

Emmett Till

Read about the brutal murder of a fourteen-year-old boy that became a rallying point for the Civil Rights Movement.

Overview

- In 1955, two white men brutally murdered African American teenager Emmett Till for reportedly flirting with a white woman in the town of Money, Mississippi.
- Till's mother Mamie held an open-casket funeral so that the world could see the violence that murderous racists had inflicted on her son's body. The funeral drew over 100,000 mourners.
- Till's murderers stood trial one month later, in a case that received a great deal of media attention across the United States and the world. Both men were acquitted.
- Till's death, and the acquittal of his murderers, laid bare the savagery of racism in the United States and served as an inspiration to a generation of civil rights activists.



Figure 1: Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy, was brutally murdered by two white men in Mississippi in 1955. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The Murder of Emmett Till

In the summer of 1955, fourteen-year-old **Emmett Till** went to visit his great-uncle and cousins in the small town of Money, Mississippi. Till was an African American teenager who had grown up in Chicago, a fun-loving prankster who "loved to make people laugh," according to one friend.

Till was unprepared for the rigidly-maintained racial order in the South, where blacks were expected to display constant deference to whites or else face violent reprisal. Three days after he arrived in Mississippi, Till entered Bryant's Grocery store to buy a pack of bubblegum. Carolyn Bryant, the white woman who was working behind the counter, alleged that Till had wolf-whistled at her, grabbed her around the waist and uttered obscenities. More than fifty years later, Bryant admitted that she fabricated this story and lied under oath about their encounter.

Bryant told her husband, Roy Bryant, that Till had made sexual advances toward her. Four days later he and his half-brother J.W. Milam kidnapped Till from his great-uncle's house in the middle of the night. They beat the fourteen year old boy mercilessly, gouged out one of his eyes, and then shot and killed him. They tied his body to a large industrial fan and dumped him in the nearby Tallahatchie River.

When Till's corpse was salvaged from the river three days later, he was recognizable only by the ring he wore, which had belonged to his father. His remains were sent to his mother with the coffin nailed shut.

Till's Funeral

It's likely that Till's murder, like those of so many other African Americans during the Jim Crow era, would have gone virtually unnoticed, if his mother Mamie Bradley had not made the brave decision to hold an open-casket funeral. *Jet* magazine published pictures of Bradley with her son's mutilated corpse, which excited outrage and horror from the broader public. Bradley said she felt she had to "let the world see what has happened, because there is no way I could describe this. And I needed somebody to help me tell what it was like."

Over 100,000 people attended Till's funeral in Chicago. Had the funeral been an official protest, it would have been the largest civil rights demonstration in American history until that point.

The Trial of Till's Murderers

Calls for justice throughout the country led to the indictment of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, whose trial for Till's kidnapping and murder began on September 22, 1955. Because women and African Americans were barred from serving on juries in Mississippi at that time, the defendants were tried before an all-male, all-white jury. At great personal risk, Till's great-uncle Mose Wright took the stand and identified Bryant and Milam as the men who kidnapped his nephew.

The case was the first major media event of the nascent [Civil Rights Movement](#), bringing hundreds of reporters and all three television networks to the small Mississippi town. The courtroom was segregated, and many outside observers were surprised at the informal conduct of the sheriff, who casually used racial epithets and initially refused to admit black Congressman Charles Diggs to the courtroom.

In his closing statements, defense attorney advised the jury that if they convicted Bryant and Milam for Till's murder, "Your ancestors will turn over in their grave, and I'm sure every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men." The jury deliberated for just sixty-six minutes before acquitting both men. "We wouldn't have taken so long if we hadn't stopped to drink pop," said one of the jurors.

Till's Influence on the Civil Rights Movement

Although Bryant and Milam were never punished for their crime—they admitted to the killing in a 1956 interview—Till's death was a watershed moment for the Civil Rights Movement. To African Americans who had grown up in the [Jim Crow](#) South, the fact that Bryant and Milam had been tried for the murder at all was an incredible mark of progress. Amzie Moore, the president of the Bolivar County NAACP, marveled that: "A white man was openly tried for lynching a black boy, you know that hadn't happened in our memory."

Till's murder awakened Americans to the true extent of racism in the nation. "People really didn't know that things this horrible could take place," according to Till's mother Mamie. "And the fact that it happened to a child, that made all the difference in the world." Many individuals who would go on to play leading roles in the Civil Rights Movement felt that Till's death was the last straw. Rosa Parks, who would initiate the [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#) just two months after the trial, said that on that day, "I thought about Emmett Till, and I couldn't go back [to the back of the bus]."

What do you think?

1. Why do you think Bryant and Milam murdered Till? What does their treatment of Till tell us about Mississippi society in this time period?
2. How do you think media affected the Till case? How would things have been different had there not been magazine, newspaper, and television coverage of the funeral and trial?
3. Why do you think Till's murder was such an important event in the Civil Rights Movement?