

Emmett Till

My introduction to the story... For the last 8 years I have served on the board for Urban Pathways Charter School (6-12) on Penn Avenue in Pittsburgh. It is a public school of approximately 350 students, chartered by the Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) district, drawing students primarily from the PPS district, but from other city districts as well. The student body is substantially low income, 100% black, and they face a variety of challenges.

A few years ago, I attended their annual Black History celebration presented by the Black Student Union at the school. They always do an amazing job, and it is always an education for me. That year, several of the students acted out a brief play on the story of Emmett Till. I remember that I was equally horrified 1) at the details of the story, and 2) at the realization that I had previously been unaware of this piece of history. Why hadn't I been taught about this in school? 1955 isn't that long ago! Why is this story even classified as "Black History"?

The story of Emmett Till⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾ Emmett Louis Till was a 14-year-old boy from the south side of Chicago. In the summer of 1955, he was visiting his mother's uncle, Mose Wright, a preacher in the Mississippi Delta region. He and some local boys went to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market to buy some candy. The market was owned by a white couple, 24-year-old Roy Bryant and his 21-year-old wife, Carolyn. Carolyn was alone at the front of the store. There are variations on what exactly happened in the store that day, but Emmett had flirted with or wolf-whistled at Carolyn. Emmett's cousin, Simeon Wright, understood the trouble that behavior would cause in Jim Crow era Mississippi. "We couldn't get out of there fast enough," he later said. In the coming weeks, Carolyn reported that Till had made lewd comments, asked for a date, and that he had grabbed her by the waist.

Carolyn's husband, Roy, returned from travel a few days later. Carolyn did not initially tell him the story; she said she was concerned about how her husband would react. He heard the story from someone else, and was angry. He and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, drove to the house of Mose Wright in the middle of the night, and dragged Emmett out of Wright's house. They beat him brutally, shot him in the head, and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River. A 74-pound gin fan was tied to his neck with barbed wire, with the hope that he would never be found.

Three days later, the body was found by boys fishing in the river. The body was so disfigured and bloated, it was difficult to identify except for a silver ring with the initials "L. T." and "May 25, 1943" carved in it. Mose Wright was called to identify the body. The ring was initially presented back to Mose, and later submitted for evidence. Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted that the body be transferred back to Chicago for a funeral, and made the important decision to insist on an open casket. "There was just no way I could describe what was in that box. No



way. And I just wanted the world to see." News of the murder, and a photo of the mutilated corpse, made the national news, and outraged people across the country. Time Magazine later named one of the photos as one of the 100 "most influential images of all time."

Bryant and Milam were indicted for murder. In a significant act of bravery, Mose Wright identified the two men in the courtroom. (It was unheard of for a black man in Mississippi to accuse a white man of a crime.) The prosecution made the case that the body could not be positively identified, and that Emmett Till was possibly still alive. They admitted that they had taken the boy that night, but said that they had later released him. The all-white all-male jury deliberated for 67 minutes and acquitted both men. "If we hadn't stopped to drink pop, it wouldn't have taken that long," one juror said.

Mississippi was one of the poorest states in the union in 1955. Having limited funds, Bryant and Milam initially had difficulty finding attorneys to represent them, but five attorneys at a Sumner law firm offered their services pro bono. Their supporters placed collection jars in stores and other public places in the Delta, eventually gathering \$10,000 for their defense.

A year later, in 1956, Bryant and Milam agreed to an interview with Look Magazine, and admitted to the murder.

Timothy Tyson, author of "The Blood of Emmett Till" (2017) released notes from a 2008 interview with Carolyn Bryant, where he says she recanted part of her earlier testimony that Till had grabbed her around her waist and uttered obscenities, saying, "that part is not true." She also said, "nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him".⁽³⁾

Lessons Learned... Unfortunately, many of the lessons learned here are not happy ones. People of color are far more likely to know the story of Emmett Till than are people in white communities. Along with so many other stories of the time, the story of Emmett Till shaped the expectation of justice for black people in the Jim Crow era. For black males, even 14-year-olds, the presumption of ill intent and an assumption of guilt were ever present.

But we can learn from this. We can continue to educate ourselves about the American history that has shaped our current racial state of affairs. We can consciously build relationships to foster understanding. We can listen to each other. And just as the outrage over Emmett Till's brutal murder helped fuel progress toward the Civil Rights Act of 1957, we can raise our voices for justice in public policy today.

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(1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmett_Till

(2) <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-death-of-emmett-till>

(3) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/books/review/blood-of-emmett-till-timothy-b-tyson.html>