



Museum is fruition of dreams of motel owner, many others

Evolution of Bailey idea took years

By Wayne Risher
The Commercial Appeal

An assassin's bullet transformed the \$13-a-night Lorraine Motel into a historic site on April 4, 1968.

But it wasn't until 14 years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered that a small group of Memphians launched the first sustained effort to preserve the site on Mulberry.

This week, members of that group will help dedicate the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine. The \$9.25 million museum, owned by the State of Tennessee, tells the story of the American civil rights movement through pictures, interactive exhibits and audiovisual presentations.

Like Dr. King, the people who saved the Lorraine for posterity had a dream: To take a source of civic shame, a decaying symbol of the city's racial divisions, and turn it into a memorial.

Like many watershed events, their efforts were born of crisis and gradually gained support.

The project ultimately involved hundreds, perhaps thousands of volunteers. But many who were part of the struggle say the names that loom largest in the preservation are D'Army Bailey, Charles A. 'Chuck' Scruggs and the late A. W. Willis Jr.

Before the civil rights era, the Lorraine was a favorite with black entertainers, including Count Basie, Lionel Hampton and Aretha Franklin.

After King's death, the motel seemed suspended in time. Its owner, the late Walter Lane Bailey, (no relation to Circuit Judge D'Army Bailey or his brother, County Commissioner Walter Bailey) turned a couple of rooms into a shrine to Dr. King and to Bailey's wife and business partner, Lorraine, who died of a brain hemorrhage two hours after King was shot.

Within a few months of King's death, visitors were filing through the rooms or driving down Mulberry for a glimpse of the wreath-draped balcony. Motel business was bad, though, and Walter Bailey struggled to keep going.

In the late 1970s, he started working with those who wanted to convert the motel into a shrine to Dr. King.

"He knew he was sitting on a crown jewel," recalled D'Army Bailey, 49, a Circuit Court judge and president of the nonprofit Lorraine Civil Rights Museum Foundation, which will operate the National Civil Rights Museum.

"He (Walter Bailey) knew that that site had a destiny, and he in his own simple, limited way was trying to meet that by trying to find somebody to come in there with some money, some leadership, to turn that decaying old site into what it needed to be," said D'Army Bailey, who was involved in early efforts to save the Lorraine.

In a guest editorial in The Commercial Appeal on May 21, 1979, D'Army Bailey concluded: "At present the Lorraine stands in spite of the neglectful attitude which Memphis has shown toward it. But the facility is standing on borrowed time, fighting the ravages of physical and environmental decay and a surrounding neighborhood of crime. It is time for something to be done. Memphis is the keeper of a heritage which is not only local, but it is national and international as well."

But nothing was done about the once-thriving motel that had become a haven for prostitutes and down-on-their-luck boarders. By early 1982, Walter Bailey faced bankruptcy.

He was behind on mortgage payments on the motel building,



A photograph made April 6, 1968, shows the view out the window from which police said James Earl Ray fired, killing Dr. King. Several officers stand where Dr. King stood when he was shot.

Charles A. 'Chuck' Scruggs, founding chairman of the Martin Luther King Memphis Memorial Foundation, recalled how children emptied their piggybanks and people of modest means willingly donated to the cause. "Everywhere we went, people said, 'It's about time.'"

which he had added to the property three years before the King shooting. An April 26, 1982, foreclosure hearing was set.

The motel owner turned to Chuck Scruggs, station manager at WDIA-AM 1070, a black-oriented radio station that had recently raised more than \$200,000 for the bankrupt Delta town of Mound Bayou, Miss.

Scruggs said in a recent interview that back in 1982, WDIA employees were unanimous in their belief that the station shouldn't try to save the Lorraine so soon after the Mound Bayou effort.

Scruggs said he met with WDIA employees A. C. Williams, community relations officer; Carl Conner, program director; and Bill Adkins, then the top morning disc jockey.

"All of us agreed in the end that we shouldn't touch it," said Scruggs. "The public wasn't going to respond positively..." Before he would allow a final decision, however, Scruggs held another meeting a few days later. Opinions hadn't changed, but Scruggs decided to proceed.

"I felt that 'Hey, nobody has done anything up till now. If we don't act, yes, it may become a parking lot, much to our disgrace, much to the dismay of those who are yet to come...'"

As the foreclosure hearing approached, Scruggs called Jesse Turner, chief executive officer of the black-owned Tri-State Bank, and obtained a personal loan of \$10,000.

Scruggs said he called D'Army Bailey and asked him to handle the legal side of the effort

because he knew of the lawyer's interest in the Lorraine.

The late William B. Leffler, a U.S. Bankruptcy Court judge, postponed the foreclosure while the WDIA group made arrangements to buy the Lorraine for \$240,000. The \$10,000 loan to Scruggs was earnest money to hold the property until the balance was raised.

D'Army Bailey and Turner joined the WDIA employees as incorporators of the Martin Luther King Memphis Memorial Foundation.

Scruggs was founding chairman. Turner was secretary-treasurer.

In the next seven months the foundation raised only about \$90,000.

"I talked to the head of one of the banks and the head of one of the local companies. They both told me flat out they just weren't interested," D'Army Bailey said.

"It was hard because nobody believed it would work. Nobody could share the vision and the confidence. If I could have looked at it from a distance, I would have shared the vision, but not the confidence."

A foreclosure auction was held Dec. 13, 1982, on the steps of the Shelby County Courthouse.

Tri-State Bank's Turner agreed to additional loans of \$50,000, underwritten by James Smith, executive director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and Paul Shapiro, owner of Lucky Hearts cosmetics. The union already had contributed \$25,000 to the effort, and Shapiro, whose business adjoins the Lorraine, had given \$10,000.

The foundation bought the Lorraine for \$144,000.

Although the campaign fell short of the goal, foundation

officials had reason to be encouraged, Scruggs said.

"Ultimately, what we did was raise the level of consciousness beyond any point it had ever been in a 15-year period. We got people talking about it, people acting about it. While it started in the black community, it was not confined to the black community."

He recalled how children emptied piggybanks and people of modest means donated to the cause. "Everywhere we went, people said, 'It's about time.'"

With the property's future assured, foundation officials turned to building a community consensus about what to do with the motel. No easy task.

"We were concentrating on how to save the property. What happened later was an afterthought," said Williams, 74, who left the foundation board and retired from WDIA shortly after the motel was acquired.

Organizers knew what they didn't want, Williams said. "We knew it was too important a shrine to be neglected, to allow somebody to buy it and put up a hot dog stand or a furniture factory or whatever."

In early 1983, the foundation changed its title to drop Dr. King's name. The change was requested by The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change Inc. in Atlanta, formed by Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King.

D'Army Bailey said the foundation spent 1983 and much

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Michael Pavlovsky's sculpture, *Movement to Overcome*, depicts masses of people existing and struggling together.

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THE LOGO

The logo for the National Civil Rights Museum (see cover page) represents the human struggle for civil rights. The figure is both black and white, symbolizing the worldwide struggle for equality. Depicted in a "struggle" position, the figure is attempting to break free from the confinement of prejudice and oppression. The figure is "everyman," representing all races, sexes and religions while emphasizing the struggle by African-Americans in the 1950s and 1960s.

The logo colors — black, white and red — represent the races and the passion and emotion of the struggle for equality.

The logo was designed by Eddie Tucker, vice president, creative director of Archer/Malmo advertising agency.

WITNESS: ROSA PARKS

Mrs. Parks, 78, often called the mother of the civil rights movement because she started the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., by refusing to give up her seat to a white man.



"The story is that I wouldn't give up my seat because my feet hurt, but that's just something that got started. The truth is, this was not the first time I'd protested bus-seating in Montgomery. I'd had problems with that same driver in 1943. He'd evicted me, and told me to go to the back door of the bus. What I did was take another bus.

"What bothered me was seeing little children hurt by not being able to take a seat in the front of the bus. The children didn't know anything about segregation, so they would just sit down anywhere. Then, whoever was with them would jerk them out of their seats, and that experience would hurt them. So when I refused to give up my seat, it wasn't that my feet hurt; it was my act of civil disobedience."

WITNESS: SHELBY FOOTE

Foote, 75, Memphis novelist and Civil War historian, started writing his three-volume history of the war in 1954, the year the Supreme Court made its decision in Brown vs. Board of Education. Thus began the modern civil rights era, and Foote says the timing gave him a marvelous opportunity to watch three Southern governors — Orval Faubus, George Wallace and Ross Barnett — as they took their defiant stands.



"I am obligated to the governors of my native state (Mississippi) and the adjoining states of Arkansas and Alabama for helping to lessen my sectional bias by reproducing, in their actions during several of the years that went into the writing of this volume, much that was least admirable in the position my forebears occupied when they stood up to Lincoln. I suppose, or in any case fervently hope, it is true that history never repeats itself, but I know from watching these three gentlemen that it can be terrifying in its approximations, even when the reproduction — deriving, as it does, its scale from the performers — is in miniature."