

# US Justice Department opens investigation into the 1955 murder of Emmett Till

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The federal Justice Department announced last month that it would reopen its long-suppressed investigation into the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a black 14-year-old from Chicago who was the victim of a brutal racist murder while visiting family in Money, Mississippi.

What was Till's crime? The black teenager allegedly whistled at a white woman at a grocery store in the heart of the Deep South. What followed the savage killing was appalling: the two admitted killers were acquitted by an all-white jury after a sham trial.

The two men who murdered Till, Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam, are dead; however, recently released documentaries suggest that others involved in the murder are still alive and could be held accountable.

The events in the summer of 1955 shocked the world and provided a powerful impulse to the mass struggles in the United States to end Jim Crow segregation in the South. While close to a half-century has passed, the Till case continues to have an impact on the thinking of broad layers of black people and many others who grew up during the era of the civil rights struggles. This is due in large part to the efforts of Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley. A courageous and self-sacrificing woman, Ms. Mobley continuously spoke out on the tragedy of her son's murder and the fight against racist brutality. Ms. Mobley died in Chicago last year at the age of 81.

A 90-minute film documentary, *The Untold Story of Emmett Till*, was released by director Keith Beauchamp in 2002, after nine years reviewing court documents and interviewing people who were in the town of Money, Mississippi, the year of the murder. Another documentary, entitled *The Murder of Emmett Till* and directed by Stanley Nelson, was recently aired on the Public Broadcasting System. Ms. Mobley was interviewed in both films and collaborated with the directors in their presentation.

## Death and disfigurement

It is important to recount the events that led to this young teenager being brutally lynched and killed. On August 24, a hot summer day, Emmett Till and five of his teenaged friends went to buy drinks to cool off after picking cotton for their uncle, a poor Southern sharecropper. The grocery store, owned by a white man, Roy Bryant, was located in a community largely comprised of poor black sharecroppers who could barely live off the sale of their crop.

It is alleged that when Emmett left the store the Chicago boy let go with a loud wolf whistle at Bryant's wife Carolyn, who was working

behind the counter. Roy Bryant, not present at the time, later described this action as an "insult to white womanhood."

On August 28, at about 2:30 in the morning, Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam pulled up at the shabby home of 64-year-old Moses Wright, Emmett's uncle, determined to teach the "northern nigger" a lesson. After kicking down the door of the home and terrorizing everyone inside, they identified Emmett, stuffed him into the back seat of a car and drove away.

Moses Wright desperately pleaded with the racists not to take Emmett away. He testified later that he begged them, "Just take him out into the yard and whip him," but it was to no avail.

After Roy Bryant's wife confirmed that he was the one who whistled at her, the two men took Emmett to a shack where they proceeded to beat him mercilessly, before shooting him in the head and dumping the body in the Tallahatchie River.

Till's body had a 100-pound cotton gin fan tied with barbed wire to the upper part of the torso. Almost all of his teeth were knocked out and it appears that his tongue was ripped out of his mouth. The right side of his head was beaten in and the skull crushed.

When fisherman first found the body three days later, local Mississippi authorities insisted it was not that of Emmett Till. They claimed that Emmett Till was either in Chicago or California and that the NAACP and communists from the North were just using this to stir up trouble. The Hernando County District attorney, Gerald Chatham, and Sheriff H.C. Strider attempted to get the body buried quickly.

After being informed of her son's death by Moses Wright, Mamie Till Mobley insisted that the body be shipped back to Chicago for a proper burial. Initially, the consensus of those at the funeral parlor was that the casket would be kept closed during the funeral.

When Mamie Till saw how mutilated Emmett's body was, she was horrified. Despite the grief of losing her only son, she personally examined the body from head to foot and defied the funeral home about the arrangement to keep the casket closed. Ms. Till felt it was crucial for the eyes of the world to see what had been done to her son by the racists and was determined that such a thing would not happen again.

More than 50,000 people filed past the body of Emmett Till as his open coffin remained on display in Chicago for four days, during the Labor Day weekend. Pictures of the young Chicago schoolboy with his face horribly swollen and disfigured appeared on the front pages of newspapers and magazines across the country and around the world.

## Whitewash and outrage

On September 6, the same day that Till was buried, a grand jury in Mississippi indicted J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant for his murder. Both men pleaded innocent and were held in a county jail until the opening of the trial on September 19 in the town of Sumner.

The racist government of Mississippi organized the trial to ensure the acquittal of Milam and Bryant. Blacks and white women were banned from the jury, which was made up of 12 white men, most of whom were farmers.

The arch segregationist and racist Sheriff H.C. Strider declared from the outset that there was “little” murder evidence and the case against the two racists was mainly circumstantial (because the eyewitness testimony was from blacks, not whites).

Even though Emmett’s uncle Moses Wright identified both men in court as the two who kidnapped his nephew, a jury acquitted Milam and Bryant after only 67 minutes of deliberation.

The acquittal was met with shock and repulsion throughout the world. In Belgium, France and Italy newspapers carried front-page articles denouncing the verdict and the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* ran an article headlined “The Sumner Trial Marks, Perhaps, an Opening of Consciousness.”

Only four months after the acquittal *Look* magazine published an article written by Alabama journalist William Bradford Huie entitled “The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi.” Milam and Bryant received \$4,000 for an interview in which they described in detail how they beat Till and then shot him in the head with a .45-caliber pistol. Milam is quoted as follows: “‘Chicago boy,’ I said, ‘I’m tired of them sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. I’m going to make an example of you, just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.’”

## A turning point in history

While there had been dozens of lynch murders in the years preceding World War II, the murder of Emmett Till and the freeing of his killers produced a different reaction in the postwar United States. The lynching became a seminal event in the history of the struggle against racism, sparking actions by thousands of black and white workers who opposed Jim Crow segregation and racist violence.

Less than three months after the acquittal in the Sumner trial, in December 1955, the famous Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott began, initiated after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white man. The conservative leadership of the NAACP felt that perhaps 50-60 percent of the black population would support the boycott, but it received close to 100 percent participation and lasted for over a year until segregation on the bus system was abolished.

The Till case itself became the subject of national agitation. Mass meetings of both black and white workers were held in Chicago, New York and states throughout the North to denounce the acquittal and demand action by the federal government. Thousands of letters were written to President Dwight Eisenhower to demand a federal investigation. Mamie Till asked for a meeting to discuss the case with Eisenhower, but he refused. The conqueror of D-Day was afraid to

anger the Southern racists—all Democrats—who held key positions in Congress.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover wrote a memo at the time, declaring that there was no legal basis for federal involvement in the Till murder case: “There has been no allegation made that the victim [Emmett Till] has been subjected to the deprivation of any right or privilege which is secured and protected by the Constitution and the laws of the United States.”

The attitude of the Eisenhower administration and the FBI emboldened the most reactionary racist elements, in Mississippi and other parts of the Deep South, to carry out further repression against the black population.

Men were stabbed to death when they registered for the right to vote and lynched by hooded mobs of white men in Poplarville, Mississippi. A black man accused of raping a white woman was taken from his jail by a local mob, beaten to death and then dumped in the river.

This reign of terror continued in Mississippi for nearly a decade, even as the civil rights struggles became a mass movement involving millions of black workers and youth, and millions more of all races who supported them.

On June 12, 1963, 37-year-old Medgar Evers was shot in the back in front of his Mississippi home after returning from a meeting. Evers was the state field secretary for the NAACP. His acknowledged killer, Byron de la Beckwith, was not convicted of the murder until 30 years later, in 1994.

In 1964 three young civil rights workers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, were murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi, during the voter registration drive known as Freedom Summer. Nineteen individuals, including several Neshoba County sheriff’s deputies, were eventually tried on charges of conspiracy and violation of the civil rights of the three victims. Seven were convicted and served prison terms of three to ten years.

Sixteen years later, Ronald Reagan kicked off his campaign for the presidency in the 1980 elections with an appearance at the Neshoba County Fair. The Republican candidate was making a deliberate—and highly successful—symbolic appeal for the votes of diehard racists in the South, one of the key constituencies of the modern Republican Party.

The Bush administration would like to conceal this ongoing political relationship through such empty gestures as reopening the investigation into the murder of Emmett Till. But the real question is why nothing was done by nine previous administrations. From Eisenhower through Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, the first Bush and Clinton, justice for Emmett Till and his family was never a serious concern.

Moreover, the methods of racist violence and cover-up remain as American as cherry pie. Only the form has changed. In the 1950s the Southern power structure portrayed blacks as subhuman. Today American imperialism, in its drive to colonize Iraq, depicts the Arab masses in the same vein, and uses methods against the prisoners at Abu Ghraib that the Ku Klux Klan would recognize.



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