

Case Illustration: Using Records and Files in Investigating the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The contribution that a record or file makes to an investigation in attaining the objectives mentioned earlier can be affected in three ways: first, by the time and order in which the information is received and evaluated; second, by how well it dovetails with or supplements other facts developed through physical evidence or obtained from people; and third, by the diligence of the investigator in following through on the insight(s) it provides. The classic case example of the Martin Luther King Jr. murder investigation indicates the possible value of using records and files. Imagine the possibilities if this same case had taken place in the age of the Internet.

The historic case of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis on April 4, 1968, shows the value of records and files. Immediately after King was shot, a lieutenant in charge of the Memphis Police TAC (Tactical) Squad correctly surmised that the assassin's escape route would be South Main Street. He reached South Main within minutes in the hope of seeing someone flee with a weapon, but there was nothing in motion—neither suspect nor vehicle. Racing to the nearest corner about 50 yards away, he

passed the Canipe Amusement Company; lying in the doorway he noted a green bedspread partially covering a blue zippered overnight bag, and a long pasteboard box from which the barrel of a rifle protruded. Moments before the officer stopped at sight of the bundle, Guy W. Canipe (the store owner) and two customers saw a man drop it in the doorway; then, they noted a white car—a compact, possibly a Ford Mustang—take off at high speed and proceed north on South Main.

A wealth of physical evidence was found in the discarded bundle after photographs of its position in the doorway were taken:

Contents of the Overnight Bag:

- Assorted toiletry articles
- Two unopened 12-ounce cans of Schlitz beer bearing Mississippi tax stamps
- A six-transistor portable radio with “00416” scratched on its side
- A pair of flatnose, duckbill pliers with “Romage Hardware” stamped on the handle
- A tack hammer
- One section of the Commercial-Appeal, a Memphis newspaper, dated April 4, 1968
- A brown paper bag on which “Homestead” was printed
- Men’s underwear (T-shirt and shorts) with a laundry mark (02B-6) printed in black letters on each item

Contents of the Cardboard Box:

- A pair of binoculars 7X35 (Bushnell “Banner”)
- A paper bag on which “York Arms Co.” was printed, and a sales receipt from the same company (dated April 4, 1968)
- A 30.06 caliber Remington Rifle (Gamemaster), Model 760 on which a Redfield 2X7 telescopic sight was mounted
- A cartridge case and some ammunition for the rifle

Because the manufacture, distribution, and sale of guns are regulated, the rifle and scope were easily traced to the manufacturer, then to a distributor in Birmingham, and soon after, to the Aero Marine Supply Company (also in Birmingham). Aero sold the weapon to a “Harvey Lowmyer” on March 30, 1968, and the salesman could describe Lowmyer; meanwhile in Memphis, the salesman of the York Arms Company was able to describe the purchaser of the binoculars. The descriptions matched. Although the duckbill pliers were traced (by a telephone call to a trade association, The National Retail Hardware Association, in Indianapolis) to Romage Hardware on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, no description of the purchaser could be obtained from this source. Yet, a connection, however tenuous, had been established between the suspect and the Los Angeles area; it suggested that if further evidence pointing to that city was developed, intense investigative efforts should also be channeled in that direction.

This was made clear when the laundry marks (02B-6) on the underwear were found to be those used by Home Service Laundry and Dry Cleaning, just two blocks away from

Romage Hardware in Los Angeles. Laundry records indicated that the number 02B-6 had been assigned to an “Eric S. Galt.” In addition, a week after Dr. King’s slaying, an abandoned white Mustang was located (in Atlanta) and searched. From a service station sticker it was learned that the car had been lubricated twice in Los Angeles.

Investigative efforts were also being channeled to the Alabama-Mississippi area. The beer cans had been traced through their markings and company records to a store in Mississippi where they had been purchased, but no further information of value could be obtained from that source. The rifle and scope, however, had been purchased in Birmingham, and a motel registration in Memphis in the name of Eric Starvo Galt on the day before Dr. King’s death also connected Galt to Birmingham. It was learned through canvassing that when living in Birmingham in 1967, Galt had expressed an interest in dancing and had attended a dancing school there. Following up on this clue, a canvass of all dance schools in Los Angeles led to the National Dance Studio. There, Galt’s name was recognized. In addition, the owner recalled that Galt had mentioned attending bartending school. A fruitful clue, it brought investigators to the International School of Bartending in Los Angeles, which provided the first photograph of Galt—in the form of a graduation picture.

In addition to systematically reconstructing the wavering, sometimes dim trail of the suspect, an effort was undertaken to determine if he had been arrested under another name. Two latent fingerprints—one on the rifle, the other on the binoculars—had been developed; and later, a third print was developed on a map found in Galt’s room in Atlanta. It was not possible at that time to locate a record in the fingerprint file, when the search was based only on a latent crime scene print. Because it was an important case, however, President Johnson ensured that extraordinary measures and resources were allocated. Initially, it was decided to limit the search of the fingerprint file to those of white male (“wanted”) fugitives whose physical descriptions were close to Galt’s. There were 53,000 sets of prints of white “wanted” males in the files. Only a day or so after the search was undertaken (15 days after Dr. King’s death), 700 fingerprint cards had been scrutinized. One card stood out—its record print matched that of the latent print. Bearing the name James Earl Ray, the record indicated among other things that Ray had escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1967.

This development remains a monument to a painstaking, tenacious investigation. And yet, from the moment the assailant discarded that bundle in Canipe’s doorway, one clue was available that might quickly have led to the identification of James Earl Ray. If the reader will refer to the list of the bundle’s contents, he or she will note that a portable transistor radio with the number “00416” scratched on its side was included. This was the prison number assigned to inmate James Earl Ray in the Missouri State Penitentiary.

Although hindsight is usually superior to foresight, the latter attribute is one the investigator must strive to cultivate. It is certainly true that the accumulation of recorded information is such that no one person can be expected to be familiar with it. What is interesting to speculate about is whether a “brainstorming” session of people from across the board in criminal justice might have provided the insight that 00416 was possibly a prisoner’s number. A group of creative, knowledgeable criminal justice people might be such a resource. It could be assembled quickly and inexpensively; that is, if advance plans are made as to its composition, meeting place, and method of calling it into session. Depending on the issue to be examined, the composition of the group could vary. There are no certainties of course, but such an attempt might enhance the possibility of a solution.

In any event, the King case illustrates how extensively record sources were employed: banks, telephone companies, credit agencies, police departments, car rental agencies, motor vehicle departments, dance schools, hotels and motels, laundries, utility companies, selective service bureaus, and labor unions.