea that their husbands could be involved in a scheme to assassinate Dr. King.