

## THE EMMETT TILL MURDER: THE TRUE STORY

by

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In August of 1955, Mrs. Mamie Bradley of Chicago agreed to allow her fourteen year old son, Emmett (Bobo) Till to accompany his uncle, Reverend Moses Wright of Mississippi and his cousin Wheeler Parker for a visit to the Reverend's farm near Money, Mississippi in the Mississippi Delta. Emmett, Wheeler and the Reverend Wright arrived in Money on Sunday, August 21st. The following Wednesday evening around 7:30 PM, Emmett accompanied seven of his cousins, ranging in age from 13 to 19 years old and all Black, on a trip to a local store to buy some treats. The store, which was really a ramshackle shack with living quarters in the back, was owned and operated by a White man, Roy Bryant, then twenty, and his wife Carolyn, then twenty-one. Carolyn was five feet tall and weighed around 100 pounds. That evening she was tending the store alone since Roy, who drove a truck to supplement their income, was away on a job hauling shrimp from New Orleans to San Antonio and Brownsville, Texas. Carolyn's sister-in-law had come to stay with Carolyn until the normal 9:00 PM closing time since Carolyn did not like to alone in the store at night. The sister-in-law was with her two small sons in the living quarters at the rear of the store. Carolyn was tending the store alone.

Emmett was a stocky, muscular teenager around five feet five inches tall and weighing about 160 pounds. Reverend Wright later testified that even at his age, Emmett "looked like a man." According to various accounts, since arriving in Money, Emmett had been showing off, exciting his cousins by daring to say "Yeah" and "Naw" to White people in the community when

even adult Black people dared say nothing more than “Yassuh” and “Nawshuh.” He bragged that he had a White girlfriend back in Chicago and even circulated a picture of her that he carried in his wallet in support of his claim. That Wednesday evening the eight Black teenagers spent some time laughing and horsing around in front of the Bryant store. Emmett eventually left the group and went into the store to buy some candy. There are a number of different versions of what happened next.

Some say Emmett, who had a speech impediment that caused him to stammer, went into the store, bought his candy from Carolyn and as he was leaving, said “G-g-g-g-goodbye.” One of Emmett’s cousins who was from the area laughed at his stuttering and as they walked away said “Bobo, don’t you know you’re not supposed to say goodbye to a white woman?” Another cousin said, “She was good lookin’, wasn’t she.” At that point, Emmett either attempted to give or actually gave out with a “wolf whistle.” According to this version that was all that occurred.

A different version of the story has Emmett entering the store to purchase the candy and speaking to Carolyn. According to this version when Carolyn started to hand him his change, Emmett touched her hand said: “How about a date, baby?” and possibly “Don’t be afraid o’ me, baby. I ain’t gonna hurt you. I been with white girls before.”

No one really knows what Emmett may have said to Carolyn and whether or at what point he gave a “wolf whistle,” if he did so at all. Carolyn later said that she told no one about the incident. Never the less, somehow the story got around the White community that a Black kid by the name of Emmett who was visiting Reverend Wright from Chicago had insulted Carolyn, scared her, or done something even worse.

On Friday afternoon, Roy Bryant returned home and quickly learned of the incident. He was incensed. On Saturday, Bryant told his half-brother, J. W. Milam, about the insult. Milam

was thirty-six, six foot two and weighed 235 pounds. He had served under Patton in WW II where he earned a reputation as an expert street fighter and accomplished close-range killer. Like Bryant, he was angry about what Emmett had supposedly done to Carolyn. He was determined to teach the boy a lesson.

Around 2 AM on Sunday, August 28, Milam picked up Bryant and they drove to Reverend Wright's home. Milam carried his favorite gun, a .45 Colt automatic pistol. Bryant pounded on the door, waking the Reverend up, and asked to see the boy visiting from Chicago. Wright showed Bryant and Milam to the back bedroom where Emmett was sleeping in the bed with the Reverend's youngest son, Simeon. Bryant and Milam demanded that Emmett get out of bed, get dressed and accompany them. The Reverend apologized for anything the boy had done, asked them not to take him, and even offered to pay for the damages. He pleaded for the boy, "He ain't got good sense," said the Reverend, "He was raised Up Yonder. He didn't know what he was doing." Of course, that was true. It did not matter. Bryant and Milam ordered Emmett to get in the back of their pickup and left. No one other than Bryant and Milam would see Emmett alive again.

We know what happened next because Bryant and Milam later confessed to what they had done in an interview with a *LOOK* magazine reporter.<sup>1</sup> Of course, that was after an all-White local jury had found them innocent of murder. According to Milam, he and Bryant did not intend to kill Emmett but to "just whip him...and scare some sense into him." Milam's idea was to take Emmett to "the scariest place in the Delta," a bluff overlooking a nearby river that Milam had found while hunting. He wanted to stand Emmett up right on the edge of the bluff,

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<sup>1</sup> You can read the entire article at <http://www.emmettillmurder.com/Look%201956.htm>. Accessed 08-26-2010. Quotes in this story are from the text of the Look interview with Bryant and Milam.

“whip” him with the .45, shine their flashlights down the 100-foot sheer drop, and make him think they were going to throw him in. The problem was Bryant and Milam could not find the road leading to the bluff. Bryant and Milam drove around for nearly three hours. Emmett never tried to escape even though he was riding in the open bed of the pickup all the time. It was obvious that he was not afraid of Bryant and Milam. As Milam put it: “We were never able to scare him. They had just filled him so full of that poison that he was hopeless.”

Eventually, Bryant and Milam gave up looking for the bluff and drove to Milam’s house. They took Emmett into the tool shed behind the house and began “whipping” him. Milam pistol-whipped Emmett with his .45, employing techniques he had used in the service to get information from German prisoners. Emmett took the blows. He would not yield to the White men. Milam recalled at one point Emmett said: “You bastards, I’m not afraid of you. I’m as good as you are. I’ve ‘had’ white women. My grandmother was a white woman.” It was too much for Bryant and Milam. A Black teenager was defying them. Milam justified what they did next this way:

Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers -- 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, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired 0' livin'. I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we've got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. 'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam you, I'm going to make an example of you -- just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in <http://www.emmettillmurder.com/Look%201956.htm>

Later that night, Bryant and Milam took Emmett Till to the nearby Tallahatchie River. Milam raised his big .45 and shot, hitting Emmett in the head just at his right ear. The two murderers then tied a three-foot wide, metal gin fan around Emmett's neck with barbwire and dumped his body in the river.

At daylight, the morning after Bryant and Milam took Emmett, Reverend Wright and his wife drove to the home of her brother, Crosby Smith and told him what had happened. Wright and Smith then reported the abduction of Emmett to the local Leflore County sheriff. In the mean time, one of Emmett's cousins borrowed a phone and called Mamie Bradley in Chicago to tell her Emmett was missing. Mrs. Bradley reported the abduction to the Chicago police. She phoned the Sheriff's office in Leflore County to enquire about what was being done to find the missing boy. Eventually, after numerous calls from the Chicago police, the Leflore County sheriff arrested Milam and Bryant. Milam and Bryant admitted abducting Emmett but claimed they had just "whipped his ass a little" and let him go. The last time they saw Emmett, said Milam and Bryant, he was walking down the railroad at Money getting the "hell back to Chicago" where he belonged.

A young White boy who had gone fishing discovered Emmett's body the next day. The body had snagged in shallow water. Emmett was horribly mutilated. Most of the left side of his head was gone. An eye dangled from one socket. Injuries to his head indicated he had suffered "torture, [and a] horrible beating." The local sheriff wanted to bury the body immediately. Mamie Bradley refused, insisting that the sheriff return her son's body to Chicago. Then, Mrs. Bradley did an extraordinary thing. She insisted that Emmett's body be displayed in an open casket so all could see what Milam and Bryant had done to her boy.

Thousands of Black people in Chicago lined up to move past Emmett's open casket and view the body. "Men's faces changed as they saw what was inside, women fainted, some women flinging up their arms in horror, covering their faces as if to shield themselves from the sight."<sup>3</sup> *The Nation* reported on the case and the anger it generated in Chicago's Black community. Then, the magazine *Jet* ran a story about Emmett's murder and included a photograph of his horribly mutilated body. Black newspapers and then White newspapers began picking up the story. Thousands attended rallies in Black communities in Chicago, New York, Youngstown, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit and Los Angeles. White people in the South had committed many atrocities against Black people before but this time a body and photograph that once seen could not be forgotten by any American vividly documented the extent of the raw brutality.

On September 19, 1955, Roy Bryant and J.W. "Big" Milam stood trial for Emmett's murder. The trial lasted just five days. The all-White, all-male jury took just a little over an hour to find the defendants not guilty in spite of all of the evidence and testimony from Black eye witnesses who were brave enough to come forward. Members of the jury said they could have completed their deliberations faster if they had not taken a Coke break. In January 1956, Bryant and Milam agreed to an interview with *Look* magazine during which they confessed to the murder. Bryant and Milam could not be tried for the murder of Emmett since they could not be subjected to double jeopardy. They were not even tried for violating Emmett's civil rights. They just went free. J. W. Milam died on December 31, 1980. Roy Bryant died on September 1, 1994. Both were still unrepentant for what they had done to Emmett.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), p. 702.

The murder of Emmett Till sent shock waves through the country. As Robert Caro says, it produced a tidal wave of support for civil rights even in the South.

By the 1950s, millions of American Negroes had never lived in the South, and while they may have been intellectually aware of conditions there, of what segregation was like, they did not really know those conditions... [N]ow reporters [for Black newspapers who covered the murder] made northern Black people see it. And they responded. A new wave of mass meetings swept across black communities in the North, and the response came not only in cheers but in cash. Before the Till trial, the NAACP had been deeply in debt because of its legal expenses in the Brown trials. Now contributions to its "fight fund," the war chest to help victims of racial attack, soared to record levels.

Nor was the tide rising only among Black people. Large, influential newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and *Times-Herald* had sent reporters to cover the trial, but while it was still going on, coverage was mostly on inside pages... When justice failed, however, the story wasn't inside anymore, but on the front page...

White indignation rose, and with it, a white sense of responsibility. There had really been two verdicts, not one, rendered at [the Bryant/Milam trial, journalist] I. F. Stone wrote. One was the "not guilty" against Bryant and Milam. "The other, unspoken, unintended, unconscious but indelible, was a verdict against the rest of us and our country."<sup>4</sup>

Black people had been truly aroused; they needed a Gandhi to lead them. They would soon get one because of a second incident that happened in 1955. The victim this time was a Black tailor's seamstress in Montgomery, Alabama, who after a long day of work refused to give up her seat in the Black section of the bus to a White man as she was ordered to do by the bus driver. Her name was Mrs. Rosa Parks.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), pp. 707-708.