



Emmitt Louis Till

Emmitt Till, 14 years old, was murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. He was shot in the head, one eye was gouged out, and his head was smashed in on one side before his body was dumped in the Tallahatchie River. Mamie Till Bradley, Emmitt's mother, ordered an open casket funeral so the whole world could see what had been done to her son.

Emmett Till

Emmett Till was a black, 14 year old boy from the working-class neighborhood of Chicago south side who inadvertently started the American civil rights movement. While visiting relatives near Money, Mississippi in August 1955 he got into big trouble.

Although friends and family thought of Emmett Till as a bit brash and fun loving, they didn't think Emmett Till could seriously offend anyone. In spite of a stutter emanating from a bout with nonparalytic polio at age 3, he often had a smart mouth. Emmett Till knew segregation from personal experience. His elementary school was a public school with only black students. But this segregation he knew in the North was nothing like what he would be introduced to in the South. Before Emmett Till left Chicago his mother warned him not to risk trouble with white people during his visit to Mississippi. "If you have to get on your knees and bow down what white person goes past, do it willingly," she said.

People who knew Emmett Till remembered that he enjoyed pulling pranks. In front of Bryant's grocery and meat market, a country store with Coca-Cola sign outside, Emmett Till showed a picture of a white girl to some friends. She was his girl, he said. Intrigued, his black companions said there was a pretty white woman in the store at that moment. They dared Emmett Till to go in and talk to her. He went in bought some candy, then turned to her on the way out and said, "bye, baby." One observer afterward claimed he had whistled at her. A girl who heard the story on the grapevine said, "when that lady's husband come back, there is going to be trouble."

She was right.

The husband, Roy Bryant, was out-of-town, trucking shrimp from Louisiana to Texas. Three days later, Bryant paid a visit to the unpainted cabin of Mose Wright, the grandfather of Emmett Till's cousin. Bryant and his brother-in-law, J. W. Milam, said they had come to "get the boy who done the talkin'." Wright tried to tell them that Emmett Till was a northerner, inexperienced in Mississippi ways, and that they might want to just give him "a good whipping." Instead, they piled him into the back seat of their car and drove him to the Tallahatchie River.

When they got out, they made the boy carry a Seventy-five pound cotton gin fan to the River bank, ordered him to strip, beat him and gouged out his eye, shot him in the head and through his body in the River. When the corpse was recovered, it was so badly mangled that Mose Wright could only identify it by an initialed ring. Authorities wanted to bury the body quickly, but Till's mother, 33 year old Mamie Bradley, requested to be sent back to Chicago where she could make sure it was really her son. When she saw it, she sobbed and decided to have an open casket funeral so the world could see what murderers had done to her only son.

When a picture of the corpse was published in the black weekly magazine Jet, black Americans everywhere saw the mutilated, distended corpse. Bradley delayed the burial for four days to let "the world see what they did to my boy." In less than two weeks after Emmett Till's body was buried in Chicago, Milam and Bryant went on trial in a segregated courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi. In light of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision, Brown vs. Board of Education (May 17, 1954), which mandated the integration of public schools, this case was watched closely around the country.

In fact, Sen. James Eastland of Mississippi asserted that the decision had "destroyed the Constitution" and Mississippi was not obliged to obey it. State Sen. Walter Givhan claimed the real purpose of the NAACP's campaign to end school desegregation was "to open the bedroom doors of our white women to Negro men." The problem in the case was the lack of witnesses. Curtis Jones, Till's cousin, was forbidden by his mother to go to Chicago to testify, for fear he would be physically harmed. But his grandfather, 64 year old Mose Wright, was determined to testify. In the courtroom, he forthrightly identified the defendants as the men who had kidnapped Emmett Till.

Afterward, Wright said, "it was the first time in my life I had the courage to accuse a white man of a crime, let alone something as terrible as killing a boy." The jurors deliberated a little more than an hour before issuing a verdict of "not guilty," saying they thought the state failed to prove the identity of the body. Reaction was swift from blacks in other states who thought that by condoning the murder of children, Mississippi had become the ultimate symbol of white supremacy.

Public reaction was further fueled by the decision not to indict Milam and Bryant on separate charges of kidnapping. White newspaper editors in many cities condemned Mississippi. In spite of the disappointment at the verdict, black Americans recognized the significance of black witnesses testifying against white people in court. Historians believe that the murder of Emmett Till had a powerful impact on a new generation of blacks, those who were adolescents in the 1950s and became the engine of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Mamie Bradley lectured around the country, calling herself "a nobody" and her son "a little nobody who shook up the world." She said she used to think what happened to blacks in the South was their business. "The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any unless, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all."