

The Secret Revealed: How James Earl Ray Got His Money

JOHN J. DUNPHY

There's always a certain time-lapse before works of importance make their way to a used-book shop such as mine. The other day, in a box of donated books, I found the autumn 2005 issue of *The American Scholar*, which I began to read. Kitty Kelley, the author of several best-selling scandalous biographies about celebrities, listed 15 secrets for which she'd like to find answers. While I haven't a clue as to what happened to Ambrose Bierce, the journalist who disappeared in revolution-torn Mexico, or whether Judge Irving Kaufman sentenced the Rosenbergs to death at the insistence of Roy Cohn, I can answer Kelley's Secret #10—"Who gave James Earl Ray the money and means for travel after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.?"

There is evidence that Ray, a spectacularly unsuccessful small-time thief, who was born in my hometown of Alton, Illinois, and committed no few number of crimes here, financed himself. My interest in regional history led me to investigate the life of southwestern Illinois' most notorious native.

James Earl Ray was born in Alton on March 10, 1928, in his family's home at 1021 West Ninth Street, in what

was then the city's red-light district. The residence has since been torn down, and the lot remains empty. He was the eldest of ten children whose parents never escaped poverty.

Ray claimed that his family was nominally Catholic and that in 1934 his parents enrolled him in the first grade at St. Mary's Catholic Church. He was forced to leave St. Mary's before the academic year ended when his father was run out of Alton because of his involvement in a forgery scheme. The Ray family moved to Bowling Green, Missouri, in 1930 and settled in a rundown farmhouse outside Ewing, Missouri, across the Mississippi River from Quincy, Illinois. James Earl Ray's first altercation with the law occurred in 1942 when the fourteen-year-old was visiting his grandmother in Alton. He grabbed a bundle of newspapers that had been tossed from a delivery truck and began selling the papers himself. The police seized the young thief and ended Ray's brief entrepreneurial enterprise.

The Ray family moved to Galesburg, Illinois, but James decided to live with his grandmother in Alton. He dropped out of school and took a job at the old International Shoe Tannery in nearby Hartford, Illinois. When World War II ended and the military cut back its orders, Ray was laid off. An Army recruiter in East St. Louis, Illinois, persuaded him to enlist.

Ray went to Germany but received a general discharge in 1948 for what the Army termed as "ineptness." He returned to Alton and then decided to hit the road. It was during this aimless period that Ray acquired his first arrest as an adult: April 18, 1950, on a vagrancy charge in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

The botched eleven-dollar robbery of a Chicago cabbie earned Ray two years at Stateville Prison in Joliet, Illinois. Upon his release in 1954, Ray returned to the Alton area where, on October 28, 1954, he burglarized National

Cleaners in East Alton. Ray jumped through a plate-glass window, losing his loafers and badly cutting his feet. When the police arrived, they disabled Ray's getaway car. He walked miles to a relative's house where he was soon apprehended by the police, who had followed his bloody footprints.

The rest of this essay is available only to *New Letters* subscribers. Use our "Comments" box to request that the issue with this essay start your subscription.

[Click here to join us as a *New Letters* subscriber.](#)