

Grace Stephens: A Sacrificial Lamb?

By Mike Vinson

During the month of December 1997, *The Nashville Tennessean* ran two articles I authored, both focusing on James Earl Ray, the convicted assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A denominator common to both articles was a woman's name: Grace Waldo Stephens. Considering the irreparable damage she suffered, I only briefly mentioned her. I feel her story now, at the very least, warrants the following space.

Cutting through the fat and straight to the bone: Grace Stephens was the common-law wife of Charles Quitman Stephens. Back on April 4, 1968, the day King was assassinated, the Stephenses shared room 6B of Bessie Brewer's flophouse, located atop Jim's Grill, 4221 1/2 South Main Street, Memphis, Tennessee. During the afternoon of April 4, 1968, between 3 and 4 p.m., Bessie Brewer rented out room SB, next door to the Stephenses, to a man signing the registration book as "John Willard," an alias admittedly used by James Earl Ray.

Sometime between 5:40 and 6 p.m. a sniper's bullet slew Dr. King as he stood on the balcony in front of room 306 of the Lorraine Hotel and Motel, located approximately 75-200 feet (looking opposite of South Main Street) behind Bessie Brewer's flophouse.

Eluding authorities for some time, eventually apprehended by Scotland Yard at London's Heathrow Airport, James Earl Ray was extradited back to Memphis in July 1968 as the prime suspect in the King assassination. The U.S. Attorney's justification for Ray's extradition relied heavily on the testimony of Charles Stephens. Stephens claimed that after he heard the shot fired, around 6 p.m., he looked out the door of his and Grace's room, 6B. He saw a person walking down the hallway of the flophouse. After being shown an FBI photograph of James Earl Ray, Stephens identified the man in the FBI photograph and the man he claimed to have seen in the hallway as the same. Here's where it gets interesting.

On April 4, 1968, James H. McGraw, a Memphis cab driver, received a call to pick up a fare at Bessie Brewer's flophouse. In later testimony, McGraw recalled:

Upstairs I found the fare to be Charles Stephens who was lying on the bed in a very drunken condition. Due to this condition I returned to my cab. When I got to the corner of So. Main and Calhoun Sts. the dispatcher said that M.L. King had been

shot. (*Ray vs. Rose*, statement by James McGraw, Exh. A.)

About how much time elapsed between McGraw leaving room 6B and reaching the corner of South Main and Calhoun Streets? One minute? Two minutes? Whichever, it is hardly enough time for Charlie to transform from bedridden drunk to able-minded witness.

Further illuminating Charles Stephens' character and value system was the \$100,000.00 reward money offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Dr. King's assassin. Records show this monetary incentive took Charles' initial, unsure statement and sharpened it to one of razor-edge recall. (For the record, Charles never collected any of the reward and, after realizing he'd been bilked out of his bounty, he recanted his statement about the person he saw in the hallway.)

Now, Grace Stephens, the subject of this story. As I mentioned in my December 7th article, Grace wouldn't corroborate her husband's story. In *Code Name Zorro*, she told author/attorney Mark Lane "that Charlie didn't see anything. He couldn't have. He was on the bed trying to sleep one off." (Nicknamed "Bay Rum" Charlie and "Wino" Charlie by his drinking peers, Charles Stephens, as of April 4, 1968, had chalked up an impressive record of almost 200 arrests for public drunkenness. This was the state's primary witness to get Ray back to Tennessee.) Years later, Grace told Jerry W. Ray, James' younger brother, that she *did indeed* see a man in the hallway of the flophouse, and the man definitely was *not* James Earl Ray. There's more.

On July 8, 1968, before James Earl Ray signed the guilty plea, Grace Stephens was escorted by her husband and the *Memphis Police* to John Gaston Hospital, in Memphis, for treatment of an ankle injury. While being treated, a psychiatrist *just happened* to appear on the scene. Without apparent cause, the psychiatrist commenced evaluating Grace and *immediately* diagnosed her problem as being "mental." Labeling her a "suicide risk," the psychiatrist had her committed to Gaston's psychiatric ward.

Held against her will in the psychiatric ward for more than three weeks, Grace Stephens, on July 31, 1968, was taken before probate judge Harry Pierotti. Pierotti ordered her committed to Western State Psychiatric

Hospital in Bolivar, Tennessee. This reeks of an obvious motive: Once declared insane, Grace Stephens' testimony was no good in court. (Remember, at this point it wasn't certain whether or not James Earl Ray would go to trial. He hadn't yet signed the guilty plea. A "sane" Grace Stephens would have proved destructive to the state's case.) She remained a patient of Western State Psychiatric Hospital until 1977; at which time Mark Lane took over as James Earl Ray's lead defense counsel and, along with Reverend James Lawson and other black leaders, secured her release.

Watts, Harlem, Detroit, Nashville, and the lootings, beatings, shootings and deaths that took place. At the time, racial tension between blacks and whites was already at a feverish pitch. Take that existing situation and throw in the catalyst of an almost godlike black leader getting gunned down like a mangy dog by a white man and what does that equation conjure up? A time bomb with a most sensitive detonator. *The Saturday Evening Post* best captured the new reality at hand. The front page of the April 20, 1968 issue pictured several young black men, their expressions amalgams of anger, fright, and confusion. The headline, in bold red letters, read: "RIOT CONTROL." The front page of the November 16, 1968 issue featured the face of a young, white police officer. The headline read: "Law and Order - What It's All About - How The White Cop Patrols the Black Ghetto - How the Black Panthers Preach Violence." King's assassination removed the lever that stopped the civil rights movement from sliding toward the black militancy movement. It was that slide that allowed the potent force of white backlash to eventually neutralize King's early achievements. Slogans such as "burn the mother down" and "bigoted, white cops" were heard all the way from northern college campuses to southern farm communities. The public was screaming for blood, and the ruling powers knew they had to deliver King's assassin—or at least, someone to fill the role of the assassin—no matter the cost. And, by God, they did.

With the help of Charlie Stephens.

Was Grace Waldo Stephens a sacrificial lamb? That's for you to decide. One thing is certain, however. She spent several years of her life locked up in a mental institution. Whether or not her lockup was justified is a question worth finding the answer to. ♣