

## **Injustice Unearthed: Revisiting the Murder of Emmett Till**

**Ellen Whitten**

### Author's Note

There are two reasons for my selecting the Till case as my topic for this project. The first is that my grandfather, John W. Whitten, Jr., was an attorney for the defense of Milam and Bryant in the 1955 trial. I did not learn about the trial until I was fifteen years old, and by that time, my grandfather's health and mental capacity were declining due to a long bout with Parkinson's Disease. I do not recall ever speaking with him about the trial.

Because the Till trial took place in my hometown of Sumner and my grandfather was a member of the defense team, it seems I should have been aware of the case at an early age. But because it was not taught in my high school, I only learned about the case through my family ties to it. I have asked a number of people from different North Mississippi high schools whether the Emmett Till class was taught in their history classes and have yet to receive an affirmative response. Granted, it would be a daring and unwise assumption to say that no high school in North Mississippi teaches its students about the Till case, but I find it unusual that awareness is so limited. I hope, through this project, to raise awareness of Emmett Till's murder to as many people as I can. It is one of the landmark events and turning points in Mississippi history. And, as the reopening has shown, despite Mississippi's best efforts, no amount of ignoring its occurrence will make this case disappear from history.

## Introduction

On August 28, 1955, two men intruded upon the household of Moses Wright in Money, Mississippi, demanding that the “boy from Chicago” be handed over to them. Despite the family’s muted attempts at dissuading the men from abducting the boy, Emmett Till was loaded into the back of a pickup truck to disappear into the summer night. His family would never see him alive again.

Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam were arrested in connection with Till’s kidnapping on August 29 but claimed Till had been alive when they last saw him. On August 31, three days after his abduction, the 14-year-old’s mutilated body was found by a fisherman in the Tallahatchie River. Milam and Bryant were indicted for murder, and the trial that would serve as a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement was set to begin. After five days of testimony and sixty-seven minutes of deliberation, an all-white, all-male jury comprised of farmers and carpenters acquitted the men who later admitted to killing Emmett Till.

There are innumerable facts about the case that have been published over the years or retained in the memories of witnesses, but the events and the trial remain largely mysterious on the eve of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Emmett Till’s death. An incredible amount of secrecy was maintained by those who were aware of the information that could fill in the blanks. Only Carolyn Bryant and Emmett Till knew what really happened when the boy entered Bryant’s Grocery. Only a handful of eyewitnesses knew how Emmett died. No one seems to know what became of the official court documents or, until recently, the trial transcript. And the lips of informed persons have remained tightly shut for exactly fifty years.

For this project, data was collected on the story from many sources and various media. Because of the huge amount of speculation involved in many areas of the original case and the incomplete nature of the new investigation, the author hopes to have put together the most logical and factual story possible, given the information available. The story has been told here without absolute certainty but in a way that can be supported by text and first-hand account information, as well as the author's speculation where no literature exists, therefore hopefully obtaining some amount of accuracy.

Emmett Till has since been referred to as the catalyst that brought about the Civil Rights Movement (Hudson-Weems). Despite the fact that Till's case was not a Civil Rights case, in the sense that he was not proving a point or supporting a principle, as Rosa Parks would do three months later, he must have helped the movement along. The murder of this youth received such heavy media attention in its day that it was impossible to ignore. But the state of Mississippi managed to push it aside for fifty years.

On May 10, 2004, the Department of Justice reopened the Emmett Till case. In the subsequent investigation, a copy of the trial transcript has resurfaced, Emmett's body has been exhumed for the purposes of performing an autopsy, and the media has latched onto the Till case at the national level again. The FBI has contacted anyone who might potentially have information, leads, or the slightest glimmer of a memory that has yet to be voiced.

Through interviews, the author set out to find some consensus of opinion among knowledgeable sources on the case as to where the investigation might lead and what people hope for its outcome. This does not include public opinion. The only interviews conducted were of

people with first-hand information about the case, those with some knowledge of the ongoing investigation, or researchers on the Till case.

In short, the two main research questions addressed in this project are as follows:

- Through comparing significant historical accounts of the Emmett Till case, what progression of events in terms of his kidnapping and murder seems most likely?
- What are informed individuals' hopes for the outcome of the reopening?

## Literature Review

An astounding amount of literature exists regarding the Till case. The tremendous amount of media coverage at the time allows subsequent researchers to follow not only the events of the case but the attitudes and immediate public opinion as the events unfolded in 1955. *The Chicago Defender*, *The Delta Democrat-Times*, *The Commercial Appeal*, *Jet*, *Life*, *Look*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Birmingham World*, *Time*, and *The New York Times* are only a few of the regional and national newspapers with reporters on the scene in Sumner. *Look* magazine printed J.W. Milam's famous confession in January 1956, and the article's author, William Bradford Huie, went on to write "Wolf Whistle," the longer story of the Till investigation, published in 1959.

In 1963, Hugh Stephen Whitaker wrote his Florida State University Master's thesis on the Till case. Entitled "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Emmett Till Case," Whitaker's paper is still the most important resource because of its use of primary sources available at the time, including the trial transcript. None of these sources exists anymore, as they were lost in a flood in the late 1970s. In 1988, Clenora Hudson-Weems wrote her doctoral dissertation on the Till case, naming the youth "the sacrificial lamb of the Civil Rights Movement." Her work was later published.

The case piqued the interest of many scholars along the way. A number of books have touched on the Emmett Till case in the larger scope of southern justice and injustice, including Bill Minor's *Eyes on Mississippi: A Fifty-Year Chronicle of Change*, James C. Cobb's *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, and Paul Hendrickson's *Sons of Mississippi*.

Many authors have narrowed their focus to the Till case specifically. The murder trial and all its controversy are significant enough within the larger historical context to merit the full

attention of a book. In *The Lynching of Emmett Till*, Christopher Metress tells the story through a well-organized series of news articles printed at the time, noting corrections where necessary and letting the story essentially tell itself. Emmett's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley gives her own account in *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*. *A Death in the Delta* by Stephen J. Whitfield gives a one-sided account, while Chris Crowe's *Getting Away With Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* uses its sources more wisely, forcing the reader to look into the case rather than asserting opinion. For the purposes of this project and its limited time and space, not all of these resources have been referenced.

Since 2003, when Mississippi officials began pushing for a reopening of the trial, newspapers have been overrun with stories about Till once again. Articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Greenwood Commonwealth*, *The Clarksdale Press Register*, *The Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, *The Charleston Sun-Sentinel*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times*, to name a few. Clearly a newsworthy case, the media has been attached to Emmett Till since his kidnapping, and with all the literature surrounding his murder, the story will, hopefully, reach a larger audience now that it is back in the public's eye.

## Method

For this project, the author collected data on the story from many sources and various media. Six open-ended, in-depth interviews of significant players in the case were audio recorded (See Appendix B). Three others were brief and/or produced information that cannot be used for the purpose of this project, due to requested confidentiality. The subjects played various roles in the case and its investigation. The demographics of the subjects interviewed were: seven white males, one white female, and one black male. Full-length interviews typically lasted about two hours; however, the shortest discussion was fifteen minutes long, and one group discussion lasted seven hours. The interviewees were two FBI agents, one author, one columnist, four researchers, and one long-time civil rights activist. Four were Mississippi natives or current residents with first-hand accounts and distinct memories of the trial in Sumner (See Appendix C). Each subject gave his consent to be interviewed and recorded by signing an IRB-approved consent form presented by the researcher.

The opinions and recollections of nine people were recorded and analyzed, providing the consensus of opinion the author hoped for when she began her research. The final paper traces the story of Emmett Till's wolf whistle, abduction, and murder, the trial that followed, the people's reaction to Milam and Bryant's acquittal and subsequent confession, the reopening, and the anticipated outcome of the reopened case.

## Results and Analysis

### Chicago to the Delta

**I let them know that Mississippi was not Chicago. And when you go to Mississippi, you're living by an entirely different set of rules. It is 'yes, ma'am' and 'no, ma'am,' 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir.' And Bo, if you see a white woman coming down the street, you get off the sidewalk and drop your head. Don't even look at her. [...] He thought I was exaggerating, which I was. I was trying to exaggerate. If I could go high enough, I—things could soak into his head that you have to be very careful.**

#### **Mamie Till-Mobley, mother of Emmett Till (Nelson)**

A change of his summer vacation destination sent Emmett Louis “Bobo” Till, in the summer of 1955, to the Mississippi Delta. He cancelled plans to travel to Detroit with his mother, accompanying instead his great-uncle and cousins to Money, Mississippi. His mother’s words to him the day before he left were harsh and, as she said, exaggerated. But her exaggeration was hardly far from the truth. Emmett was accustomed to his life in Chicago. At age 14, prepared to enter the eighth grade in the fall, he was described by his cousin and fellow Chicagoan, Wheeler Parker, as being “in the middle of all of it, and he just loved to play ball. He just loved jokes. He would pay people to tell him jokes. If there was a group there, Emmett was in front. And he was the lively one” (Nelson 2). Emmett’s personality, along with his affinity for joking and the situation in the Jim Crow South, provided the ideal setup for a disaster like the one Emmett fell victim to in Mississippi. “Emmett lived in a predominantly black middle-class neighborhood and attended a predominantly black school, but there were a few white classmates, friends, and teachers,” (Hudson-Weems 31) which must have made his understanding of and transition to the ways of the South quite difficult.

The Mississippi Delta was still known in the 1950s for its harsh white supremacy, for its clutching desperately the traditions of previous generations. The people were poor, and the



chasm between the races was a wide one. While whites tended to take on a paternal relationship with the blacks, assuming they knew what was best, the situation was so cripplingly unfair as to harm both the races. Things had changed very little in the Delta since it had been populated: “ever since white planters and black slaves had settled the area, the Delta had encapsulated extremes—white wealth and black poverty, white violence and black suffering, white power and black survival” (“Covering” 98). And the lack of advancement grew, quite simply, out of the lack of will to change. One scholar noted in the late 1950s, “the doctrine of White Supremacy as preached and practiced in the South is unsound, wasteful, emotional, unreasoning, frantic, and nostalgic. It is also not a little sad; for there is real pathos in the constant looking back and clinging to an era gone forever” (Adams 23). When asked about the degree of oppression in the 1950s, retired FBI agent and Sumner native Lent Rice replied, “If a white man walked down the sidewalk, a black man moved to the side, might have even stepped off the curb, especially if a white lady or girl, even a minor child walked by, they would get out of the way, they would take their hat off.” And in addition to the attitude of white supremacy, there were also frequent lynchings, people dying for rights or for no reason at all. In the months before Emmett Till’s arrival in Mississippi, Rev. George Lee and Lamar Smith had been murdered for urging blacks to vote in Belzoni and Brookhaven, respectively. The stage was set for disaster when a young, outgoing black Chicago boy boarded the train for Mississippi.

On August 20, Emmett Till (See Appendix A, Picture 1) entered this atmosphere ignorant of the oppression he would encounter in the Delta. He, along with Wheeler Parker, Moses “Preacher” Wright, and Simeon Wright, made the sixteen-hour train trip to the Delta. The first days of Emmett’s vacation consisted mostly of the boys’ playing outside. As Wheeler Parker

said, “We went to the South, near the beginning of cotton-picking time, late August, and we picked cotton for a half a day and we would go swimming, run the snakes out the river. We had a lot of fun” (Nelson 3).

That Wednesday evening, August 24, Emmett and his friends and cousins abandoned a sermon at Emmett’s great-uncle Moses Wright’s church. The August heat and their restlessness led them to Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market in downtown Money, Mississippi (See Appendix A, Picture 2). Their ’46 Ford pulled up at the store at 7:30 in the evening, and several of the children in the car filed into the store for drinks and candy. Emmett had been talking to the friends in the car—one girl and seven boys, ranging in age from 13 to 18—about a white girl he had been with in Chicago. Because of their residence in the segregated South, Emmett’s stories were foreign and hardly believable to the others. The youths doubted his relations with white women, and, mentioning the attractiveness of the 21-year-old woman behind the counter at Bryant’s store (See Appendix A, Picture 3), encouraged Emmett to take a look when he made his purchase.

The exact events that took place as Emmett prepared to leave the store are uncertain. Several accounts present varying actions on Emmett’s part, each one more severe than the last. He may have reached across the counter, as Carolyn Bryant’s story goes, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her toward him, saying more than a few words about her and about his girls in Chicago. Or his actions may have been as harmless as turning back to whistle at her as he left the building with two cents’ worth of bubble gum in his pocket, as Ruth Crawford recalls in Keith Beauchamp’s documentary, *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*: “Speaking publicly for [in Beauchamp’s film], she says she watched Till through a window and that all he did to upset Bryant while in the store was place his money in her hand, rather than on the counter”

(Anderson). Crawford's story is probably the most accurate. Either way, because of his 'wolf whistle,' he would soon fall victim to one of the most infamous crimes the Mississippi Delta would ever see.

Emmett's whistle was real enough; several men lounging and playing checkers on the front porch of the store heard it, as did Till's cousins and friends. His mother claimed the whistle itself could be attributed to his stutter, a permanent side effect of his earlier conflict with polio, but relatives have verified since her death that this was a delusion that made coping easier for her, so they let her believe it. No matter what Emmett might have said inside the store, he turned back to Carolyn Bryant from the doorway and whistled at her. She ran toward the back of the store, and the youths understood that she was going to her sister-in-law's car to retrieve the Colt .38 automatic tucked under the driver's seat. They piled back into the Ford and drove away, assuming that their biggest concern was making sure Uncle Mose was kept in the dark about the evening's events. Wheeler Parker would later recall that "Till begged us not to tell my grandfather, so we didn't tell. And there was a girl there; her name was Ruth Crawford. She's a black girl, a little younger than me. She's still there I understand. And she told us 'you all gonna hear some more from this'" (Hudson-Weems 36). .

Carolyn told her sister-in-law, Juanita Milam, about the black boy who had come into the store. Carolyn Bryant claims they decided not to tell their husbands about Emmett's whistle. Roy Bryant was en route from New Orleans to San Antonio hauling a truckload of shrimp, which left Carolyn managing the store in his absence. The women supposedly remained quiet about the incident when Juanita's husband, J.W. Milam, arrived at the store around 9:00 to escort them home.

As in any small town, word got around in Money about Emmett's whistle. There could have been as many as a dozen witnesses, all black, on the porch of the store, and the talk made its way back to Roy Bryant in almost no time. Four days later, Bryant enlisted Milam to help him teach the boy from Chicago a lesson.

## The Crime

**If we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, then we don't deserve to survive, and probably won't.**

**William Faulkner**

**The state of Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children.**

**Roy Wilkins, NAACP**

J.W. Milam was 36 at the time. At 6'2" and 235 pounds, he was fierce-looking and brutal, the prototypical plantation overseer of any Southern fiction novel. A veteran of the Second World War,

he was commissioned in battle by the 75<sup>th</sup> Division. He was an expert platoon leader, expert street fighter, expert in night patrol, expert with the 'grease gun,' with every device for close range killing. A German bullet tore clear through his chest; his body bears 'multiple shrapnel wounds.' Of his medals he cherishes one: combat infantryman's badge. Big Milam, like many soldiers, brought home his favorite gun: the .45 Colt automatic pistol (Huie 48).

It is indicated by historical accounts that Bryant was less vicious, smaller and less inclined toward violence than Milam. In terms of describing Bryant, where he painted such a terrifying portrait of Milam, William Bradford Huie wrote, "Roy Bryant is pathetic. He's a scrapper, but no killer. He 'had' to 'whip the niggah's ass.' But I don't believe Bryant would have killed him, even after the boasts about the white girl" (Huie 42). But perhaps he was capable of anything in terms of protecting his pride and avenging the insult to his wife.

At 2:30 a.m. on Sunday, August 28, Milam and Bryant drove Milam's half-ton '55 Chevrolet to Moses "Preacher" Wright's home 2.8 miles east of Money (See Appendix A, Picture 4). They parked the truck among the cedar and persimmon trees in Wright's front yard and approached the screened-in front porch of his house, calling, "Preacher, Preacher," (Huie 48),

and when Wright opened the door, he saw Milam standing in front of him with his .45 in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Bryant asked, "Preacher, you got a boy from Chicago here?" (Huie 48) Despite Mose's protests and assurances that Emmett had been severely chastised for his act of disrespect, Milam insisted on being led to the bedroom in the back of the house where Emmett shared a bed with his cousin, Simeon Wright. The boys had been to downtown Greenwood earlier that night and had fallen fast asleep after the excitement. Mose Wright recounts, "So we marched around through two rooms, and I found the boy in the third room in the bed with my baby boy, and they told him to get up and put his clothes on" (Nelson 4). Milam woke Emmett and "shined the light in Bobo's face, said, 'You the nigger who did the talking?'" (Huie 48). Rather than saying "yes sir," as any black who abided by the harsh rules of the small-town South would have, Emmett replied bluntly, "Yeah." Milam barked, "Don't say 'Yeah' to me: I'll blow your head off. Get your clothes on" (Huie 48). By then, everyone in the house was awake. Emmett's cousin Wheeler Parker heard this threat in the next room and lay in bed, petrified.

Emmett took his time dressing and insisted that Milam and Bryant wait for him to put on socks and shoes. They led him outside, where a high voice inside the truck, according to Mose Wright's testimony, identified him as "the one." Milam ordered him to lie down in the back of the truck, and Emmett complied. Emmett Till's family would not see him alive again after Milam's truck pulled away from the house and into the moonless night.

One can only speculate as to what happened after Till's abduction. Milam's published confession appeared in an article written by William Bradford Huie for *Look* magazine in January 1956, but many questions are left unanswered. Milam claimed "their intention was to 'just whip him...and scare some sense into him.'" And for this chore, Big Milam knew 'the

scariest place in the Delta.’ He had come upon it last year hunting wild geese. Over close to Rosedale, the Big River bends around under a bluff. ‘Brother, she’s a 100-foot sheer drop, and she’s a 100 feet deep after you hit’ (Huie 50). He explained the specific intent of his plan at the bluff in Rosedale, saying his “idea was to stand him up there on that bluff, ‘whip’ him with the .45, and then shine the light on down there toward that water and make him think you’re gonna knock him in. ‘Brother, if that won’t scare the Chicago nigger, hell won’t’” (Huie 50).

But the brothers drove to Rosedale, a 50-mile hike from Money, and couldn’t find the bluff, so they claim that they took Till to Leslie Milam’s place in Drew. Willie Reed, an 18-year-old sharecropper’s son on the Drew plantation said,

I could hear this cryin’ and cryin’ and beatin’, and I’m saying to myself, ‘They beatin’ somebody up there.’ I heard that beatin’ even before I got to the barn. I passed by, they still beatin’, they still beatin’. I hear it. Milam came out. So when he said, ‘Did you hear anything?’ I saw him, he had khaki pants on, had a green nylon shirt, and a .45 on his side. So I said, “Naw, I didn’t hear anything” (Nelson 5).

Reed later became a star witness for the prosecution during the trial, but despite his testimony, Milam maintained the claim that Till remained arrogant and disrespectful, never uttering a cry or shedding a tear. In his later confession to William Bradford Huie, Milam recounted the events of August 28. Huie wrote

Back of Milam’s home is a tool house (See Appendix A, Picture 5), with two rooms each about 12 feet square. They took him in there and began ‘whipping’ him, first Milam then Bryant smashing him across the head with those .45’s. Pistol-whipping: a court-martial offense in the Army...but MPS’s have been known to do it...And Milam got information out of German prisoners this way. But under these blows Bobo never hollered—and he kept making the perfect speeches to insure martyrdom. Bobo: “You bastards, I’m not afraid of you. I’m as good as you are. I’ve ‘had’ white women” (Huie 50).

Milam claimed that, after the pistol-whipping, they put Till in the back of the pickup again and drove on to find a weight. Milam was ready to “make an example” of Till “just so everybody can

know how me and my folks stand” (Huie 50). They allegedly drove to Boyle, which, if their earlier story were correct, would have been backtracking, and picked up a 72-pound gin fan that had been discarded. They drove back to Glendora after making Till carry and load the weight that would sink his body, then went to a spot near Swan Lake on the Tallahatchie River (See Appendix A, Picture 6).

It seems that the progression of Milam’s confession must be fabricated. He and Bryant picked Till up in Money at 2:30 a.m. and left him at the river at 7:00 a.m. During that time, Milam claims they traveled from Money to Rosedale (59.02 miles), then to Drew (35.74 miles) and back to Boyle (19.19 miles), then back to the river near Swan Lake (39.90 miles) (See Appendix A, Picture 14). That gave them 4.5 hours to travel 153.85 miles, a significant portion of which would have been back roads, including time to search for the bluff on the river and make two stops: one to pistol whip Till and one to pick up the gin fan.

Another account suggests that Milam and Bryant may have taken a different route. Steve Whiakar, in his 1963 Master’s thesis, traced their progress this way:

Milam drove seventy-five miles [from Money], through several Delta towns, found the levee, but couldn’t find that particular bluff in the dark. He finally gave up and drove to his home in Glendora. His family was away, and the house was deserted. He drove into the back yard and stopped. [...After pistol whipping him], the three rode approximately thirty-six miles and got to the gin just after daylight [then they drove back to Glendora...]. From there, they drove north toward Swan Lake, crossed over the Tallahatchie River Bridge and turned down a dirt road that paralleled the river (Whitaker 114-115).

This course would have taken them approximately 200 miles, a trip even more implausible considering the time constraints. However they got there, they reached the river at daybreak.

Emmett Till was forced to take all his clothes off. He was shot once in the head, just above the right ear. The gin fan was tied to his neck with a length of barbed wire. According to Milam, they rolled his body down the embankment and into the water. But this part of the



confession causes a problem as well: The spot in the river where they claimed to have dropped the body is narrow, and the water would have been very low in late August (see Appendix A, picture 6). The current would have been too weak near the bank to carry a 160-pound body and a 72-pound gin fan out into the river to be swept downstream. Till's body was found eight miles from the place where they dropped it, and traveling such a distance would have been more plausible if the body had been dropped into the middle of the river—the strongest area—from a bridge. A new bridge over the Tallahatchie had recently been erected 1.5 miles from where they dropped the body, and it can be inferred that they may have dropped Till's body from there—even Sheriff Strider admitted that he had “located blood on the bridge over the Tallahatchie River which the two had crossed just before Till was killed” (Whitaker 119). But this would mean they lied in the confession, and the purpose of fabricating a story when they had been pardoned is unclear.

The only explanation for their failure to tell the whole story is that the truth might have implicated other people. As Steve Whitaker wrote, “It is possible that Milam deviated from the truth in slight detail, in order to protect the other persons who might have been involved from criminal action; these two had been acquitted and could not be tried again” (Whitaker 111). For example, if they threw the body from a bridge, it may have taken another person to help heave the body and the gin fan over the edge simultaneously. But questions like these can only be answered by those who witnessed the event firsthand.

They left Till there at 7:00 a.m. and spent the following hours burning what little evidence they had—his clothes, and his crepe-sole shoes that resisted the fire but eventually burned down to nothing, as everything else had.

Following Till's abduction, Mose Wright's wife Elizabeth had notified her cousin, Crosby Smith, of Emmett's kidnapping. Crosby passed the word on to Leflore County Sheriff George Smith. Sheriff Smith was in Greenwood, the seat of Leflore County, a few miles from Money. He arrested Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam on August 29 from their locations in Money and Minter City, respectively. They were held in the Leflore County Jail on kidnapping charges.

On August 31, Robert Hodges, a 17-year-old white youth fishing in the river, saw feet sticking out of the water. Emmett Till's body was caught in a drift eight miles downstream from where Milam had allegedly dropped the body. H.C. Strider, Jr., the son of Tallahatchie County's sheriff, Clarence Strider, was sent in his boat to meet a group of the sheriff's deputies. They fished the body out, and saw it had been beaten beyond recognition, particularly about the head. Sheriff Strider (See Appendix A, Picture 13) attempted to have the body buried immediately, and it was never embalmed, which, authorities say, helped preserve the body until the 2005 exhumation. Despite a federal law that called for embalming,

the undertakers received assurances that there was to be a closed-casket funeral, and that the usual pre-funeral preparation of a corpse was not necessary. Intravenous embalming of the corpse, which had swollen to twice its original size, was impossible. The body was weighted and immersed in a vat of formaldehyde, and incisions were made all over the body in order to release the tissue gas and to admit the preservative. The next morning, September 1, the body was placed in 'the finest casket available,' without further preparation, and put on the train for Chicago (Whitaker 118-119).

There was no investigation. As Lent Rice reported in an interview, it was a "very poor, poor, poor investigation. Ridiculous. As far as the preservation of a crime scene, if you don't preserve that crime scene, especially in a crime of passion, it's going to be tough to prove. As far as your physical evidence in this case, what is it? Where is it?"

Mamie Till Bradley, the boy's mother, demanded that her son be sent back to Chicago. As Mrs. Bradley slowly uncovered her son's body, she saw bruised limbs and already

decomposing skin. When she reached his head, she saw what would later shock the nation into action in a series of infamous photographs. She said,

When I got to his chin, I saw his tongue resting there. it was huge. I never imagined that a human tongue could be that big. [...] From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek. It looked like it was still attached by the optic nerve, but it was just suspended there. [...] [His other eye] wasn't there. it seemed like someone had taken a nut picker and plucked that one out. [...] I looked at his teeth, because I knew I could recognize them. Dear God, there were only two now, but they were definitely his. I looked at the bridge of his nose, at the point right between his eyebrows. It had been chopped, maybe with a meat cleaver. [...] As I moved around, I saw a bullet hole slightly back from the temple area. [...] It was that one bullet hole that finally caused me to speak. 'Did they have to *shoot* him?'" (Till-Mobley 135-6)

Emmett Till's body was put on display at Roberts Temple Church on the South Side of Chicago. His viewing was open-casket, with a plate of glass covering the boy's upper body, assuring that his face was fully visible (See Appendix A, Picture 12). On a Sunday afternoon, 50,000 Chicagoans passed through the church to see what the South had done to one of their own. They did not hesitate to take their children with them, and "about one in every five had to be assisted out of the building. They would just go into a faint" (Nelson 6). Because of the magnitude of the funeral and the outrage of the people of Chicago, the national press caught wind of Till's brutal murder, and, when the murder trial began in the Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi (See Appendix A, Picture 7), roughly one hundred reporters and photographers descended on the small Delta town.

## The Trial

**Mississippi may as well burn all its law books and close its courts if the maximum penalty of the law cannot be secured in this heinous crime.**

**Editorial, *Clarksdale Press Register*, September 1955**

**They are calling this a lynching in some places outside of Mississippi. Well, it wasn't. But it may well become a lynching post-facto, if the courts in Mississippi are unable to accomplish justice in this matter. And if that happens, we will deserve the criticism we get.**

***Delta Democrat-Times*, 6 September 1955**

**You kill sixteen jigs, and what do you git? A Freestate Jury that'll always acquit;  
Saint Peter don't call Emmett, 'cause he can't go, he owes his soul to Bryant's sto'.**

**Chorus from a song popular among Tallahatchie County teenagers following the acquittal (Whitaker 172)**

Presiding over the notorious trial of J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant was Judge Curtis Swango, known for his fairness as a judge and his insistence upon an orderly courtroom. One reporter described him aptly and with respect:

the dominant figure in the case was [Judge Curtis] Swango, 47 years old, handsome and impeccably groomed, a blend of judicial dignity and great natural charm. His voice was cultured, precise in grammar and soft in tone. His commitment to the law and its search for equal justice was total (Popham 8).

One attorney later asserted that "he was a fine judge, and everything you've ever seen written about him was good. He kept a good court and always had order. [...] He did a great job and conducted a good trial. He was impartial" (Webb-Whitten 2).

Milam and Bryant went before the grand jury in Sumner on September 5. Statements were issued by Leflore County Sheriff George Smith, Deputy John Ed Cothran, Tallahatchie County Sheriff H.C. Strider, and Deputy Garland Melton. The most significant assertion of the day came from the Tallahatchie County sheriff—that the body pulled from the river had not been

satisfactorily identified as Emmett Till's. Rumors were already circulating in Sumner about the NAACP's involvement and the probability that the murder accusations had been planned by the organization. Strider claimed that the body could not be positively identified, that the ring on his finger had been planted there, and that Emmett Till was surely still alive in Chicago. This theory would be the basis for the defense's argument in court. The conspiracy theory was outrageous, but the possibility that the NAACP had orchestrated things was not out of the question, from the mindset of white southerners who were suddenly blinded by the national media spotlight.

The opinion of a physician from Greenwood, Dr. L.B. Otken, was crucial to the validation of the defense's argument. He was heard by the grand jury on Tuesday, September 6, along with Mose Wright. Wright retold the story of Till's abduction and claimed that he recognized the body as his nephew's. Otken "shared Sheriff Strider's opinion that the body claimed as Till's was much too deteriorated for such a brief period in the water" (Simpson 184). In an interview in 1994, Attorney John W. Whitten, Jr. recalled that Dr. Otken's testimony was

the thing that made me question it. [...] He testified [that] the body he pulled from the river had been in the river at least two weeks, and this Till boy had been in the river just three or four days. It could have been anybody. That's what made me question, not whether the crime had been committed, but whether they had the right corpse. He was a well-respected doctor (Webb-Whitten 3).

At the end of the hearings on September 6, the grand jury indicted Milam and Bryant on charges of kidnapping and murder, though the prosecuting attorney claimed he did not seek the death penalty. Their arraignment took place later that afternoon, when Seventeenth Judicial District Judge Curtis Swango heard their "not guilty" plea.

In the interim between the primary hearing and the beginning of the trial, the atmosphere in Sumner became tense. Sumner was being put on display as a representative of the South that could commit such horrendous murder crimes as this one. But Sumner was not involved in the

murder in any way. Milam was from Glendora, a Tallahatchie County town roughly twenty miles from Sumner; but Bryant was from Money, where Till was abducted, in Leflore County. Because the body surfaced on the Tallahatchie County riverbank, the county seat was entitled to take the case. The residents of Sumner “resented the threat to their isolation and were hostile to the prospect of parading their community before the pious scrutiny of an entire nation. The publisher of the town’s weekly newspaper probably echoed the sentiment of Sumner’s majority in voicing his fear that the trial coverage might turn into a ‘Roman holiday’” (Simpson 187). This excluded, of course, the black community, which was shaken into paralysis by the murder. When asked several times by an interviewer in front of a news camera whether he thought the defendants should be convicted, one young black man’s steady reply was, “I really don’t know, sir” (Nelson 11).

The murder trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam began on September 19, twenty-two days after the murder. The county’s five attorneys came together to defend the pair, in hopes of avoiding any stigma that could be attached to one who defended them alone or was not involved in the trial. Attorney John W. Whitten, Jr. later shared the following sentiment in terms of the pair’s guilt: “I’ll tell you the first truth: I don’t know what happened. We never asked them. We defended them...you know why. But we didn’t question them. I personally didn’t ask them because [...] I didn’t want to hear the truth. They were entitled to defense so I defended them; but I didn’t have to listen to them” (Huie 33-34). Early in the investigation, when the trial was set to be held in Tallahatchie County, “the local power structure in Tallahatchie County refused to support the accused men. The sheriff was firmly set to prosecute. The most experienced and probably the most powerful law firm in the county, that of Breland and Whitten [See Appendix A, Picture 8], refused to take the case for the defendants. ‘Judge’ Breland set his price at

\$5,000—a figure he knew the brothers were unable to pay” (Whitaker 121). But by September 4, following the funeral and several statements issued by the NAACP,

the power structure of Tallahatchie County decided to ‘go to bat’ for J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. In the Freestate of Tallahatchie, when the power elite decide against an ‘outsider,’ a jury decision is almost a foregone conclusion. The first indication of the change in feeling was the announcement by Sheriff H.C. Strider, on Saturday afternoon, that he was fairly certain that the body which was found was not that of young Till, but of a ‘grown man.’ It was more decomposed than it should have been after that short stay in the water. Strider then made public a rumor which was to spread like wildfire. He said ‘he believed Till was still alive.’ The following day, September 4, all five lawyers in the county agreed to accept the offer to serve as defense counselors (Whitaker 125).

Members of the defense team were J.J. Breland and his partner John W. Whitten, Jr., J.W. Kellum, R. Harvey Henderson, and C. Sidney Carlton (See Appendix A, Picture 9). For the prosecution were District Attorney Gerald Chatham, Tallahatchie County Prosecutor Hamilton Caldwell, and Special Assistant Attorney General Robert B. Smith. Milam and Bryant were smug as they entered the courtroom (See Appendix A, Picture 10), but the immediate publicity of the trial curbed their confidence.

The atmosphere in the courtroom was certainly peculiar, to the point of being unsettling. It “was like subdued hostility, you could feel the tension, it just doesn’t erupt in the open, but it’s obviously there, and they didn’t look upon us reporters with a great deal of warmth,” as *Times-Picayune* columnist Bill Minor described in a recent interview. Sumner resident Betty Pearson hosted the press. She recalled in an interview, “We had a plantation out from Webb, Rainbow Plantation, so that’s where I was. [...] The four nights that [the press] were here, we had five or six guys out there every night, and it was really interesting because of the conversations we had after supper. Everybody talked about what had happened. That was the fun part of it.” Pearson also commented on Sheriff Strider: “He was this fat sheriff, Sheriff Strider, who had on pants with suspenders. He was fat, and he looked like a picture out of a movie, like a southern

sheriff.” He played the part as well. An article from *Jet* magazine stated that “[Sheriff Strider] liked to demonstrate his friendliness with Negro reporters covering the trial by greeting them each day with: ‘Good morning, niggers’” (“Covering” 98). Meanwhile, the defendants sat with their families behind the railing in the courtroom, and “one of [Milam’s children] played a solitary game, waving his toy water pistol at a sheriff and shouting ‘boom, boom, boom.’ Another time, little Harvey Milam amused himself by slipping a rope around his brother’s neck and tugging at it” (“Covering” 98).

The first day of the trial was dedicated entirely to the selection of the jury. Milam and Bryant were not well known by Tallahatchie County’s residents and had their reputations to rely on. The prosecution hoped for jurors from the east side of the county (See Appendix D), the hill country, under the incorrect assumption that those men were farther away from Milam and Bryant and were, therefore, less likely to be friends of theirs. So “On September 8, 1955, on the motion of the State, Circuit Judge Swango ordered a special venire of 120 men to be drawn from the jury boxes, in open court, on September 12. The special venire gave the state a chance to get half of the jurors from the east side of the county, far from the homes of the accused” (Whitaker 142). What these men did not understand about Tallahatchie County is that it is and always has been divided, half hill country, half Delta land, with distinct differences between the residents and distinct antagonism as well. Whitaker wrote,

The fallacy in the prosecution’s reasoning is apparent to anyone who knew the situation in the county. First, except for a few close friends, people who knew Milam and Bryant disliked them and were afraid of them. [...] Second, the prosecutors failed to note the distinct differences which have always existed between the hills and the Delta. Nearly all of Beat 1 and most of Beats 2 and 3 are in the hills. Here, most white farmers were in competition with Negroes, and did not feel the intense noblesse oblige that was common to many of the large landowners of the Delta. The defense lawyers, all of whom lived in the county, were cognizant of this error by the state, and were happy to capitalize on it (Whitaker 144).



Men from the east side of the county were also deputized by Sheriff Strider, patrolling the streets, brandishing the weapons on their hips, and upsetting the Sumner residents even more. Not only was their presence in town unappreciated, their presence on the jury proved beneficial to the defense.

By the time the court recessed on Tuesday, a twelve-man jury had been chosen, consisting mostly of white male farmers and carpenters. Whitaker observed, “Ten were from the hill section of the county; four from Beat 1, five from Beat 2, three from Beat 3. Of the three Deltans, only one was from Milam’s home in Beat 4. None of the three was considered to have been endowed with paternalism toward Negroes” (Whitaker 146). Following selection, District Attorney Chatham called for a recess in order to organize his new witnesses.

On Wednesday, the first witness was called. Mose Wright took the stand, and, when questioned as to whether the men who kidnapped Till were in the courtroom, he set a precedent in Mississippi history. Not only did he identify Milam and Bryant, but he rose from his seat on the witness stand and extended a crooked finger in Milam’s direction, saying simply, “Thar he. And thar’s Mr. Bryant.” The already imposing air in the courtroom thickened, as did the blood in the veins of every white man there. Mose Wright had not only testified against a pair of white men, but had looked into their faces and pointed them out (Appendix A, Picture 11). Despite an intense cross-examination, Wright stood by his conviction that Milam and Bryant were the guilty parties. The moment when he collapsed into his chair was described as, “the end of the hardest half hour in the hardest life possible for a human being in these United States” (Hendrickson 12).

Memphis photographer Ernest Withers was on-site at the trial and “would risk a judge’s contempt to capture the single most significant photograph of the entire trial” (Till-Mobley 159), the photograph of Mose Wright standing to point at Milam and Bryant. He sold the photo, as

“somebody approached Ernest Withers, stopped him in his tracks. Somebody had seen him take that picture, capture the moment: Papa Mose standing to accuse Bryant and Milam. As it turned out, the man was from one of the wire services. He bought the film right out of Ernest Withers’s camera” (Till-Mobley 176). Incidentally, Withers went on to photograph some of the most pivotal events of the Civil Rights Movement; for example, the most famous photographs of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were taken by Withers.

Thursday saw Mamie Bradley take the stand, certain that she was capable of identifying her only child’s body. Also on the roster was another blow to the defense’s argument: surprise witness Willie Reed, who had seen and heard the beating at Leslie Milam’s plantation. The defense relied on the testimonies of Carolyn Bryant, Dr. L. B. Otken, and Dr. H. D. Malone. Mrs. Bryant recalled the incident in the store, claiming that Till had not only touched her but handled her roughly, saying inappropriate things until she managed to escape his grasp. Her testimony was dismissed by Swango, however, because it did not relate directly to the case in question.

Friday brought six character witnesses to the courtroom, then the focus moved on to the prosecution and defense’s summations. John W. Whitten, Jr., in defense of Milam and Bryant, “stressed that ‘every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to set these men free,’ and warned that the jurors’ ‘forefathers would turn over in their graves if these boys were convicted on such evidence as this’” (Whitaker 154). Meanwhile, a desperate but unhopeful Gerald Chatham said, “‘They murdered that boy, and to hide that dastardly, cowardly act, they tied barbed wire to his neck and to a heavy gin fan and dumped him into the river for the turtles and the fish.’ He said the defendants ‘were dripping with the blood of Emmett Till’” (Whitaker 153).

In an interview, Sumner resident Betty Pearson recalled,

I never had been to a trial of any kind, especially not a murder trial, so I wanted to be in the courtroom to hear what they said. Harvey Henderson was best man in our wedding. Johnny and [his wife] Marianne were in our bridge club. Here were these people who were social friends, and they were doing this. I was horrified. [...] [My husband] Bill's uncle, Billy Simpson, owned *The Sumner Sentinel* at that time, which was right across the street from the courthouse. So I said, 'Billy, I want you to get me two press passes to that trial.' He said, 'I don't want you writing up that trial for me,' and I said, 'I'm not offering to write up that trial for you, I just want to go to it.'"

She witnessed the trial and hosted the press. Aware of every perspective of the case, she was stunned that her friends were in a courtroom defending these men. She said that, after hearing their representation of Milam and Bryant, she had trouble considering the attorneys friends for a long time. She noted, "It took me five years to be friendly with Johnny Whitten again because of that summation. I couldn't believe that Johnny was saying what he said. At that time, I was so ignorant of legal matters, I didn't know that in the summation to the jury, you didn't have to stick to fact, you could just say anything. So he weaves this fairy tale."

Following the summation, fairy tale or not, the jury left the courtroom and delivered a 'not guilty' verdict after sixty-seven minutes of deliberation.

No one was particularly shocked by the jury's decision, but their brief stay in the jury room was insulting. As one reporter recalled,

When it was over and the jury had announced its 'not guilty' decision, the mass of sweating, shirt-sleeved, cotton-farming spectators arose to go, but first turned a damning glance toward the handful of Negroes who sat crowded around their press table. And in that single, hate-filled look it was obvious that to these white southerners, some of whom had never seen television or could believe that a Negro Congressman was not a violation of federal law, 'white supremacy' had again triumphed (Wright 11).

By the time the verdict was delivered, Mamie Bradley and her escorts had made it to Tunica, Mississippi, leaving early because of their confidence that no one would be convicted.

The prosecuting attorneys were so surprised by the brevity of the jury's deliberation that they were not in the courtroom for the verdict. Willie Reed "went back home and got his clothes then went out to the fields like he was going to pick cotton. Soon afterwards, he ran across six miles of cotton fields to get away" (*Jet*, 13 October 1955). Reed suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized once he reached his mother in Chicago. Mose Wright intended to stay in Money long enough to harvest his cotton crop, but the night after the trial, he had a dream that told him to get out. After deciding his house was not safe, he slept in his car in the yard of his church in East Money, only to find out the next day that a pair of white men had ransacked his house looking for him. He gathered his three sons and took them to Chicago, where they remained with his wife, who had already arrived there safely. He told *Jet* magazine a month later, "meanwhile, I'm going to keep praying for the day when there's a hollering 'Preacher, Preacher' outside my door. And when I look out, I want to see them two white men on their knees begging forgiveness for killing my boy" (*Jet*, 13 October 1955)

In the aftermath, "Strider became the personification of the type of law enforcement that had cause so many Negroes to 'go North'" (Whitaker 164). Several black families left his plantation, and an attempt on his life in 1957 persuaded him to withdraw from the running for Sheriff of Tallahatchie County. He later died of a heart attack while on a deer stand at a hunting camp.

Milam and Bryant were eventually forced out of Mississippi, as all their patrons boycotted their places of business. Milam attempted farming but was not allowed enough land to farm on. Both their families moved to Texas, and an incident in 1961 expresses vividly the attitude Tallahatchie County residents had toward Milam and Bryant: "[Tallahatchie resident] Woods McLellan and his family were driving through a Texas town and stopped for a traffic

light. The driver in the next car noted the license plate and yelled, 'You're from Tallahatchie County.' 'That's right,' said McLellan. 'I'm Roy Bryant,' said the Texan. The smile disappeared from McLellan's face; he stared straight ahead as he drove swiftly away from the traffic light, not looking back" (Whitaker 162).

Milam and Bryant were found not guilty on kidnapping charges in Leflore County on November 9, 1955.

J.W. Milam died of cancer of the spine on New Year's Eve in 1980.

Roy Bryant died of cancer in 1994.

Mamie (Bradley) Till-Mobley died in 2003.

Carolyn Bryant is still alive and resides in Greenville, Mississippi.

## The Reopening

**Mine is not just the passion of an aggrieved mother. This should be the sentiment of an entire nation. As long as the Emmett Till murder is unresolved, this case will sit there like a thorn in the side of our sense of justice and fair play. It will continue to pike at us, to prick our conscience and irritate. Without a resolution, we can never be at ease.**

**Mamie Till-Mobley (Till-Mobley)**

**It doesn't matter too much whether Emmett Till's murderers are brought to justice. [...] It is the correction of this cancerous condition, rather than the punishment of a single crime, that now must have the attention of the right-thinking people of this country**

**Olive Arnold Adams (*Time Bomb*)**

**That's the way the erasure of the past tends to work, by selective memory and willed amnesia and the wearing away of time. And yet there are always some folks around who are willing to remember things whole.**

**Paul Hendrickson (Interview)**

The Till case is said to have accelerated the onset of the impending Modern Civil Rights Movement. Falling neatly between two of the movement's key events—the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision fifteen months earlier and Rosa Parks' Montgomery bus boycott three months later—the Till case certainly could have served as a catalyst for the movement, as some have asserted, but Till was not aiming to make a point. He was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Despite the incredible media attention at the time of the trial, the case seemed to fall out of the nation's periphery for nearly a half-century. It is not a required part of the curriculum in Mississippi high school history classes, which suggests that the state continues to hope that things unaddressed are things nonexistent. The South has changed slowly since 1955, certainly progressing, though perhaps not enough. Olive Arnold Adams once wrote, "the doctrine of White Supremacy as preached and practiced in the South is unsound, wasteful, emotional,

unreasoning, frantic, and nostalgic. It is also not a little sad; for there is real pathos in the constant looking back and clinging to an era gone forever” (Adams 23). In this case, it seems that looking back is the key to letting go of that former era, righting wrongs, and moving forward. Because of the dedication of a few people who were looking back, the Emmett Till case was brought to the attention of the Department of Justice in 2004.

A 2003 PBS documentary, *The Murder of Emmett Till*, reminded the country of this atrocious case. *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, produced and directed by Keith Beauchamp, gained attention the next year, only viewed by the press but already a highly controversial documentary. Beauchamp claimed that at least seven people were involved in Till’s murder, and at least one is still alive. With the encouragement of Beauchamp and Mamie Till-Mobley, Mississippi District Attorney Joyce Chiles pressed the Department of Justice for an investigation. Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division R. Alexander Acosta supported the motion as well, saying,

the Emmett Till case stands at the heart of the American civil rights movement. This brutal murder and grotesque miscarriage of justice outraged a nation and helped galvanize support for the modern American civil rights movement. We owe it to Emmett Till, and we owe it to ourselves, to see whether after all these years, some additional measure of justice remains possible (Stanley A2).

On May 10, 2004, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Mississippi District Attorney’s Office, 4<sup>th</sup> District, opened the investigation that should have been performed fifty years ago. According to statute,

the federal law that gives the Department of Justice jurisdiction is USC 28 Section 533, which was used with the assassinations of Kennedy and Martin Luther King. This federal law gives the Attorney General the authority to investigate or reopen any case even if the perpetrators are dead. The civil rights statutes that existed in 1955 have expired (Keith Beauchamp, Court TV interview).

The family supported the reopening. Mamie Till-Mobley passed away in 2003, after a long battle in her son's name. Wheeler Parker and Simeon Wright are still alive and cooperating with authorities in terms of their witness to Till's abduction. Milam and Bryant are dead as well, but their wives are still alive, and Carolyn Bryant is a suspect, as she was allegedly with Milam and Bryant at Mose Wright's home, identifying Emmett Till as the one who whistled.

But the tangible evidence in support of a reopening is practically nonexistent. No court records have survived the fifty-year delay of justice, save for a recently discovered, handwritten copy of the trial transcript. The 72-pound gin fan was discarded when the Sumner courthouse was renovated several years ago. All the attorneys on the trial have passed away as well, with the exception of Harvey Henderson, who was the youngest attorney for the defense. Hearsay over the years has expanded or diminished the facts so that the story is too distorted to straighten out. FBI Agent Dale Killinger may be nearing the end of his intense investigation, at which point, Lent Rice said, "he will give a completed report to the DA of Leflore County [Joyce Chiles]. She'll have to make a decision before she's out of office, as far as what she's going to do with this, if there's something there to go forward with—whether it's enough to go on to a grand jury." Judging by the consensus of opinion among those most knowledgeable about the case, it seems that someone could still be convicted. But hard evidence is crucial, so the exhumation of Till's body eventually began to seem inevitable three months ago. One article in *The Clarksdale Press Register* explained: "the Justice Department announced plans last year to reopen the Till investigation, citing several pieces of information that included a documentary by New York filmmaker Keith Beauchamp. 'The exhumation is a logical continuation of that,' [FBI spokeswoman Deborah] Madden said. 'an autopsy was never performed on the body and the cause of death was never determined'" ("Till's body").



After a year of investigation on the part of the FBI, two interesting developments occurred in the search for justice in Till's name. The decision was made to exhume Emmett Till's body. Because no investigation or autopsy was performed at the time of the murder and no physical evidence existed at the time of the original trial, one thing can be made certain at this point—that the body in question is, in fact, Emmett Till's. The decision to exhume made the public, as well as Till's family, quite skeptical, but FBI special agent Robert J. Garrity, Jr. noted that "it would not be a quantum leap to think if we had absolutely no potential defendants, there would be no need for an exhumation" (Mitchell 3B).

Between the decision to exhume and the actual exhumation, a handwritten copy of the trial transcript was found. An original and no more than two carbon copies were all that existed to begin with, and when those were destroyed or disappeared, there seemed to be no hope for finding another. But one was procured on May 17, 2005, though the FBI has yet to disclose its source or what information it may contain. The transcript may be the only thing short of a confession that can bring someone to justice, if it proves that powerful. For instance, "legal experts say a transcript is key to putting together the case against any living suspects, particularly if that suspect is Carolyn Bryant, whom relatives say maintains her innocence. Experts say it's possible some of the transcript could be used against her, but there's no guarantee a judge would admit such testimony" (Mitchell 1B).

On June 1, the FBI removed Till's casket, and officials reported that the body was surprisingly well-preserved, probably due to the fact that it had been soaked in formaldehyde and had not been embalmed. The autopsy was performed, and Till was reburied on June 4. No official autopsy results have been released, but Simeon Wright has been told, "[He]'ll be very

pleased” (AP, 4 June 2005). The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported the discovery of a bullet, but this claim is not backed by official information.

On July 2, a section of U.S. Highway 49 that runs from Tutwiler to Greenwood was dedicated as the Emmett Till Memorial Highway. Family members, state legislators, and residents were there for two separate unveilings, one at each end of the highway. U.S. 49 passes by Sumner and near Money, as well as, ironically enough, intersecting U.S. Highway 32, the Henry Clarence Strider Memorial Highway, at Webb.

The interviews revealed an interesting pattern: Subjects expressed a desire to see one of three themes—truth, justice, or redemption—in the resolution of the reopening. These three seem to be different goals, but they all essentially point to the same idea. They are three consecutive steps in the same process—in order to right the wrongs Mississippi has made in the past, some degree of truth or fact that has not been available before must be obtained. No investigation was carried out during the original Till case, so the government is doing the best it can to correct that mistake. If possible, through finding whatever truths may be available, the Department of Justice hopes to bring someone to justice, but this can only be done through the surfacing of concrete facts about the murder. Only through the utilization of those facts in obtaining some degree of justice can the state of Mississippi achieve some level of redemption, an apology to those whose lives were touched by the losses of people like Emmett Till, who were murdered with no consequence for their killers.

The following quotes and explanations will serve to illustrate this pattern.

To reiterate a quote by John W. Whitten, Jr. referenced earlier: “I’ll tell you the first truth: I don’t know what happened. We never asked them. We defended them...you know why.

But we didn't question them. I personally didn't ask them because [...] I didn't want to hear the truth. They were entitled to defense so I defended them; but I didn't have to listen to them" (Huie 33-4). As it turned out, the absence of the 'truth' that Attorney Whitten preferred not to hear was significant to the fact that the killers were never brought to justice. But without the knowledge that Milam and Bryant had killed Emmett Till, there was still an argument to the contrary. The truth came out, after Milam and Bryant had escaped the justice they deserved, and the reopening of the case serves to eliminate doubts in other areas of the case.

If it goes nowhere, the outcome will be disappointing, but the attempt may lead to some positive change in the end. As one editorial from *The Commercial Appeal* put it, "it is right to pursue such cases, even if they don't always end up with a prosecution. Evil-doers must know they cannot escape the law, either through time or perjured testimony" ("Murder"). In an interview, retired FBI agent Lent Rice said "the objective in this whole thing, whether it's a federal investigator, a state investigator—hopefully, a state investigator—to get to the truth." When the investigators discover the truths about the case, they will be able to decide whether the investigation can go forward, whether people can be indicted on charges relating to the original case. Without new evidence that points to any accomplices Milam and Bryant might have had, the case can go no farther, as Steve Whitaker voiced in an interview. He said, "I don't think there is going to be [a reopening of the case]. I can't imagine. They would have to indict them for being an active part of the murder for them not to exceed the statute of limitations. Mississippi statute applied to about six offenses back then. Murder was one, but kidnapping, back in '55, was not one of them. Everything was covered by a Statute of Limitations of two years." Because of the very few counts involved persons can be tried on, without facts, there is no hope of serving justice.

Another consensus of opinion seems to be that the case should resolve itself in justice, which was the theme the researcher expected would arise most often. To some, justice is simply the truth, the absence of mystery, even if it means an investigation in 1955 would have revealed no additional information. One article states that “the error is reversible if Mississippians are willing to shine a light on dark passageways to the truth” (“Business”). Because the case was forgotten by so many for so long, author Paul Hendrickson expressed his hopes for the reopening this way in an interview: “It’s personally very hard for me to imagine how the authorities can tie other people this long away directly to that crime. I can’t figure that part out, maybe they can, maybe they can’t. [...] What I’m hoping will come out of this is that it will be written into the books.” This aligns well with the author’s opinion: whether anyone is brought to justice, the reopening only emphasizes the import of the case, so this resurfacing of a milestone in Mississippi history should raise awareness about the case where it is lacking.

One editorial in *The Greenwood Commonwealth* asserted that “those who are applauding the reopening of the Emmett Till murder case see it as another step in the quest for justice for the heinous civil rights crimes of Mississippi’s past. They are bound to be sadly disappointed” (“Wrongs”). Professor Davis Houck noted in an interview that “Well, of course, we all want justice, right? So it would be fantastic if the FBI was able to find enough evidence.” If justice is the ultimate goal, then this implies that the validation of old suspicions or discovery of new facts is necessary. No one can be indicted or tried for his involvement in the murder without proper evidence.

Some subjects claimed that closure and redemption were the most important things this reopening could result in. But again, without the truths and justice necessary to bringing it about,

redemption remains an impossibility. Long-time columnist Bill Minor, who was a reporter on-site at the 1955 trial said in an interview:

I think it's more redemption they're seeking than anything else. [...] Well, there's nobody there. Who are you going to—there's no question they probably dragged in some black kid to help throw him into the back of the truck, but is that an accomplice? There's nobody there, there's nothing there. The two culprits who did it, if they had rounded up [...] a lynch party out in the countryside, if you put together a group of people, but there was no group, it was just old man J.W. Milam.

While several theories directly contradict Minor's claim that no one else was involved, the point he makes here is significant. To repeat, if no facts point toward another involved individual, no one will be brought to justice. And he admits that redemption is the ultimate goal but seems to doubt that it is a feasible one. Obtaining justice in the reopened cases of J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, Edgar Ray Killen (orchestrated killings of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney), and Byron de la Beckwith (murdered Medgar Evers) may be just the beginning of a larger reconciliation or redemption process. The reconciliation will, perhaps some time in the future, relieve racial tensions in the region, as one source said: "getting other convictions will start us on the road in the sense that we can finally say we've finally done what we should have done 50 years ago, so Mississippi has changed that much, but if it will get us on the road in the sense of improving relationships between the races locally, I don't know. That's what I would love to see come out of it" (Pearson).

Similarly, director Keith Beauchamp expressed his expectations on a larger scale in an interview, saying,

I hope that the Till case could be used as a catalyst for change, just like it was in 1955. I hope that the reopening of this case will begin to start the process of reconciliation, that this country so desperately needs. Racism still exists in this country and until we begin to address these social issues in a public forum we will be doomed to repeat the atrocities of our past. Having justice done in this

case will give closure for the Till family and millions of Americans, black and white, who grew up with this story.

If these three themes—truth, justice, and redemption—can be considered as different steps in the same process, it follows that all three culminate in Pearson’s and Beauchamp’s comments. The redemption, closure, and improvement on a larger scale that they speak of will not be possible without the other two parts: truth and justice. As these themes build on each other, the issues they encompass grow larger, from a specific case to one state’s problem to the state of race relations in the South, perhaps in the entire country.

Simply put, the reopening will result in more truth than was produced in 1955. Despite what that truth is, it will bring closure to the family members and scholars who have spent five decades following this case and its injustices. It can also bring about a starting point on Mississippi’s road to redemption. Whether anyone is brought to justice is less important—if there is no one to convict, there will be no conviction. But the pursuit of justice in this case can finally come to a close, and Emmett Till can finally be laid to rest and written into history as history, rather than an aging unsolved murder case.

## Discussion

The reopening of the Emmett Till murder case is not a futile one. Granted, there are very few people still living who could be held accountable for some aspect of Till's murder. But Carolyn Bryant is still alive and was believed, at least, to have been in the truck with Milam and Bryant when they retrieved Till from Mose Wright's house. Juanita Milam was in Leflore County on the night of the murder, but it is unlikely that she escaped the situation without learning at least some of the details. Henry Lee Loggins and Levy "Too Tight" Collins are two suspected accomplices who conveniently disappeared immediately following the murder and did not resurface until three days after the trial was over. Loggins is still alive. So a conviction is not likely, but it is also not out of the question.

The significance of cases like Emmett Till's are the ones that fall into the background, it seems, when we consider the tragedies and injustices of this country. At the forefront, understandably, are events like Rosa Parks' Montgomery bus boycott, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other great and sorrowful moments in history. Emmett Till's is certainly not an unknown name, but his story should come to mind as quickly as any other's when civil rights, the Jim Crow South, or lynchings are spoken of. Especially because of its media coverage in 1955 and a renewed media interest over the past three years, it seems that avoiding the knowledge of this case at this point would require some amount of effort.

Mississippi seems to be making an attempt, in following up on cases like Till, Medgar Evers, and the Neshoba County Freedom Summer killings, to right its previous wrongs and move on. In the case of Edgar Ray Killen, three consecutive sentences were issued to an eighty-year-

old man. Certainly one would have been enough, so was he sentenced to the additional two to serve as an example?

The reopening of the Till investigation may not produce such favorable results, but the effort certainly counts for something in this case. And the fact that a few informed sources are seeking closure says something as well, whether that closure comes from an apology on Mississippi's part or something as simple as some element of truth that has not been available before. This situation is indicative of an effort by one state with an unfavorable history to make amends, and one can only hope that the ultimate goal in these investigations and convictions is some degree of change. If these cases in which justice is delayed but not denied continue to reopen, the state may make some progress in clearing its name. And as a result, perhaps race relations in the Mississippi Delta can improve.



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**Appendix A: Photographs**



1 – Emmett Louis Till



2A – Bryant's Grocery, 1955



2B – Bryant's Grocery, 2005



3 – Carolyn Bryant



4 – Moses Wright's house site, 2005



5 – Shed behind Milam’s house



6 – Tallahatchie River



7A & B – Tallahatchie County Courthouse, Sumner, 1955 and 2005



8 – Breland & Whitten Lawyers



9 – Defense team for Milam and Bryant - L to R:  
J.W. Kellum, C. Sidney Carlton, Harvey Henderson,  
John W. Whitten, Jr., J.J. Breland



10 – J.W. & Juanita Milam, Carolyn & Roy Bryant



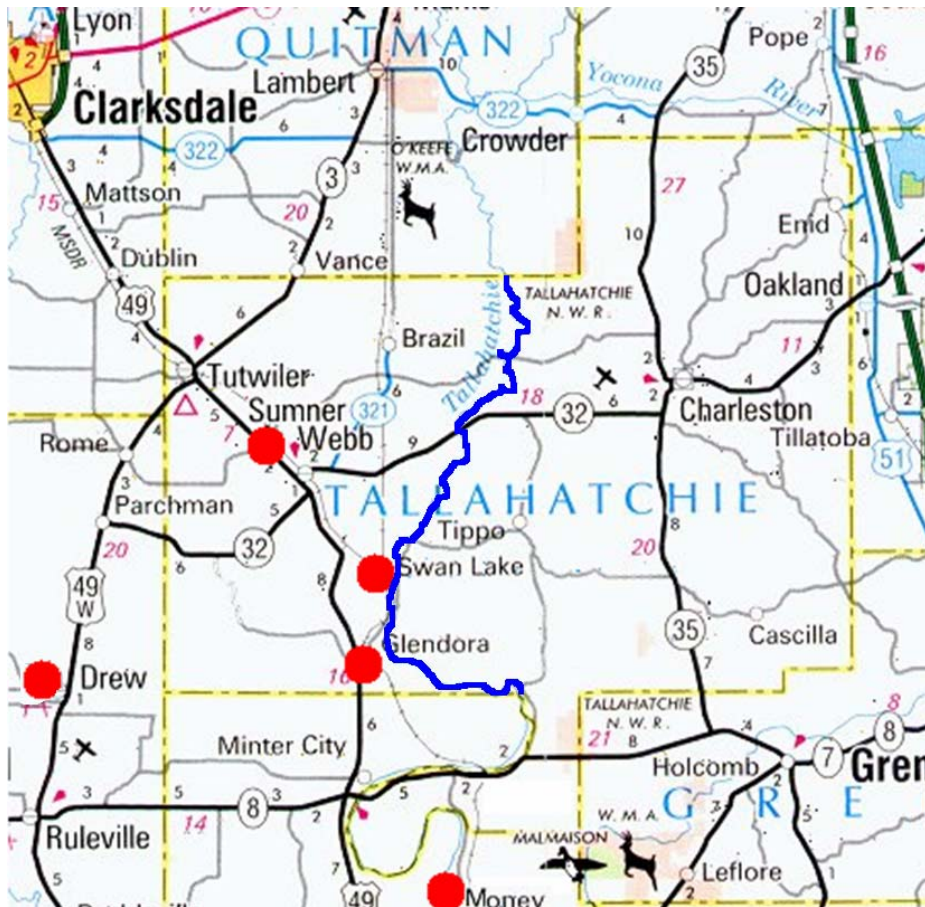
11 – Moses Wright



12 – Body of Emmett Till



13 – Sheriff H. Clarence Strider



14 – Map of Tallahatchie County, with key places marked in red and the Tallahatchie River as it runs through the county traced in blue.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

Where were you originally from? Where have you lived since then?

(if local) How do you recall your childhood in Sumner? What demographics were represented? What attitude was prevalent? How did people interact with each other, typically?

What were race relations like, and, if they changed abruptly or at all, what seemed to be the turning point?

(if not local) How did you first learn about the Till case?

What were your feelings about the events and the case, initially? Have they changed? How has learning more about the case affected your thoughts on it, if at all?

What sparked your interest in the Till case?

Do you find that, the more you research it, or as more time elapses, that the trial and case seem more or less logical? More or less justified?

Where do you see strengths and weaknesses in the case?

In your opinion, did the defense and prosecution each have a legitimate argument?

In a similar investigation, Edgar Ray Killen was recently investigated and convicted, as was Byron de la Beckwith before him. Do you think the FBI hopes for the same outcome in this case?

How would you feel if someone were convicted? Were you particularly affected by these other convictions decades after their crimes?

Do you feel the Till case was an important event for Mississippi in terms of civil rights? If so, in what way?

It seems that, aside from the recent media, there is little talk of the case in the Delta. But the rest of the country is fairly familiar with it, though it happened in our midst. Do you agree?

Do you feel that this case is being accurately addressed by the media? Do you feel that it was in 1955?

Do you see race relations in the Delta changing in the near future? In the future at all? What are your hopes for the next decade in terms of race relations as the Till case is concerned?

### **Appendix C: Interviewees**

Beauchamp, Keith.

Producer/Director of unreleased documentary, *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*.  
Brief interview, 17 July 2005

Hendrickson, Paul.

Author of *Sons of Mississippi*.  
Extensive interview, 13 July 2005.

Houck, Davis.

Professor, Florida State University.  
Extensive interview, 19 July 2005.

Minor, Bill.

Semi-retired columnist, New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. Mississippi resident present at 1955 trial.  
Extensive interview, 28 June 2005.

Mulligan, Mark.  
Graduate student, Florida State University.  
Brief interview, 2 July 2005.

Pearson, Betty.  
Sumner resident present at 1955 trial.  
Extensive interview, 27 June 2005.

Rice, Lent.  
Retired FBI agent, native of Sumner.  
Extensive interview, 4 July 2005.

Whitaker, Steve.  
Author of "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Emmett Till Case." Tallahatchie Co. native.  
Extensive interview, 19 July 2005.

Confidential source.  
Brief Interview, 12 July 2005.

## **Appendix D: The Trial**

### The Jury:

Howard Armstrong	Enid	East Tallahatchie County	farmer
Ed Devaney	Charleston	East Tallahatchie County	carpenter
Willie D. Havens, alternate	Charleston	East Tallahatchie County	carpenter
George Holland	Glendora	West Tallahatchie County	farmer
Bishop G. Matthews	Charleston	East Tallahatchie County	carpenter
Davis Newton	Enid	East Tallahatchie County	farmer
James Green Pennington	Webb	West Tallahatchie County	farmer
Lee L. Price	Charleston	East Tallahatchie County	insurance salesman
Augustus "Gus" Ramsey	Enid	East Tallahatchie County	farmer
James Shaw, Jr.	Webb	West Tallahatchie County	farmer
Travis Thomas	Murphree	East Tallahatchie County	farmer
James A. Toole	Enid	East Tallahatchie County	farmer



Ray Tribble                                  Paynes                          East Tallahatchie County                  farmer

Presiding:  
Judge Curtis M. Swango

Prosecution:  
Gerald Chatham, District Attorney  
Robert B. Smith, III, Special Assistant Attorney General  
James Hamilton Caldwell, Jr., Tallahatchie County Prosecutor

Witnesses:  
Mary Amanda Bradley, Mamie Till Bradley, John Ed Cothran, Robert Hodges, Chester Miller, Benjamin L. Mims, Charles Nelson, Add Reed, Willie Reed, Leflore County Sheriff George Smith, C. A. Strickland, Moses Wright

Defense:  
Jesse Josiah Breland  
Caleb Sidney Carlton  
Robert Harvey Henderson  
Joseph W. Kellum  
John Wallace Whitten, Jr.

Witnesses:  
Lee Russell Allison, L. W. Boyce, Carolyn Bryant, Grover Duke, Pete McGaa, Harry D. Malone, Juanita Milam, Dr. L.B. Otkens, Harold Perry, James Sanders, Franklin Smith, Sheriff Henry Clarence Strider

(Anderson)