

The Lynching of Emmett Till

By Chris Crowe

"This is not a lynching. It is straight out murder."
—Hugh White, Governor of Mississippi, 1955

On August 20, 1955, Emmett Till, a 14 year-old, African-American boy from Chicago, left his home to visit relatives in Money, Mississippi, a tiny cotton gin town on the eastern edge of the Mississippi Delta. His mutilated corpse would return to Chicago in a coffin less than two weeks later.

Emmett wasn't a civil rights activist. He wasn't politically active. He didn't go to Mississippi to change the Jim Crow culture. But, the national media attention surrounding his death and the trial and acquittal of his alleged killers had an impact that no one ever could have imagined. The Emmett Till case became one of the key incidents of 1955, the explosive year that launched the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Emmett planned to stay with his great uncle, Mose Wright, in Wright's sharecropper shack a few miles outside Money. With only 55 residents, Money was barely a stopover along Old Money Road heading north from Greenwood. Its center of industry was a cotton gin, but it also had a gas station and three stores, including Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market.

Rural Money had little in common with urban Chicago, and its biggest difference, perhaps, was its racial climate: white people in Tallahatchie County vigorously enforced Jim Crow segregation laws. And, tension in Mississippi ran high in August 1955, because, just a few months earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had ordered that southern states must integrate black students into white schools "with all deliberate speed." Many white people in the South felt that their way of life was under attack by the Court and by groups like the NAACP. Violence against blacks increased all over Mississippi; in May, Reverend George Lee, an African-American voter registration activist, was murdered in Belzoni, Mississippi. On August 13, Lamar Smith, another African-American activist, was shot to death in Brookhaven, Mississippi. And, just a few weeks before Emmett came to Money, a black girl was beaten for "crowding" a white woman in a local store.

On Wednesday night of August 24th, Emmett, his cousins, and some local kids were hanging out on the front porch of Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, playing checkers, listening to music, and telling stories. While talking about life up North, Emmett showed off some photographs and joked that a white girl in one picture was his girlfriend. One of the boys in the group laughed and said, "There's a pretty little white woman in there in the store. Since you Chicago cats know so much about white girls, let's see you go in there and get a date with her."

The boy's challenge stunned the southern kids, because they knew the dangers of a black male talking to a white woman. Asking a white woman on a date was unthinkable! But, Emmett had no comprehension of the severe penalties inflicted on blacks who broke Jim Crow laws in the South, and he walked into the store while the kids outside crowded against the windows to see what would happen.

When he left the store a few minutes later, witnesses reported that Emmett turned, said "Bye, baby," and whistled the two-note 'wolf whistle' at the white woman who worked behind the counter.

News of the Chicago boy's crazy stunt zipped through the county like lightning, and, by the time, Roy Bryant, the woman's husband returned from a road trip three days later, everyone—black and white—in Tallahatchie County had heard the story. When Bryant heard it, he decided he and his

half-brother, J. W. Milam, had to punish Emmett for being disrespectful to his wife. The two men planned to meet around 2:00 a.m. on Sunday to "teach the boy a lesson."

Mose Wright told reporters what happened next. "Sunday morning about 2:30, someone called at the door. And, I said 'Who is it,' and he said, 'This is Mr. Bryant. I want to talk with you and the boy.' And when I opened the door, there was a man standing with a pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other hand." Bryant and Milam forced their way into the back bedroom where Emmett was sleeping, and after making sure he was the one "who'd done the talking at Money," they marched him outside to their car.

That was the last time anyone in his family saw Emmett Till alive. To the surprise of many people in the South, less than a day after Emmett's disappearance, authorities from Tallahatchie County and nearby Leflore County arrested Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam and charged them with kidnapping. Both men admitted they had taken the boy from his great-uncle's home but claimed they had turned him loose, unharmed, that same night. Three days later, a fisherman found Emmett Till's naked, battered body in the Tallahatchie River, and law enforcement officials then added murder to the charges against Bryant and Milam.

A week after the two men's arrest, an all-white Sumner County grand jury surprised southerners when it ordered Bryant and Milam to stand trial for the murder of Emmett Till. Since 1880, more than 500 people had been lynched in Mississippi, and only rarely was any legal action taken against whites who committed violence against blacks. Because of this long-standing "white" immunity against prosecution for lynching, many people believed that this was the first time a Mississippi court would hear a case of white men accused of a crime against a black man. It wasn't the first case, but it quickly became the most famous.

The nature of the crime, a black teenage boy murdered for being rude to a white woman, and the gruesome photos of Emmett's corpse that appeared in *Jet* magazine drew national attention. Thousands of people attended his funeral in Chicago, hundreds of thousands read about his murder, and the trial held in Sumner, the county seat of Tallahatchie County, drew more than 70 newspaper, magazine, radio, and TV reporters from across the United States.

Immediately after the murder, many citizens of Mississippi condemned the killing, but the intense media attention and the harsh criticism from northern states and civil rights groups like the NAACP put Mississippi racists on the defensive. In response to the widespread claims in the northern and African-American press that Emmett Till's murder was a racist-inspired lynching, Mississippi Governor Hugh White denied that race was a factor in the crime. "This is not a lynching," he told reporters. "It is straight out murder."

Mississippi whites soon rallied to the cause. Almost overnight, Bryant and Milam went from criminals to martyrs as local authorities and newspapers reacted against pressure from the North that they feared would change "the southern way of life." They weren't defending two killers; they were defending the South. The trial, held in a segregated courtroom, lasted only one week, and, despite ample evidence and a vigorous effort from state prosecutors, the case was lost before it began. Although it was remarkable that this trial was even being held in the Mississippi Delta in the mid 1950s, the odds were slight that a white man would be convicted by a white jury for killing a black man. In his closing remarks, one defense attorney told the jurors that "every last Anglo-Saxon one of you men in this jury has the courage to set these men free." In the muggy afternoon of September 23, 1955, the all-white jury deliberated barely an hour before declaring Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam innocent.

The tide of outrage at the acquittal swept across America. People realized that race relations had declined to such a low level, that even children were no longer safe from racist violence. For years, the NAACP had hosted training meetings and discussion groups to find ways to overcome

Jim Crow laws, challenged segregation in the courts, and campaigned vigorously against lynching; but the murder of Emmett Till and the release of his killers made it clear that something had to happen. Soon.

And it did. On December 1, 1955, just three months after the trial of Bryant and Milam, Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat to a white person on a segregated Montgomery, Alabama, city bus. Her act of civil disobedience led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the emergence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a powerful leader in the fight for civil rights.

Most historical accounts of the modern Civil Rights Movement point to the 1954 Supreme Court school integration decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott as two the events that kicked off the first large-scale campaign for equal rights. In reality, the Emmett Till case is equally important. Because of the Supreme Court's integration ruling, Mississippi in 1954 and 1955 was a hostile environment for all African Americans, but it was especially dangerous for African Americans from the North. Because of Emmett Till's murder and the sham trial of his killers in August and September 1955, Rosa Parks made a decision that now was the time to put an end to Jim Crow. And, because of Rosa Parks and all who followed, Jim Crow laws eventually became the subject of history instead of the law of the land.

For Further Reading and Viewing

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Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Viking, 1987. Chris Crow teaches in the English Department of Brigham Young University.