

Emmett Till's mother opened his casket and sparked the civil rights movement

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In 1955, when Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley heard the news that her only child had been kidnapped in Money, Miss., tortured, shot, wrapped in a barbed wire attached to a 75-pound fan and then thrown in the Tallahatchie River, she insisted that authorities send his body home to Chicago.

When she went to the train station to see the body of her 14-year-old son, she collapsed. "Lord, take my soul," she cried, according to a 2003 interview with The Washington Post.

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Emmett Till's body was swollen beyond recognition. His teeth were missing. His ear was severed. His eye was hanging out. The only thing that identified him was a ring. In her grief and outrage, the mother called the Chicago Defender, one of the country's leading black newspapers. She called Ebony and Jet magazines, telling reporters she wanted the world to see the barbaric act committed against her son by white men in Mississippi.

Then the mother did something that would change history: She asked for an open casket at his funeral.

"I think everybody needed to know what had happened to Emmett Till," Till-Mobley said, according to PBS.

"At a church on the South Side of Chicago," according to PBS, "Emmett Till's mutilated body would be on display for all to see. Fifty thousand people in Chicago saw Emmett Till's corpse with their own eyes. When the magazine Jet ran photos of the body, black Americans across the country shuddered."

Sixty-three years after Emmett's slaying, the Justice Department has reopened the investigation into the 14-year-old's death. In March, the Justice Department told Congress in a report that it had reopened the investigation into Emmett's death "after receiving new information." The report did not include details about the "new information." No new charges were announced.

New information published in a 2017 book prompted federal investigators to reopen their probe of Emmett's murder, according to two people familiar with the case.

The emotional photos at Emmett's funeral captured Till-Mobley as she approached her son's casket. Her body seemed to buckle. Photographers captured her leaning over the casket, to which photos of the smiling boy had been taped inside the lid. At the graveside, the mother held her stomach as she cried.

"Negro Boy Was Killed for 'Wolf Whistle,'" a headline in Jet Magazine read. When the magazine printed photos of Emmett's mangled body, it created national outrage, shocking white and black America. Emmett's death became a catalyst for the civil rights movement.

In August 1955, Till-Mobley put her only son on a train to visit relatives for a summer vacation in Mississippi, where he would stay with his great-uncle, Moses Wright.

Till-Mobley, who had been born and raised in rural Mississippi, warned her son that Mississippi was ripe with racism. She reminded her son, who had grown up in Chicago, that he needed to obey his relatives.

"She told him 'to be very careful ... to humble himself to the extent of getting down on his knees,'" according to Time. " 'Living in Chicago,' she explained at the trial of his murderers, 'he didn't know.' "

A few days after Emmett arrived in Mississippi, he and his cousins went to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market in town in Money to buy some candy. According to accounts, Emmett allegedly whistled at Carolyn Bryant, a white woman who worked at the store.

Maurie Wright, 16, Emmett's cousin, told the United Press in a report published Sept. 1, 1955: "Emmett went into the store and asked for some bubble and left after telling the women 'goodbye.' Outside, Emmett gave a 'wolf call.' I told Emmett to be careful of what he said in the store."

That night, on Aug. 28, 1955, the woman's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half brother, J.W. Milam, went to Emmett's great-uncle's home and demanded the boy come out,

[according to a 2007 Associated Press report.](#)

“Moses pleaded with the men to leave Emmett alone,” [according to PBS.](#) “He’s only 14, he’s from up North. Why not give the boy a whipping, and leave it at that?” His wife, Elizabeth Wright, “offered money to the intruders, but they ordered her to go back to bed.”

Emmett’s uncle “led the men throughout his home with flashlights until they found Emmett in a bed, sleeping,” according to the PBS report. “They woke him up and told him to get dressed.”

Three days later, Emmett’s body was found in the Tallahatchie River, with a cotton-gin fan tied around his neck.

Bryant and Milam were charged with murder and brought to trial on Sept. 19, 1955, in Sumner, Miss.

Five days after the trial began, Bryant and Milam were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury after about an hour of deliberations. The acquittal shocked the world.

Several months later, on Jan. 24, 1956, Look Magazine published their confessions.

“In the Look article, titled ‘The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi,’ the men detailed how they beat Till with a gun, shot him and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River with a heavy cotton-gin fan attached with barbed wire to his neck to weigh him down,” according to [the website of the History channel.](#) “The two killers were paid a reported \$4,000 for their participation in the article.”

Nearly 60 years later, Emmett’s accuser, now known as Carolyn Donham, revealed she lied about her interaction with Emmett. Timothy B. Tyson, a professor at Duke University who published the book “[The Blood of Emmett Till](#)” in 2017, wrote that in an interview, Donham conceded that Emmett did not make a sexual advance toward her. Her statement directly contradicted her testimony decades before, when she told a jury that Emmett had grabbed her waist and said crude things to her.

In 2004, the Justice Department reopened the case. In 2005, Emmett’s body was exhumed by the FBI and an autopsy was performed. But a grand jury decided not to seek indictments. No one was ever convicted in Emmett’s slaying.

“You’re looking at Mississippi. I guess it’s about the same way it was 50 years ago,” Emmett’s cousin Simeon Wright told the Associated Press in 2007. “We had overwhelming evidence, and they came back with the same decision. Some of the people haven’t changed from 50 years ago. Same attitude. The evidence speaks for itself. I don’t know how many years I have left on this Earth. We can leave this world and say: ‘Hey, we tried. We tried to get some justice in this, and we failed.’”

Emmett’s mother, who taught special education in Chicago elementary schools, never stopped fighting for justice for her son.

She told The Post in a [2003 interview](#), “I have not spent one minute hating.”

Till-Mobley died in Chicago in 2003 at the age of 81.

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