

[HowStuffWorks](#) / [Culture](#) / [History](#) / [Historical Figures](#)

Why Emmett Till's Murder Shook the Conscience of the U.S.

By: [John Donovan](#) | Updated: Apr 28, 2023



A young Emmett Till (left) is seen here riding bicycles with his friend Wheeler Parker (right). COURTESY OF THE WHEELER PARKER COLLECTION, DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES & MUSEUM, CLEVELAND, MISSISSIPPI.

Emmett Till was just 14 years old in the summer of 1955 when he traveled to visit family in the tiny community of Money, in the Mississippi Delta. Till was born and raised in a suburb of Chicago. He had never been to the Deep South.

The tragic story of what happened to young Till became, to many, a catalyst for the American [Civil Rights Movement](#). But his story did not end in Mississippi. It never really

ended.

"I'd like to think that if we had the trial again that, No. 1, we'd have some Black jurors ... and some women. That in fact, justice would be done. That's the optimist in me," says Florida State University professor Davis Houck, who helped create the [Emmett Till Memory Project](#) and has been instrumental in building FSU's [Emmett Till Archive](#). "But I don't want to be too optimistic, because we're at a time in our country right now where anything goes. In terms of violence visited upon young Black boys for whistling at a white woman ... yeah. I think we're pretty far down the road from that. But I don't want to say we've arrived at some ideal place. We haven't."

The Story of Emmett Till



Emmett Till with his mother, Mamie Bradley, ca. 1950. To expose the horror of her 14-year-old's lynching, Bradley insisted on an open coffin funeral to show his tortured and mutilated body. COLLECTION OF THE SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE, GIFT OF THE MAMIE TILL MOBLEY FAMILY

The brutal murder of Emmett Till might have been lost to time, just another of the thousands of [lynchings](#) that were perpetrated all over the United States after the Civil

War. The Equal Justice Initiative has documented [more than 4,400](#) lynchings, in 20 states ([mostly in the Deep South](#)), between 1877 and 1950.

Till's murder stands out separately from those, though, not because of its sheer violence — lynchings were, by definition, alarmingly savage — but because the particular inhumanity brought upon him was not automatically relegated to the inside pages of newspapers, as many others had been. Even in Mississippi, shortly after his death, news accounts almost immediately condemned the boy's murder. The governor of the state at the time — Gov. Hugh White — even spoke out against it.

Still, it wasn't until Till's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, demanded that her son be returned to Chicago for burial that the entire world took notice. She held an open-casket funeral to show what happened to him. He was beaten, shot, a 75-pound (34-kilogram) fan tied to his neck with barbed wire and then tossed into the Tallahatchie River, where he was found several days later. The brutality was hard to ignore.

"Oh, yes, we're going to open the casket," Bradley told documentarian Keith Beauchamp years later, in retelling the story of the day she saw her son's body return from Mississippi. "Let the people see what I see. I want the world to see this."

More than 100,000 people attended Till's funeral. Jet magazine published graphic photos — including one depicting [Bradley above the coffin](#) containing her battered son's body — and the outrage grew louder. When the two men accused of the murder, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, were acquitted by an all-white jury weeks later, anyone looking for further reason to put an end to lynching and demand racial justice had a rallying point.

What Really Happened?



During his murder trial of Emmett Till at the Tallahatchie County Courthouse, defendant Roy Bryant (left) sits with his family. His wife Carolyn (far right), accused Till of flirting with her. She later recanted her story. ED CLARK/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

What prompted Till's kidnapping and murder is still debated and, in reality, beside the point.

The jurors were told by Bryant's wife, Carolyn, that Till had whistled at her, come into the Bryant family store, grabbed her by the wrist, put his hands on her waist and bragged about being with white women.

It was a lie. [She recanted that story years later.](#) What she told author Timothy Tyson for his 2017 book, "[The Blood of Emmett Till](#)," strikes at the very truth of that night. "Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him," Bryant said.

Still, the original retelling of the encounter between 14-year-old Till and 21-year-old Carolyn Bryant has had remarkable staying power, despite the fact that version has been disavowed by its creator. A [1956 Look magazine article](#) by William Bradford Huie,

containing a "confession" from the murderers (Look paid them to be interviewed), was purported to tell the "true account" of the murder.

"That so-called confession continues, in some, to function as the history of what happened to Emmett Till that night," Houck says. "What the article has done, what I see, is it still divides Mississippi along Black and white lines. 'Oh, Emmett Till was kind of this borderline rapist man-child who had it coming to him.' You will hear that in polite company in Mississippi to the present day."

The Aftermath of the Murder



Mamie Till-Mobley (middle) grieves during her 14-year-old son, Emmett Till's funeral services Sept. 6, 1955. COLLECTION OF THE SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE, GIFT OF LAUREN AND MICHAEL LEE, PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Till's story had an immediate and profound effect on Americans at the time, both Black and white — largely because of his mother's bold decision to display his body, and Jet's decision (among others, including the [Chicago Defender](#)) to publish the pictures. Former politician and activist Julian Bond, who died in 2015, explained in a foreword to Devery

S. Anderson's indispensable look at the events, "[Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement](#):"

The Till story was a touchstone narrative of my generation. Among many southern horror stories, this was among the most morbid. The Till death picture was proof of white southerners' malevolence. Their refusal to acknowledge the killer's guilt was proof of their acceptance of evil.

Till's story was recounted throughout the 1960s as the [Civil Rights Act](#) became law. It is still widely cited by activists from [Bond](#) to [Rosa Parks](#) and beyond.

And the story of what happened in Mississippi in August 1955 may not be finished, either. Till's body was exhumed and positively identified as part of a [2004 Department of Justice reopening of the case](#), which resulted in no new charges. A Mississippi grand jury in 2007 found [no evidence](#), suggested by documentarian Beauchamp that as many as 14 people may have taken part in his kidnapping and murder. In 2018, the Department of Justice again opened up an investigation; [it's evidently still pending](#).

Many articles, books and [documentaries](#) have been produced on the story. The newest feature film, "[Till](#)," which hit the big screen Oct. 7, 2022 and stars Danielle Deadwyler as Mamie Till-Mobley, is about Till-Mobley's attempt to expose those involved in her son's attack. There's also now an [Emmett Till Interpretive Center](#) in Sumner, Mississippi. The state of Mississippi has several road signs that detail places in the Emmett Till story, though many of the signs [continue to be shot and otherwise vandalized](#).

The [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#), dedicated to Black people terrorized by lynching, opened in 2018, not far from [The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration](#). Both are projects of the Equal Justice Initiative.

And finally, on Feb. 26, 2020, the United States House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the [Emmett Till Antilynching Act 410-to-4](#), to make lynching a federal hate crime. This comes after lawmakers have [tried and failed more than 200](#)

times. The bill finally passed the the U.S. Senate March 7, 2022, and [President Joe Biden signed it into law](#) March 29.

Now That's Interesting

Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam never took the stand in their 1955 trial for murder. They didn't need to. The jury [deliberated for only 67 minutes](#) before acquitting them. Afterward, both Bryant and Milam celebrated by lighting cigars and posing with their wives for photographs. Milam died in 1980, at age 61. Bryant died in 1994, at age 63. Bryant's wife Carolyn [died on April 27, 2023](#), at age 88. Up to 2022, prosecutors were still trying to put her on trial for kidnapping and manslaughter.

Originally Published: Apr 14, 2020

Featured



Special Offer on Antivirus Software From HowStuffWorks and TotalAV Security



Try Our Crossword

