refusing to 'bow ... willingly'



EMMETT LOUIS TILL 1941-1955 Murdered for speaking to a white woman, Money, Miss.

amie Till was a devoted, well-educated mother who taught her son that a person's worth did not depend on the color of his or her skin. Nevertheless, when she put 14-year-old Emmett on a train bound for Mississippi in the summer of 1955, she warned him: "If you have to get down on your knees and bow when a white person goes past, do it willingly."

It was not in Emmett Till to bow down. He came to Mississippi from a working-class section of Chicago, where he had learned to be bold and selfassured. He didn't understand the timid attitude of his Southern cousins toward whites.

After being in Mississippi for a few days, Emmett went with some of his cousins and friends to the town of Money. Emmett and a cousin made a purchase at a local store and were standing outside the building when the storeowner's wife, Carolyn Bryant, came outside. Emmett whistled in her presence, shocking his relatives. Someone said Bryant was going to her car for a gun, and the boys scrambled to their vehicle to leave.

Within hours, nearly everyone in town had heard at least
one version of the incident.
Some said Emmett had asked
Mrs. Bryant for a date; others
said he whistled at her. Whatever the details were, Roy Bryant was outraged at the notion
that a black youth had been
disrespectful to his wife. That
weekend, Bryant and his halfbrother, J.W. Milam, went look-

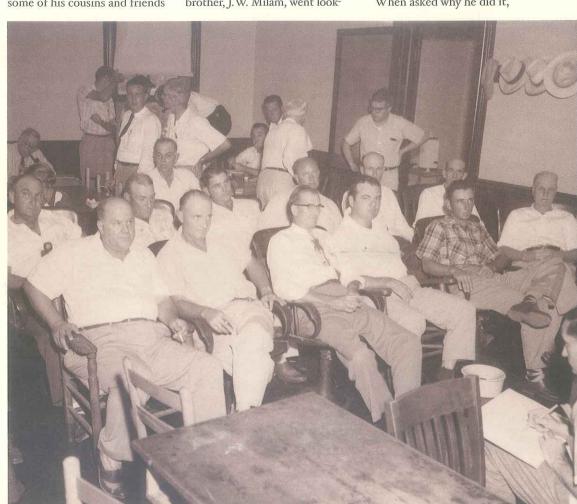
ing for Till. They came to the cotton field house that belonged to Mose Wright, a 64-year-old farmer and great-uncle of Emmett Till. Bryant demanded to see "the boy that did the talking," and the two white men searched the house until they found Till asleep. As they took Emmett Till away, they told Wright not to cause any trouble or he'd "never live to be 65."

Writer William Bradford Huie, in an early instance of "checkbook journalism," later paid Milam to describe what happened that night. Milam said he and Bryant beat Emmett Till, shot him in the head, wired a 75-pound cotton gin fan to his neck and dumped his body in the Tallahatchie River.

When asked why he did it,

"The fact that Emmett Till, a young black man, could be found floating down the river in Mississippi just set in concrete the determination of the people to move forward."

THE REV. FRED SHUTTLESWORTH





Milam responded, "Well, what else could I do? He thought he was as good as any white man."

SO THE WORLD COULD SEE

Till's body was found three days later — a bullet in the skull, one eye gouged out and his head crushed in on one side. The face was unrecognizable. Mose Wright knew it was Till only because of a signet ring that remained on one finger. The ring had belonged to Emmett's father, Louis, who had died 10 years earlier, and bore his initials, L. T.

Mamie Till demanded the body of her son be sent back to Chicago. Then she ordered an open-casket funeral so the world could see what had been done to Emmett. Jet magazine published a picture of the horribly disfigured corpse. Thousands viewed the body and attended the funeral.

All over the country, blacks and sympathetic whites were horrified by the killing. Thousands of people sent money to the NAACP to support its legal efforts on behalf of black victims.

In the meantime, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant faced murder charges. They admitted they kidnapped and beat Emmett Till but claimed they left him alive. Ignoring nationwide criticism, white Mississippians raised \$10,000 to pay the legal expenses for Milam and Bryant. Five white local lawyers volunteered to represent them at the murder trial.

Mose Wright risked his life to testify against the men. In a courtroom filled with reporters and curious white spectators, the frail black farmer stood up and pointed to Bryant and Milam as



the men who took Emmett away.

Wright's act of courage didn't convince the all-white jury.
After deliberating just over an hour, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty.

The murder of Emmett
Till was the spark that set the
Civil Rights Movement on fire.
For those who would become
leaders of that movement, the
martyred 14-year-old was a
lasting symbol of the struggle
for equality.

"The Emmett Till case shook the foundations of Mississippi," said Myrlie Evers, widow of civil rights leader Medgar Evers. "...because it said even a child was not safe from racism and bigotry and death."

NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins said white Mississippians "had to prove they were superior...by taking away a 14-year-old boy."

The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, who eight years later would lead the fight for integration in Birmingham, Ala., said, "The fact that Emmett Till, a young black

man, could be found floating down the river in Mississippi just set in concrete the determination of the people to move forward.... Only God can know how many Negroes have come up missing, dead and killed under this system with which we live."

Mamie Till Mobley continued to tell the story of her only son until her death in January 2003. Several months later, her story about Emmett was published in Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America. Despite her vigorous efforts to have Emmett's case reopened, she did not live to see this happen. In May 2004, the FBI reopened the case, and Till's body was exhumed the following year. The case was turned over to local prosecutors, with the FBI suggesting a closer look at Bryant's wife, Carolyn, who was still living. In February 2007, a Mississippi grand jury ruled that there was insufficient evidence to indict her, essentially closing the book on the case. (8)

OPPOSITE PAGE

The all-white jury listened to the evidence against Emmett Till's murderers and then took little more than an hour to find them not guilty.

ABOVE

Mamie Till was overcome with grief when the body of her son arrived at the Chicago train station.