
INTRODUCTION

WE ALL KNOW the story: In late August 1955, a fourteen-year-old Chicago kid named Emmett Till went to visit family in Mississippi. At a crossroads store in the tiny Delta town of Money, Till whistled at the white woman behind the counter. A few days later, he was kidnapped, beaten, and shot. His abductors weighted his body down and threw it in the Tallahatchie River.

A friend of mine from Chicago was also fourteen when they murdered Emmett Till. He told me recently about the photo he saw back then in the newspaper, a photo of Till's body after it had been pulled from the river, his face crushed, a cotton-gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire as a weight.

No such photo exists. No journalists were by the riverbank to take pictures, and the police photographer who waited back at the sheriff's office in Greenwood took the official photos long after they cleaned the muck off Till's body and removed the weights tied around his neck.

Maybe my friend was thinking of the funeral pictures, taken a few days later in Chicago, and which have now become horrifically iconic. When Mamie Till Bradley saw how savagely her son had been beaten, she asked the mortician not to prettify him, and more, she insisted on a glass top over his coffin. "Let the people see what they did to my boy," she famously said.

But I am sure my friend did not see those photos either. He is white. He was not a reader of *Jet* magazine or the *Chicago Defender*, two publications that carried them. African Americans across the country saw the pictures. They passed them around, discussed them, and took grim determination from them. While mainstream newspapers and magazines devoted lots of coverage to the Till story, none published the photos of Emmett's battered face. Few white Americans saw those now-infamous images until video documentaries of the Civil Rights Movement made by African Americans began to appear late in the 1980s.

Our memories are not always reliable. Emmett Till's story has been repeated so often in recent years, the photographs so widely reproduced, that it feels as if we have always known about them. Even as I write these words, a new cover story in *Time* magazine, "The Most Influential Images of All Time," featuring the one hundred photos that "changed the world," includes two of Emmett Till. These photographs "proved a black life matters," *Time's* editors declared; the pictures "forced the world to reckon with the brutality of American racism."¹

Seeing had moral consequences in *Time's* telling of the story; Americans were converted by the visceral impact of those horrifying images. But if "seeing" did not happen until decades later, then surely it could not explain that moral reckoning. Similarly, in 1995, forty years after covering the trial of Till's killers in Sumner, Mississippi, the journalist David Halberstam called it "The first great media event of the Civil Rights Movement." Yet only after all that time had passed could Halberstam understand fully the significance of what he witnessed back in 1955, only then could he put the name Emmett Till together with "media event" and "Civil Rights Movement."²

The Till saga is like that. Our popular version of the story, worn smooth as an ancient ballad, tells the essential truths: that an innocent boy was murdered because he violated a social code he did not understand, that his mother invited the world to look at his destroyed face, and that her courage helped propel the Civil Rights Movement. All of this is true. The implied part, however, is not. That the crucifixion in Emmett Till's face softened white peoples' hearts and put America on the road to racial justice—that, as a television report on CNN put it in 2003, "everything changed after the murder of Emmett Till"—is a pleasant untruth. Few white people saw the photographs. Radical change demanded years more struggle and far more blood.³

Depending on who told it, where, when, and why, Emmett Till's story was filled with ambiguity, distortions, even outright lies. Whole books have been written about the murder expressly to test and debunk some

of the “facts” that have grown up around it—among them, that Emmett’s cousins egged him on to whistle at the white woman at Bryant’s Grocery Store; that Emmett bragged about his white girlfriends back in Chicago; that Emmett acted belligerently toward his captors. Getting the facts straight is a worthy goal for its own sake, but also because truth is a precondition of justice.

Still, to seek only the literal truth misses something larger about Emmett Till’s story, which was never simple, never reducible to mere facts. Even things we know as stone-hard truth—that white men savagely beat a black boy, then executed him for reasons that seem trivial—has mystery at its core: How can we comprehend this blend of sadism and bigotry? Where does such evil come from? How could whole communities, whole states, a whole region rationalize the atrocity? As is always true of the past, the literal truth takes us only so far in exploring moral questions, the very heart of historical studies.

The Emmett Till story is an American Rashomon, for how it was told in 1955 or 1985 or 2015 depended not just on “the facts” but on what you believed they were, what they ought to be, and above all, what they meant. Of course, it is the historian’s duty to get the facts as accurately as possible. Not all versions of a story are equal; some claims are demonstrably false, shamelessly prejudiced, self-serving. Some tellings are fuller, richer, and more accurate than others. That there are things we can never know for sure, however, is also a fact, and understanding how people try to fill those gaps carries its own kind of truth.

Sixty years after they killed Emmett Till, his story refuses to go away. Indeed, his memory is more alive now than at any time since 1955, invoked in many variations. I know African American parents who told their children about him in order to teach them the savage history of racism and warn them of its living perils. While doing research for this book I also met white Mississippians who told me that Till was indeed a would-be rapist with designs on Carolyn Bryant, designs that were foiled only at the last minute. Back in Chicago, I heard northerners talk about his murder with all the regional sanctimoniousness of 1955, as if racism was purely a southern phenomenon, then and now.

Today, some tell Emmett Till’s story to illustrate how far we have traveled in racial relations, how America has overcome the bigotry of his killers, how our tears for this long-dead child reveal our own purity of heart. Others vehemently disagree, arguing that his lynching was a textbook case of race-based injustice, foreshadowing contemporary chapters filled with police shootings of unarmed black men. How people have told the Emmett Till story over the years depended on why they were telling it.

Like the buses of Montgomery and the neighborhoods of Chicago, memory itself was segregated. African Americans kept Emmett Till's flame alive through the years of the Civil Rights Movement, and activists born around the same time as the young martyr are sometimes referred to as "the Emmett Till generation." But white Americans whose local newspapers and television sets carried daily stories about him in September 1955 had all but forgotten him a year later, and the media did little to remind them. A generation after his death, Till's name was mostly gone from their history and memory.

That started to change beginning in the late 1980s. The PBS television history of the Civil Rights Movement *Eyes on the Prize* aired in early 1987. The first few minutes highlighted Till's murder, implicitly marking his story as the beginning of the freedom struggle. The next thirty years witnessed a rising tide of new material: books—both academic and popular—articles, anthologies, documentaries, museum exhibits, and websites. Just in the last two years came Devery Anderson's substantial work of historical sleuthing, *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement*, followed by Timothy Tyson's *The Blood of Emmett Till*, which featured Carolyn Bryant's startling yet vague admission that she lied back in 1955.

I have two goals in this book: To tell the Emmett Till story well, and to take it seriously as a story. The first part means capturing what happened with fairness and accuracy. The second part is trickier. In telling the story, I am joining many others who have done so over the years. Till's murder came at a particularly fraught moment in American racial history, when the mere suggestion of anything sexual between black men and white women was social dynamite. For example, newspapers were powerful organs of opinion in 1955, and how they first reported the story—was it a lynching or a murder, an honor killing or mere bloodlust?—reflected deep racial, regional, and political assumptions. A month later, the sensational trial of Till's killers in Sumner, Mississippi, sharpened the conflicts, as attorneys and witnesses, judge and jury fought over the evidence and its interpretation. How to tell the story—and whether to tell it at all—grew more contentious, as Americans struggled with their assumptions about race, segregation, rights, and equality. Months after the trial, Americans kept relitigating the case, probing its meanings, interpreting its significance.

Let the People See tries to capture the shock that Americans felt in 1955 when suddenly their attention was riveted on the Mississippi Delta. I take readers inside the courtroom to hear the attorneys and the witnesses in order to understand what was at stake during that hot week in Sumner. On trial were not just Till's killers but Jim Crow segregation, the Southern

Way of Life. On trial, too, was how Americans thought about race and, more explosively, how they thought about race *and* sex. Above all, I explore not just history but memory: How and why have we forgotten and remembered the story over the years?

This book is arranged chronologically in four sections: “Murder,” “Trial,” “Verdicts,” and “Memory.” Till’s body was no sooner pulled from the Tallahatchie River than questions began. Would the federal government intervene in the case? How should the press cover the story? Was the body really Till or someone else? By the time the killers came to trial, it had become an international story, headline news as the world struggled with decolonization and the Cold War. For six months, into early 1956, the press was filled with accusations, confessions, and new revelations. Tens of thousands of African Americans joined Emmett Till rallies across America. Then as quickly as it came, interest in Emmett Till almost vanished, among white people anyway, only to be revived decades later as America began to reassess its long racial past.

Let the People See is an African American story and a southern one too, but above all, it is an American story about race and racism. Two book-ends flank this volume, the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and that of Donald Trump in 2016. I began research shortly after the former and finished writing a year after the latter. That moment in Chicago’s Grant Park in 2008 when Obama took the stage as America’s president-elect remains an electrifying memory. No matter the accomplishments or disappointments of the next eight years, America did something remarkable that day. Fifty-three years earlier, when Emmett Till went to Mississippi, most African Americans could neither vote nor run for office, let alone imagine a black president.

Yet America had not suddenly become “post-racial,” quite the contrary. As if operating under some inexorable law of physics the reaction set in, starting with innuendo—he was an African, an Islamist, certainly not an American. A leading purveyor of these racist charges became our next president. He doubled down: Mexicans were criminals, Muslims terrorists, African countries shitholes.

I never thought we would elect a black president in my lifetime, and I never thought we would regress to the likes of Donald Trump. As a historian, I should have known better, America has done this repeatedly: Civil Rights Movement follows Jim Crow which follows emancipation; racially motivated laws slam shut the doors of immigration, followed by reopened doors, followed by dreams of impenetrable walls; we defeat a racist Japanese regime while imprisoning our own Japanese American citizens, then apologize to them decades later. Less a mountain to climb or a nightmare

to wake up from, racism is more like a shape-shifting demon we must wrestle again and again.

The Emmett Till story has been like that, disappearing, then resurfacing in new guises. A friend of mine who was born in Mississippi a decade after the Till lynching, recalled a joke he heard as a boy. On any occasion when whites denigrated blacks, someone might remark that they were so ignorant they would steal a chain and a gin fan and try to escape across a river. Years later, my friend visited Botswana in southern Africa. Introduced to some local gentlemen, he told them that he was from Mississippi. "Oh yeah," one of them said? Did you hear the one about the black who stole a length of chain? He would have gotten away with it if he hadn't tried to swim a river with it." They all had heard that one, knew the joke.

Emmett Till's killers could not hold his memory down any more than his body, and it still keeps surfacing in unexpected times and places. Even as this book goes to press, the FBI once again is reopening the Till case. Conscience, like the dark Tallahatchie River, gives up its secrets in its own good time.