

0. EMMETT TILL DIES in MISSISSIPPI - Story Preface

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The Tallahatchie River flows for about 85 miles (137 km) in Mississippi before it joins the Yalobusha to form the Yazoo River. This image depicts the Tallahatchie south of Minter City. After Emmett Till's death, his killers placed the boy's body into the Tallahatchie. Image by Richard Apple, online via Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

Arriving at Mose Wright's cabin, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam ordered Emmett Till to get out of bed. The two white men had plans for him, and no black person - living that moment inside Wright's rural dwelling - could stop them.

Bryant and Milam didn't like Till's attitude. Seemingly unafraid, he thought he was as good as a white person and appeared unintimidated by the brothers' taunts. Perhaps Bo didn't believe the two men would actually murder him.

A veteran, Milam had pistol-whipped Germans during World War II. Although it was against U.S. military law to do so, Milam had learned such actions produced results. Both he, and Bryant, began to pistol-whip Emmett Till inside a [tool shed at Sheridan Plantation](#). Although they inflicted serious injuries on the boy, they could not break him.

Leaving the [shed at Milam's property](#), where they had beaten Bo, the brothers drove to a [local cotton gin](#). Milam knew the owners were replacing equipment and expected they could find something to act as a weight. Locating a discarded [cotton-gin fan](#), he directed Till to pick it up and place it in the truck.

Their next destination was a spot along [the Tallahatchie River](#). Ordering the now-injured boy to strip naked, while standing on the shore, Milam asked Emmett a question. Did he still think he was as good as Milam and Bryant?

Bo's answer became his final word. As soon as he said "yeah," Milam shot the youngster in the head. The two brothers then attached the 74-pound gin fan to Emmett's head - with barbed wire - and rolled him into the Tallahatchie. They made it home in time to attend church that Sunday morning.

Three days later - on August 28 - boys [fishing in the river](#), near [Glendora](#), saw what appeared to be the feet of a body. It was Emmett Till's, horrifically disfigured.

Local authorities had the body placed into a coffin and planned to bury it. Emmett's mother, who'd learned her son was dead, had meanwhile lobbied for a court order requiring her son's remains returned to Chicago. The order was served three hours before the scheduled Mississippi burial.

Although forced to release the body, the sheriff in Mississippi - [H. Clarence Strider](#) - had the coffin pad-locked. He ordered that no one could open the casket and had it sealed with Mississippi's state seal.

When Emmett's remains [arrived in Chicago](#), his [mother instructed the funeral director](#) - A.A. Rayner - to open the lid. When he refused, because of the sheriff's order, Mamie Till-Mobley reminded him they were in Illinois, not Mississippi. She threatened to take a hammer herself, to open the coffin, if Rayner didn't do it.

Stunned at what she saw inside, she insisted on two key things. The funeral director would not "touch-up" her son, and his casket would remain open for all the world to see what had happened to her boy. Emmett's death would reveal what could happen - even to children - in a racially divided society.

As [crowds of people lined-up](#) to pay their respects, reporters from *Jet* magazine were at the scene. Not only did *Jet* publish a [story about Emmett Till](#), the company also printed pictures of his body. Its [shocking appearance](#)

stunned all who viewed it firsthand (estimated to be more than 50,000 people) and all who saw it in the magazine (estimated to be millions around the world).

Mamie Till-Mobley's insistence on showing the evidence of her son's brutal torture, and death - at his wake and at his funeral - provided a key step forward in the civil-rights movement. Addresses by politicians, or even eloquently worded speeches from civil rights leaders, could never leave a lasting impact the way pictures of Emmett's body could.

Justice, however, did not prevail for him. Bob Dylan memorialized that fact in a song he wrote about Emmett Till.

"Mississippi Values" influenced the result of the murder trial - held in the Tallahatchie County courthouse in Sumner - which included moments of high drama (and segregated seating). Moses Wright identified the defendants as his great-nephew's kidnappers. Willie Reed testified about the noises he'd heard when the brothers were with someone in Milam's shed.

Despite such eyewitness testimony - the first time a black man had directly accused a white man in a Mississippi court, then lived to tell about it - a jury of white men found Bryant and Milam "not guilty" of murder. While the defense team rejoiced, Mose Wright left Mississippi for Chicago. He no longer believed that he and his family were safe.

Two months later, he returned to tell a grand jury the facts about his great-nephew's kidnapping. After convening for a very short time, the grand jury issued no indictment against Bryant and Milan for that crime (although they'd previously admitted, to police, they had abducted Till).

Effectively condoned by a justice system ignoring evidence of racially based crimes, extreme violence against blacks did not diminish. As the "Mississippi way of life" continued through the late 50s and early 60s, people - including African-American women who provided domestic help in the homes of white families - were in fear of such one-sided justice.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/EMMETT-TILL-DIES-in-MISSISSIPPI-The-Help>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/EMMETT-TILL-DIES-in-MISSISSIPPI-The-Help>

Questions 2 Ponder

Is a Kidnapping Still a Kidnapping Even If a Jury Holds Otherwise?

Did Ray Bryant and J.W. Milam kidnap Emmett Till? If the jury decided the men did NOT kidnap the teenager, does that really mean that Emmett wasn't kidnapped? Explain your answer.

If the jury is biased, either for or against the defendants, can anyone say that the trial was fair?

What Is It Like to Stand-up to a Bully?

How did the decisions made by Emmett Till's mother, to keep her son's coffin open during his funeral, change the dynamics of black-and-white relationships in America?

Have you ever had to stand-up to someone's efforts to "bully" you into submission, like Mamie Till-Mobley did? Did the bullier back down?

Do you think Mamie Till-Mobley is a role model, for blacks and whites? Why, or why not?

Media Stream



Emmett Till - Scene of Beating at Sheridan Plantation

Photograph of buildings at Sheridan Plantation, online courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Emmett-Till-Scene-of-Beating-at-Sheridan-Plantation>



Emmett Till - Sheridan Tool Shed Today

Photograph by Kalina Deng, online courtesy "Mississippi Teacher Corps Internship 2011."

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Emmett-Till-Sheridan-Tool-Shed-Today>



Emmett Till - Glendora Cotton Gin

Photo of M.B. Lowe's Glendora Gin - located near Money, Mississippi - by Michael6076, online courtesy Flickr. Copyright, Michael6076, all rights reserved. Provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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Cotton-Gin Fan Used in Emmett Till Murder

Image, published in *LIFE* magazine, online courtesy Library of Congress.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Cotton-Gin-Fan-Used-in-Emmett-Till-Murder>



Emmett Till - Body Found in the Tallahatchie River

Photo of the Tallahatchie River near Glendora Mississippi - where Emmett Till's body was found - by Peter Staubrandt. Online, courtesy Picasa Web, copyright Peter Staubrandt, all rights reserved. Provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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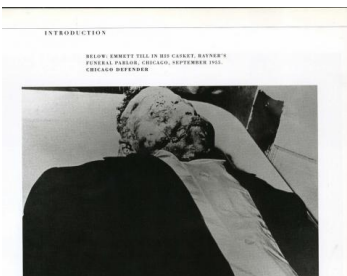


Emmett Till - Body Arrives in Chicago

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Emmett-Till-Body-Arrives-in-Chicago>



Emmett Till - Mother Ignites Civil-Rights Movement

Photograph originally published in *Chicago Defender*.

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Gathered Crowd for Emmett Till's Funeral

Section of *Jet* magazine's June 21, 1956 edition - article entitled, "The Grave of Emmett Till Remains Unmarked in Burr Oak Cemetery Less Than 1 Year After Death."

Online, courtesy Google Books and *Jet* magazine. Copyright, *Jet* magazine, all rights reserved. Provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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Emmett Till Funeral

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Emmett Till - Scene of Murder Trial

Image of the Tallahatchie County Courthouse, as it appeared during the murder trial, online courtesy MDAH.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Emmett-Till-Scene-of-Murder-Trial>



Defense Team Representing Bryant and Milam

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Defense-Team-Representing-Bryant-and-Milam>



Till Trial - Mose Wright Accuses Bryant and Milam

Photo of Mose Wright at the murder trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, online courtesy *Jet* magazine and Wikimedia Commons.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Till-Trial-Mose-Wright-Accuses-Bryant-and-Milam>



Willie Reed - Surprise Prosecution Witness

Photo online, courtesy Special Collections department at the University of Memphis Library.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Willie-Reed-Surprise-Prosecution-Witness>



Emmett Till - Trial in a Segregated Court

Photo of the Emmett Till murder trial, online courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH).

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Emmett-Till-Trial-in-a-Segregated-Court>



Police Actions against African-Americans

Photograph online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Moses Wright Tells the Story of Emmett Till

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Emmett Till - Mother Describes the Body

Clip from "Emmett Till - The Untold Story," a 2005 documentary by Keith Beauchamp which incorporates historical footage and interviews with Mamie Till-Mobley and other family members. Copyright, THINKFilm Company, Inc., all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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Emmett Till - Historical Footage

Clip from "Emmett Till - The Untold Story," a 2005 documentary by Keith Beauchamp which incorporates historical footage and interviews with Mamie Till-Mobley and other family members. Copyright, THINKFilm Company, Inc., all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

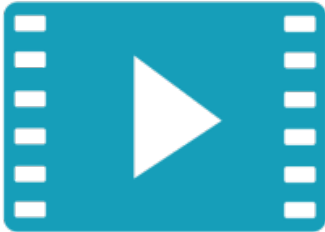
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Emmett Till - The Murder Trial

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Emmett Till - No Kidnapping Charges

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Emmett Till - A New Case

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Bob Dylan - "The Death of Emmett Till"

Clip of Dylan performing "The Death of Emmett Till," online courtesy RobMD29's Channel at YouTube. Copyright, 1963, 1968 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1991, 1996 by Special Rider Music. All rights reserved. Provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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