

# **Emmett Till And What Came After**

How A Major Tragedy Helped Spark The Civil Rights Movement In America

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Katie Kelley

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At 2:30 a.m. on August 28, 1955, two white men seized a young African-American boy named Emmett Till from his family's home in Mississippi because Till had allegedly whistled at a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, who accused him of making "sexual advances." Three days later fishermen pulled his body from the Tallahatchie River. Bryant's husband, Roy, and his half brother, J.W. Milam, took responsibility for Till's murder only after a jury had acquitted them, causing rage throughout the nation. The tragedy of Emmett Till's death helped spark the Civil Rights Movement in America. People rallied for change and stood up for their rights.

Before his kidnapping, Emmett Till was an average teenager. He lived in Chicago with his mother, who enjoyed a good relationship with her son: "We were so much like brother and sister, like friends," she has said (in Anderson 11). The two shared a tight bond forged by daily struggles and by health challenges such as Till's experience of polio, which altered his speech (Anderson, 14). Neighbors knew him as quiet and shy, a solid student who enjoyed baseball. His mother believed she could trust him when, in August of 1955, Till asked to visit family in Mississippi: "He was a normal well-adjusted child and that's why I thought I could let him go," (Anderson 19). Till-Mobley had faith in her responsible son.

She worried, however, because she had experienced racism while growing up in Mississippi. She prepared her son for the trip by teaching him about segregation. "Even though you think you're perfectly within your right," she told her son, "for goodness sake, take low. If necessary, get on your knees and beg apologies. Don't cross anybody down there because Mississippi is not like Chicago" (Anderson 20). Till-Mobley told her son to watch his mouth and to defer to white people. "No matter how much it seems that you have the right," she said, "just forget your rights while you're in Mississippi" (20).

No one knows for certain what Till did to attract the attention of the Bryants and J.W. Milam. We do know that he did not make sexual advances toward Carolyn Bryant, a fact she admitted in 2017 (Brown). We also know that kidnappers wrapped his body in barbed wire and tied it to a cotton gin's heavy fan before dumping it in the river. Local fishermen found his mangled body August 31, 1955. One eye dangled out of its socket. Decay had set in. Because of the damage done to his body, family members did not recognize him and identified him only through the ring he wore.

The discovery of Till's body--the discovery of the murder--sparked not just sorrow, but anger. Powerful representatives of the African American community spoke out in order to inspire the state of Mississippi to take charge and right this wrong. For instance, while Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, Field Secretary for the NAACP, cried, Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary for the NAACP, challenged Mississippi Governor Hugh White to take a stand. Wilkins demanded justice, saying that the NAACP "together with all decent citizens throughout the Nation call upon you to use all the powers of your office to see the lynchers of 14-year-old Emmett Louis Till are brought to justice. We cannot believe that responsible officials of the state of Mississippi condone the murdering of children on any provocation" (Anderson 49). Wilkins took a more aggressive stance when speaking with the public later that day, criticizing the culture, in Mississippi, that allowed this crime. "It would appear from this lynching that the State of Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children," he said. "The killers of the boy felt free to lynch him because there is in the entire state no restraining influence of decency" (Anderson 49). Wilkins argued that nothing prohibited this crime--that racism

dominated the culture, allowing Till's killers to believe they could murder without facing consequences.

Mamie Till-Mobley echoed this idea in an interview. She said, "The State of Mississippi will have to pay for this. I would expect that down there if a boy does something wrong he might come back beaten up. But they didn't even give me that" (50). This event solidified her belief that African Americans could not consider themselves safe in Mississippi. She described Mississippi as a "den of snakes" where people "will do these things with hardly any provocation--they don't even need provocation" (Anderson, 50). When Governor White did not take action, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley wrote to President Dwight D. Eisenhower asking him to take an interest in the case, but because Till's murderers had not crossed state lines, federal agencies had no jurisdiction and the State of Mississippi had to assume responsibility for seeking justice. Governor White said, "Mississippi deplures such conduct on the part of any of its citizens and certainly cannot condone it" (Anderson, 50). However, White refused to acknowledge Till's murder as a lynching, causing people to question his commitment to justice.

While lawyers prepared the case for court, Mamie Till-Mobley made a decision that changed history. She insisted upon an open casket so the world could see what Till had endured: "I think everybody needed to know what had happened to Emmett Till," she said (in Brown). She also contacted national media. Photographers from *Jet* ran photos of Till's mangled body in the casket. When morticians began to prepare the body for the funeral by fixing some of the damage, Till-Mobley refused their efforts. She requested that the funeral home allow as many people as possible to see Till's corpse. An estimated 10,000 to 50,000 people walked past the casket on the very first night (Brown). People fainted. Others fell ill after viewing the

decomposing body. Till-Mobley taped photos inside the casket so people could compare what he looked like before and after (Anderson 56). "People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying, race hatred could be. How it had menaced my son during his last, tortured hours on earth. How it continued to stalk us all. People...would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil" (Till-Mobley 142). His mother knew Till's open casket could inspire change.

National attention did not influence the outcome of the trial, however. Prosecutors charged Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam with Till's murder, and the case went to trial in Mississippi on September 19, 1955. The trial lasted just five days. The jury--all male, all white--took just one hour to set Bryant and Milam free (Brown). Once Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam had been acquitted, Milam granted an interview with *Look Magazine* in which he admitted to beating Till. He did not show any remorse: "Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless..." Milam was angry with Till because Till refused to grovel or beg for mercy. "I'm no bully," Milam said. "I never hurt a [n—] in my life. I like [n—s] — in their place — I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, [n—s] are gonna stay in their place" (as quoted in Latson, 2015). Because Till did not grovel when confronted by Bryant and Milam, his attackers felt justified in beating him.

When this interview was published, readers were appalled by the lack of remorse shown by Till's murderers. As Jennifer Latson explains, this sparked an angry response from readers: "Because Milam and his accomplice had already been tried once for Till's murder, the public confession did not yield more charges. But it provoked national outrage and became as powerful a catalyst in the civil rights movement as Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat just a few

months later". Latson cites a Los Angeles *Times* writer as saying, "If Rosa Parks showed the potential of defiance, [some historians] say, Emmett Till's death warned of a bleak future without it." In other words, because Bryant and Milam admitted to the murder but served no time, it became clear that young people would continue to die if no one took action.

The acquittal touched off a series of reactions heard all over the world. Josephine Baker, for instance, wrote letters to the White House and led a rally in Paris (Till-Mobley 191). New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell demanded an economic boycott of products from Mississippi. Angry and inspired, voters called for "anti-lynching legislation, the end to racial segregation, black voting rights" (Till-Mobley 191). Rosa Parks, arrested when she refused to sit at the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, attended a meeting in which Dr. T.R.M. Howard had presented information about the Emmett Till case in November of 1955, and Parks told his mother she had been thinking of Emmett Till the night police arrested her (Zinn Education Project). "People were energized, they were angry. They were moved to action in ways they hadn't been before" (Till-Mobley 191).

Deborah Watts founded and serves as the Executive Director of the Emmett Till Legacy Foundation. She welcomes the United States Justice Department's decision to reopen the case and hopes that it will result in justice for her family. "Justice in some others' mind[s] may mean an apology," she says. "But I want to see the law work, I want to see the blind justice work the way it should work" (Lei). The Foundation has established "educational initiatives" designed to turn "tragedy into triumph" (Lei). According to the Emmett Till Legacy Foundation's website, the Foundation "sets out to foster a Legacy of Hope in the nation." "We have the power and strength inside all of us to eliminate hate and provide justice and peace," the Foundation claims,

while advocating for a “unique theme for good living”: “HOPE begets H.O.P.E. ‘Historical Opportunities for Positive Endings resulting in Hatred Overpowered Peace Everywhere.’” (ETLF).

Florida State University will also house an archive dedicated to preserving Emmett Till’s memory and to upholding his legacy. Keith Beauchamp, a filmmaker known for the documentary *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, has donated raw footage collected during research for the film. Beauchamp describes the murder of Emmett Till--and his murderers’ acquittal--as a “motivating factor” in the development of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The archive, Beauchamp says, “serves as a reminder of how far we have come and how far we have yet to go in terms of race relations in our country” (Weeks). He believes “The archive will finally institutionalize the importance of Emmett Till to the larger black freedom movement” (Weeks). In an interview with NPR, Beauchamp also expresses hope that Emmett Till’s story can still inspire action. “I hope that scholars, students and laymen who are interested in the archives walk away with a better understanding of the Till case and its importance to American history...Just like it was a catalyst for change in 1955, I truly believe that if everyone understands Till's story, it can be a catalyst for change today” (Weeks).

In his introduction to Death of Innocence, Reverend Jesse Jackson describes Mamie Till-Mobley’s strength and credits her with changing the world. “People tend to want to cover up a lynching,” he writes. “But Mamie put the struggle for emancipation and her outrage above personal privacy and pride. She allowed the distorted, water-marked body from the Tallahatchie River to be displayed in an open casket, at the time the largest single civil rights demonstration” (Till-Mobley). Jackson describes the shock and “disgust” expressed by more than one hundred

thousand mourners who viewed Emmett Till's mangled body. The mourners "were never the same again. Mamie's courage unsettled people of conscience into action." Mourners changed when they learned what Emmett Till had experienced.

Those who did not personally view the open casket also learned about the brutality because of Mamie Till-Mobley's efforts to attract national attention to her son's murder. According to Jesse Jackson, "Mamie empowered the media to nationalize the lynching." The case caught the attention of *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, which inspired national news organizations to cover the murder, making a local issue into a national event. "It was an earthquake," Jackson writes, "and Mamie used the aftershocks of the earthquake to awaken, to transform a people, and to redirect our course."

"We often think of the modern civil rights movement as beginning in Montgomery in 1955 because of the dramatic arrest of Rosa Parks and the emergence of Dr. King," Jackson says, "but that is not so." He credits Emmett Till's death--and Mamie Till-Mobley's insistence upon the open casket--as touching off the Civil Rights Movement. "Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955; Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957; Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 are aftershocks of the murder of Emmett Till and the genius of his mother" (Till-Mobley). Because of the attention paid to this murder not just in Mississippi, but across the country, the tragic loss of a young man propelled the brave actions of Americans who took part in the Civil Rights Movement, including Rosa Parks.

In her introduction to *Death of Innocence*, Mamie Till-Mobley explains why she finally told her story. She describes her effort to "pull hope from despair." "You see, my story is more than the story of a lynching. It is more than the story of how, with God's guidance, I made a



commitment to rip the covers off Mississippi, USA--revealing to the world the horrible face of race hatred. It is more than a story of how I took the privacy of my own grief and turned it into a public issue, a political issue, one which set in motion the dynamic force that led ultimately to a generation of social and legal progress for this country” (Till-Mobley xxii).

“Emmett,” his mother has said, “represented so many things to so many people...To all black people, he was a reminder of the common problem we faced in this country...He was a unifying symbol” (199). The tragedy of Till’s death inspired Americans to take action. “For an entire nation,” she wrote, “the murder of Emmett Till marked the death of innocence” (200) and the birth of a conscience that drove Americans to take responsibility for the change they wanted to see. “There could no longer be any innocent bystanders,” Till-Mobley said. Americans would need to rise to the occasion to end racism and promote peace. The tragedy that devastated Emmett Till’s family helped to spark the Civil Rights Movement and to move America forward.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

“THE LAW: Trial By Jury.” *Time Magazine*, 3 Oct. 1955.

This is an actual magazine article from back in 1955 about the trial, what happened, about what the jury said, and how the public reacted. It also had some great quotes in it that I plan to use in my essay.

Till-Mobley, Mamie, and Chris Benson. *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. One World, 2003.

This is a book his mother helped write about what happened to her son. She explained what she did after his death and how others reacted to what she had done. She explains, for instance, why she insisted on an open casket and how she has used his death to push for changes since he died.

### Secondary Sources:

“A Brutal Lynching and a Possible Confession Decades Later.” *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, 27 Oct. 2018.

This was a podcast about what happened to Emmett Till and how decades later someone finally spoke the truth. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam did sell the story to a newspaper back then, but this was an actual account of what happened and why it was so brutal.

American Experience Staff Writers. “Getting Away with Murder.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2019, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-biography-roy-carolyn-bryant-and-jw-milam/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-biography-roy-carolyn-bryant-and-jw-milam/).

This was about the other side of the trial: Roy and Carolyn Bryant and JW Milam. It talked about what the trial was like for them and what they did after the trial.

Anderson, Devery S. *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement*. University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

A book on what happened to him and how his death helped change America. It mentioned who stood up, what they did, and what the end result was.

Bates, Karen Grigsby. "Key Witness Against Emmett Till's Killers Led a Quiet Life." *All Things Considered*, episode Code Switch: Race and Identity, Remixed, National Public Radio, 25 July 2013.

This was about one of the key witnesses in the case and what he heard and saw. It also talked about what about what he did after the hearing ended including changing his name so no one would know who he actually was.

"Brave Testimony." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-biography-moses-and-elizabeth-wright/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/emmett-biography-moses-and-elizabeth-wright/).

This talked about Emmett Till's Great Uncle and his Great Aunt. It included what happened when Till was kidnapped, what they did after, and how they lived before everything happened.

Brown, DeNeen L. "Emmett Till's Mother Opened His Casket and Sparked the Civil Rights Movement." *Washington Post Magazine*, 12 July 2018.

Unlike other sources this one mentioned why his mother opened his casket so the world could see Emmett. It also mentioned how people reacted to seeing him. Other than that it mentioned how her doing that helped propel people to stand up for their rights.

Campbell, Bebe Moore. "The Boy in the River." *Time Magazine*, 8 Mar. 1999.

This talked about how even after so many years people still talked about how his death made people want to speak up. It also showed how one death could push people so many years later to fight for racial justice for people of all colors.

"Emmett Till Biography." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 24 Jan. 2019, [www.biography.com/people/emmett-till-507515](http://www.biography.com/people/emmett-till-507515).

This source shared information about Emmett Till's life before he went to Mississippi. It also included what happened when he went down to Mississippi. It gave me some good background on his early life that other sources did not include.

Latson, Jennifer. "How Emmett Till's Murder Case Changed the World." *Time Magazine*, 28 Aug. 2015.

This spoke about how his death changed America for the better. It went into depth about what changed and how it is better now after the fact. It gave facts about the Civil Right Movement and also what his mother spoke about and how her rallies/speeches empowered people.

Lei, Cecilia. "Emmett Till's Cousin on Reopening of Case: An Opportunity For the Truth to Be Told." *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 14 July 2018.

This was another podcast in which Emmett's cousin, Deborah Watts, explained what she thought of people reopening the case decades later. She gave some good quotes and also spoke about how his death rattled her family. She also spoke about how she thought this would help America and prove that what Milam and Bryant did was wrong in so many ways.

Lewis, Russell. "Old Newspapers Shed New Light on Emmett Till Murder." *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, 30 Mar. 2013.

This showed old pictures from old newspapers, but it was not a primary source because it wasn't documents from back then. The author only showed photos and then explained why these had a major impact on the murder investigation. It also had other photos that showed what happened in the history of the Civil Rights Movement that was very important.

"Nov. 27, 1955: Rosa Parks Attends Meeting About Emmett Till." *Zinn Education Project*, 2019, [www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/rosa-parks-emmett-till/](http://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/rosa-parks-emmett-till/).

Tyson, Timothy B. *The Blood of Emmett Till*. Simon & Schuster, 2017.

This was a book where the author interviewed one of the key people in the case who was Carolyn Bryant back when the case was open. Bryant spoke about what happened as far as she could remember and how she did in fact lie during court about what happened in the store.

Weeks, Linton. "The Creation Of An Emmett Till Archive." *NPR*, NPR, 24 Aug. 2015, [www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/08/24/433530734/the-creation-of-an-emmett-till-archive](http://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/08/24/433530734/the-creation-of-an-emmett-till-archive).

This talked about how an Emmett Till archive was being created. It talked about what was going to be in the archive, where it was going to be, and also who was going to be able to access it.