

## "MURKIN" – The Largest Manhunt in America's History

by Susan E. Lloyd (1979-2004)

In the early morning hours of April 5, 1968, FBI fingerprint expert and supervisor George J. Bonebrake began an examination of the evidence from one of the highest profile cases in the history of the FBI. Less than 12 hours before, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN. Although a number of pieces of evidence had been collected and flown overnight to the FBI in Washington, DC, the identity and whereabouts of the shooter was unknown. Dubbed "MURKIN" for King's murder, the largest manhunt in American history was underway.

The intersection of the paths of the assailant and Dr. King in Memphis began one year earlier when Prisoner #416-J escaped from the state penitentiary in Jefferson City, MO, where he had already served seven years for armed robbery, with 18 more to go. A career criminal, the prisoner had worked in the prison kitchen for a number of years, primarily in the bakery.

On the morning of April 23, 1967, the prisoner, James Earl Ray, dressed in layers with makeshift civilian garb under his prison uniform. At some point, he went to the loading dock and climbed into a large metal box — 4' x 3' x 3' — which was partially loaded with fresh bread destined for delivery to the prison's honor farm. Fellow prisoners placed a false bottom on top of him and then filled the remaining space with more loaves of bread. Two inmates hoisted the box into the bed of the delivery truck, which was then cleared for departure.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Lorraine Motel

As the truck approached the honor farm, Ray jumped unseen from the back of it and made his way to a nearby river. He had the clothes on his back, 20 candy bars, a small transistor radio and almost \$300 in cash. A "Wanted" poster was soon distributed which announced a \$50 reward for his capture.

Ray walked west for six days alongside railroad tracks and then hopped an eastbound train. As the months of 1967 went by, Ray kept moving and lived for brief periods in St. Louis, Chicago, Toronto, Montreal, Birmingham and Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. He used the name "Eric Galt" and carried a .38 snub-nosed revolver. In Birmingham, he bought a 1966 white Mustang bearing Alabama license tags which he drove to Mexico and eventually on to Los Angeles, arriving there in mid-November. His money came from selling marijuana from Mexico, robberies and smuggling schemes.

While in Los Angeles, Ray attended a six-week bartending class, enrolled in a locksmith course and took dance lessons. His primary commitment, however, was to his work as a volunteer at George Wallace's presidential campaign headquarters in North Hollywood. There he spent hours collecting signatures to allow Wallace's name to appear on the state's primary ballot.

By March 17, Ray had concluded his work for the Wallace campaign. He packed his Mustang with his few belongings and got on the road the next day for Atlanta, the hometown of Martin Luther King Jr. After arriving there, he

rented a room in a shabby rooming house in the midtown neighborhood, paying rent for one week.

By 1968, the dominance of the cotton industry was on the wane in the South. Thousands of black families had left the cotton fields and many headed to the city of Memphis, hoping to find work there. With limited job openings, some were relegated to the low-paying job of trash collector.

On February 1, 1968, two Memphis sanitation workers were crushed to death by the faulty hydraulic ram mechanism of an aging garbage truck. Without insurance or compensation, their families had no money for proper burials. One widow resorted to burying her husband in a pauper's grave some distance away from Memphis.

Less than two weeks later, because of seeming disregard by the City of Memphis for municipal worker's safety as well as other grievances, 1,300 city employees went on strike. One month into the strike, on March 17, Dr. King received a telephone call from his old friend in Memphis, Rev. James Lawson, asking King to come to Memphis to speak to the striking workers, the sooner the better.

King flew into Memphis the next day. That evening, he spoke to fifteen thousand cheering supporters and promised to return in a few days to lead a march through the downtown area on behalf of the workers. King and his entourage spent the night at the Lorraine Motel, a black-owned motel that was his usual lodging place in Memphis.

Although King was scheduled to lead a march through downtown Memphis on March 22, Mother Nature intervened by dumping 17" of snow the night before on the city. A new date of March 28 was set for the march. That march started peacefully but soon turned violent, with outsiders breaking windows, looting, throwing rocks and starting fires. King and

his followers made the decision to break away mid-march and retreated from the area, lest they be accused of initiating the riots.

Meanwhile, about the same time, Ray drove from Atlanta to Birmingham with the intent to buy a rifle, ostensibly to go deer hunting. At the Aeromarine Supply Company, he handed over \$248 in cash for the purchase of a Remington Gamemaster .243 caliber rifle, a scope and several boxes of ammunition. Ray signed the sales slip using another alias, Harvey Lowmeyer, and gave a local Birmingham address.

Ray returned to the store the next day to exchange that rifle for a Gamemaster 760 .30-06-caliber rifle, stating he needed "a heavier gun." With the scope mounted on it, the 760 did not fit into its original box. Instead, the salesman was able to package it into an old Browning rifle box.

Back in Atlanta, Ray read in a newspaper that Dr. King was returning to Memphis in a few days to again try to lead a peaceful demonstration there. He quickly decided that was where he needed to be and departed Atlanta the morning of April 3 en route to Memphis. Most of Ray's belongings were left at the rooming house, including his .38 revolver, but he tucked the Gamemaster rifle in a bedspread and stowed the bundle in the trunk of his car.

Later that day, Ray arrived in Memphis, a city he had never before visited. He checked into the New Rebel Motel using the alias of Eric Galt and completed the registration form listing his Mustang and its true Alabama license tag. The next afternoon, Ray drove around the city and happened upon a rundown rooming house just one block west of the Lorraine Motel around 3:00 pm. Managed by Bessie Brewer, all of the rooms were on the second floor with some at the back having a clear view of the Lorraine Motel. Ray selected #5B, which had a rear window that wasn't boarded up. He introduced himself as John Willard and gave the manager one week's rent.

Once inside his room, Ray moved a dresser away from the window and looking out, saw the rooming house's trash-littered backyard and beyond it, the two-story Lorraine Motel with its long balcony. Ray estimated King's room was only 200' away and 12' lower than his window sill.

Ray was not fully satisfied, however, because he feared a large portion of the rifle would be too visible if he leaned over the sill for the best angle from which to shoot. Less than 15' down the hallway in a shared bathroom, though, Ray found a more promising vantage point. From the bathroom window and by using the rifle scope, the balcony of the motel would appear to be only 30' away.

King and his associates landed in Memphis mid-morning on April 3 and were first driven to the Lorraine Motel to check in. King was given his regular room, #306, in the middle of a row of rooms on the second floor. Most of that afternoon was spent indoors in meetings and making phone calls. That night he gave his famous "I have been to the mountaintop" speech. The next day, April 4, brought more meetings.

Shortly after 5:00 pm, King began to dress for a dinner party that night at the home of a local



Plaque outside of the motel room where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated

minister. After changing his too-tight shirt and finding his tie, King stepped out on the balcony at 5:55 pm to join the others in his entourage.

At that moment, Ray was in his room and saw movement on the balcony through his binoculars. He instantly realized he was looking at the man he had been tracking and ran down the hall to the bathroom to check the view. Ray ran back to his room to grab the rifle and the bundle of his belongings and then returned to the bathroom, locking the door behind him. Climbing into the bathtub directly below the window, Ray propped his rifle on the window sill, sighted it and at 6:01 p.m., pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit the right side of King's face and its impact caused him to fall backward onto the floor of the balcony. He was mortally wounded but still alive. However, despite a medical team's best efforts, King was declared dead one hour later at St. Joseph's Hospital.

Within a minute of firing the fatal shot, Ray ran out of the rooming house and onto the street with the bundle under his arm. As he headed toward his Mustang, he saw police cars ahead and panicking, threw the bundle into the recessed entry of a store. Among other items, the bundle contained the rifle, the Browning box, rifle scope, binoculars and a blue plastic suitcase.

After hearing the thud, the store owner went to investigate and found the bundle on the ground. Looking down the street, he saw a white male of medium build walking quickly away and getting into a late model white Mustang.

Deputies from the Shelby County Sheriff's Department appeared at the store within a minute or two and secured the bundle, discerning the rifle was possibly the weapon used in the shooting of King. Based on the store owner's statement, an APB was put out for a white Mustang driven by a well-dressed white male.

Other officers tracked back to the rooming house where they found several roomers eager to tell them about the strange new tenant and point them toward Room #5B and the hall bathroom. In Ray's room, the officers found two black leather straps which appeared to come from a binocular case which became evidence.

Custody of the bundle was turned over to the Memphis FBI Office that evening. An inventory was conducted prior to its being hand-delivered to the FBI lab in Washington. Inside the blue suitcase, a pair of pliers was found which bore a small sticker marked "Rompage Hardware." This name was traced to a single hardware store in Los Angeles and FBI Agents were soon dispatched to the store.

Also in the suitcase was men's underwear with laundry tags stamped "02B-6." Through a machine company in Syracuse, NY, which manufactured these tag stamps, it was learned the machines were primarily used by laundries in Los Angeles. At the Bureau's request, the machine company put together a list of all the laundries in Los Angeles that used the stamping equipment.

FBI Agents in Memphis were assigned to canvas the area's economy lodging facilities. At the New Rebel Motel, they hit the jackpot when the owner produced a registration card for Eric S. Galt, who listed a rooming house address in Birmingham and who drove a Mustang bearing Alabama tag 1-38993.

By then, Ray was well on his way. He arrived in Atlanta early on April 5 and drove to Capitol Homes, a sprawling housing project, where he parked his Mustang and walked away. That same morning, he went to a laundry to pick up clothing he left there before he went to Memphis.

As a regular customer, the individual pieces of Ray's laundry bore small identifying marks of "EGC-83," denoting his alias, Eric Galt. He next

returned to the rooming house to claim his belongings, including his .38 revolver and approximately \$1,000 he had saved from various illegal activities. Satisfied he had everything he needed, Ray headed to the bus station where he caught a bus going north. He subsequently transferred to a train destined for Toronto, Canada. Once in Toronto, he found a modest rooming house and paid for a week's rent.

Ray was without any solid identification. To resolve that problem, he accessed birth announcements from the 1930s at the local newspaper office, selecting the names of baby boys Ramon Sneyd and Paul Bridgman. Both were still living in Toronto according to the phone directory. Ray surveilled both men's houses to see if he resembled either one and then telephoned both on a pretext to see if either one had a passport. Ray then made the decision to obtain identification and a passport using Sneyd's identity.



*George Bonebrake*

At about the same time Ray reached Atlanta on April 5, FBI fingerprint expert George Bonebrake was awaiting delivery of evidence collected from the Memphis crime scene. A serious man who took pride in everything he did, Bonebrake had moved to Washington from the Midwest in October 1941 to work for the FBI.

He resigned in December 1941 following the Pearl Harbor attack to enlist in the Navy, with the understanding he could return to the Bureau after the war. After his discharge, Bonebrake returned in 1946 as a Latent Fingerprint Examiner, eventually becoming the supervisor of the section. He taught at the FBI Academy and was also responsible for the design of the FBI's fingerprint laboratory there. Bonebrake retired from the FBI in 1978 and went on to work as a fingerprint consultant in the private legal sector.

In 1968, the FBI categorized fingerprints according to the Henry classification system. This system recognizes three primary ridge patterns: arches, loops and whorls. At the time, the



Bureau had the fingerprints of more than eighty-two million people on file. Long before automation was introduced, examiners had to search painstakingly by hand for each and every match.

While many others in the FBI lab went to work on their respective pieces of evidence from Memphis, Bonebrake started his examination for latent prints. Soon he was able to lift six quality fingerprints and two in particular from the same left thumb: one from the rifle and one from the binoculars. The ridge pattern of this print was significant — an ulner loop of twelve ridge counts — which would help narrow the search.

A reward was posted for the capture of King's killer and a composite sketch was released based on witness descriptions, generating a flood of tips. On April 10, a resident of Capitol Homes called the authorities to report an abandoned Mustang that had been parked near her house for five days. Agents converged on the car the next day and proceeded to conduct a comprehensive search and inventory. One key item they found was an oil change sticker on the inside of the door from a car dealership in Los Angeles.

An interview at the dealership revealed Eric S. Galt had taken the vehicle in for service in late February and had listed a nearby home address on

the paperwork. Agents deployed to that address found a rundown hotel and a clerk who remembered Ray. Using the name of Galt, the man had checked out on March 17 or 18 after a stay of two months and left a forwarding address of General Delivery, Atlanta.

Ray briefly had phone service in his room in January 1968 and Agents obtained a record of his incoming and outgoing calls. One call was to a dance studio where it was learned "Galt" had taken lessons for several months before quitting in February, purportedly to take bartending classes. A local canvas of all such schools turned up not only the school he had attended but also a photo of "Galt" at his graduation on March 2. The only problem with the photo was that his eyes were shut.

Other Los Angeles Agents canvassed area banks for accounts Galt might have had. Although he had apparently never opened an account, the Agents did locate a bank where Galt had purchased a series of money orders. Several of these had been sent to a locksmith school in New Jersey for a correspondence course. In fact, records at the school showed the last lesson had been mailed to Galt at an address in Atlanta only one week earlier.

After a surveillance of the rooming house at the Atlanta address came up empty for anyone resembling the man in the bartending graduation photo, it was time to talk to the manager. He identified Galt from that photo in a photographic lineup and showed the Agents to Galt's room. There they found an old TV, several booklets, a stash of food items and a number of road maps of the U.S. and Mexico. March 31 was the last time the manager had seen Galt when he paid for a second week's rent.

In Toronto on April 16, Ray wrote to the registrar of births to request a copy of a birth certificate for Ramon Sneyd, his new alias. Later that day, he walked into a travel agency to ask about plane fares to other countries. Not only did Ray book a flight to London, departing Toronto on May 6, but the travel agent offered to help him get a Canadian passport without a birth certificate. At that time in Canada, a birth certificate was not required if a passport applicant signed a form called "Statutory Declaration in Lieu of Guarantor" in front of a notary.

Ray used the real Ramon Sneyd's name and date of birth on the application forms but listed the true address of his rooming house. Ray paid the agent and was told both the passport and plane ticket should be received at the agency in about two weeks.

Back at the FBI lab on April 16, Bonebrake and his team of examiners were able to match a fingerprint raised from a map of Mexico in "Galt's" room in Atlanta with a fingerprint found on the Gamemaster rifle. The next day the FBI issued an arrest warrant for Eric Starvo Galt, alias Harvey Lowmeyer and alias John Willard, for violating Dr. King's civil rights. Two photographs were also released to the public: Ray's photo with closed eyes from the bartending school and an artist's depiction of that same man with his eyes open. Neither image was a convincing likeness.

By April 18, Bonebrake and his men had narrowed their search for matching prints down to three million sets by focusing on men between the ages of 21 and 50, still a daunting task. FBI executives discussed ways to further narrow the search and agreed that Galt had acted like a man on the lam even before the assassination. He could possibly even be an escaped convict.

There were 53,000 “Wanted” fugitives in the system. Bonebrake suggested concentrating on the two left thumb prints, found respectively on the rifle and the binoculars, because of their quality and clear loop pattern with twelve ridge counts. This further trimmed the number of possibilities to nineteen hundred known fugitives.

Bonebrake and his team worked through the night examining fingerprint cards. By morning, they had reviewed five hundred sets of cards, with another fourteen hundred to go. Just as the lunch break arrived, one of the examiners gave a shout. He was holding card #702 which was an exact match to the thumb prints on the rifle and the binoculars. The prints belonged to James Earl Ray.

In Toronto, Ray was in a bar watching an episode of ABC’s “The FBI” when Efrem Zimbalist Jr. appeared on the screen. He showed a picture of Ray and gave Ray’s real name as the suspect in the King murder case. Ray quickly left the bar and went back to his rooming house where he locked himself in for a full day.

Ray ventured out on May 2 to pick up his passport and plane ticket at the travel agency. Much to his chagrin, the last name on his passport appeared as “Sneya” instead of “Sneyd.” However, it was too late to have it changed if he wanted to travel on May 6 to London.

Upon landing in London on May 7, Ray exchanged his return ticket for a ticket to Lisbon, Portugal, where he hoped to catch a ship to Africa to pursue his dream of becoming a soldier of fortune in Angola. He visited the Canadian embassy in Lisbon to obtain a new passport with the correct spelling of the last name “Sneyd.” However, he soon became disillusioned with life in Portugal and



*George Bonebrake, on the left, taking a print*

unable to find a ship to Africa, he returned to London on May 17.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the FBI had expanded its hunt to Canada after learning Ray had spent time there soon after his escape from prison. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) joined the investigation and proceeded to examine all passport applications submitted since April 1967, some 218,000 total. After long days of careful examination, one constable pulled an application with a photo that fit the fugitive’s description. The name on the passport was Ramon George Sneya.

RCMP detectives fanned out across Toronto to visit the various addresses listed on the passport application. At the travel agency where Ray had obtained his plane ticket, they learned that Sneyd had been booked to travel to London on May 6.

Detectives at Scotland Yard determined Sneya had passed through London’s Heathrow Airport on his way to Lisbon on May 7 and that he had returned to London on May 17 with a new passport in the name of “Sneyd.” Flyers bearing “Sneyd’s” photo were distributed to every police and immigration officer in the British Isles and his name was placed on the All Ports Warning list.

By June 4, Ray was low on money and made the decision to rob a bank. Walking into the chosen bank, he approached a teller and passed a pink paper bag with a demand note written on it. Ray collected ninety-five pounds and fled the bank after he heard a noise similar to a gunshot. The pink bag was accidentally left behind and upon examination by New Scotland Yard, yielded a high quality latent thumbprint.

On June 8, Ray traveled to London’s Heathrow Airport to take a flight to Brussels, Belgium, where he planned to get information on becoming a mercenary in Africa. He presented his “Sneyd” passport to an immigration officer who noticed another



*Martin Luther King Monument along the Tidal Basin in Washington, DC during the blooming of the cherry blossoms*

passport tucked in the man's wallet. The officer asked to see that one, which was the original passport issued in the name of "Sneya."

While Ray was explaining the discrepancy, a Scotland Yard detective appeared. Thinking the passenger looked familiar, he checked his copy of the All Ports Warning and found the name of Ramon George Sneyd. Keeping a poker face, the detective asked Ray to accompany him to a nearby office where it was discovered the man was carrying a revolver. He was placed under arrest and charged with traveling on a forged passport and carrying a firearm without a permit.

Ray was transported to a holding cell inside Scotland Yard while detectives continued to gather information about him. After several hours, the Detective Chief Superintendent entered the cell and told Ray they not only believed he was an American but that his real name was James Earl Ray, wanted in connection with the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. After 65 days on the run, Ray was finally in custody under his true name.

In the weeks that followed, an extradition hearing was held in London beginning on June 27 at which George Bonebrake testified about the matching latent fingerprints. Ray was extradited back to the states on July 18 via a C-135,

which departed from the USAF base in Suffolk, England, accompanied by four Agents and a physician. After landing at a naval air base outside of Memphis, the prisoner was transferred to the custody of the Sheriff of Shelby County, Tennessee and charged with murder.

Ray entered a guilty plea on March 10, 1969, to avoid a probable death sentence and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. In June 1977, he escaped from the Brushy Mountain State Prison, but was captured three days later. He died in prison on April 23, 1998, due to complications from hepatitis C. At the time, it was estimated the "MURKIN" case cost nearly two million dollars and involved more than 3,000 FBI Agents and employees.

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**Editor's note:** Because of the breadth of the "MURKIN" case, several portions of the investigation have been omitted from this article. For those readers who are interested in additional information, there are numerous articles and books about the case available in the public domain.

The editor wishes to thank George Bonebrake's daughter, Priscilla Andachter and her husband, retired FBI Special Agent Ron Andachter, for their time and contributions to this article.

## PHOTO FROM THE FILES



*FTU and SOARS members during a rappelling exercise at Quantico on June 23, 1980.*

*Submitted by Bill Vanderpool (1973-1993)*

*Kneeling: Bill Vanderpool, Cal Ford, Tase Bailey, Jim Adams and Don Gray; standing: Sid Pruitt, Don Bassett, unknown, Bowen Johnson, Dave Piseni, Roger Nisley, unknown, unknown and Rollie Swanson*