

TO: GLENDORA COTTON GIN  
BLACK BAYOU BRIDGE

FROM: [REDACTED]

SUBJECT: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

DATE: 9/17/2010

CC:

---

In August 1955, fourteen year-old Emmett Till was beaten and murdered in Mississippi. Till's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, paid to have the body returned to Chicago for burial. She insisted on viewing the body and decided to have an open casket. Hundreds of people viewed the body and thousands more saw photographs in *Jet* magazine. The Till murder drew national attention.

Tallahatchie County prosecutors indicted and tried Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam for the murder of Emmett Till in September 1955. Although an eyewitness identified Milam and Bryant as the men who took Till from his great-uncle's home the night of his murder and another who placed Milam, Bryant and Till at a barn on a plantation in Drew, MS the day of the murder, an all white jury found the men not guilty.

As a result of the victim's age, the brutal nature of the crime, the strong evidence against Milam and Bryant, the verdict was widely seen as unfair. The trial drew national press attention, unlike other lynchings of blacks in Mississippi in 1955. Many historians cite the Till murder and trial as the beginning of the modern Civil Rights movement.

Due the passage of time and the lack of investigation at the time of the crime, the full facts of the Till case will never be known. Contrary stories abound. However, some facts are settled.

Emmett Till was the son of Mamie Till and Louis Till. The senior Till died in Europe during World War II. In August 1955, Till went to Mississippi to stay with the family of Mose Wright, his great-uncle. Wright was a farmer and preacher who lived near Money, Mississippi in Leflore County. On Wednesday August 24, Till and a group of young blacks aged 13 to 18 went to a store in Money operated by Roy Bryant and his wife Carolyn. Till was alone with Bryant in the store when some event occurred. Bryant later testified the Till grabbed her and made advances. Another witness later said all Till did was to touch Bryant's hand as he paid. The truth of what occurred will probably never be known. Till and Bryant both left the store and at that point Till whistled at her. Both Wheeler Parker and Simeon Wright, Till's cousins, confirm Till whistled at Bryant. They knew this was a serious breach of racial relations and hurriedly left. At Till's request, no one told Mose Wright about the incident.

In the early morning hours of Sunday August 28, Milam and Bryant, and probably others, appeared at Mose Wright's home looking for the "boy from Chicago." Milam had a gun. Although Wright and his wife asked the men to leave everyone alone the men took Till to a waiting truck. Someone asked a passenger in the truck whether Till was the one they were looking for. The response was, "Yes." Wright could not identify the person in the truck.



What happened next is in dispute. Willie Reed, a young black man, testified at the trial. He said he saw a truck with four white men in the front and three black men in the back pass him on the road near Drew, Sunflower County. He testified one of the black men was Till, based on a newspaper photograph. He saw the truck in front of a barn on Leslie Milam's farm. He saw J. W. Milam emerge from the barn and stated Milam had a gun. Reed heard someone being beaten in the barn and screaming.

A witness interviewed by the FBI in 2005-2006 stated he saw Milam's truck parked in front of Milam's store in Glendora, in the early morning hours of August 28. He identified J. W. Milam and two black men he identified as "Oso" and "Too Tight" present. He saw blood running from the truck. When his father asked about the blood, Milam grabbed his father and turned back a tarp in the back of the truck and said, "This is what happens to smart niggers." He saw them drive toward the Glendora Cotton Gin and then leave town. The witness said he later saw Too Tight Collins and another black man, name redacted (probably Henry Lee Loggins), washing blood out of the back of Milam's truck.

The sequence of events following Till's kidnapping is not well settled. Much of what is known has been derived from an interview that Bryant and Milam gave to journalist William Bradford Huie which was published in *Look* magazine in January 1956. They were paid \$3500 or \$4000 for the interview. Milam and Bryant claimed they acted alone. They initially wanted to scare Till and took him to a bluff over looking the Mississippi River to threaten him. Unable to find the bluff they took him to a shed at Milam's home in Glendora and beat him. Milam claimed he decided he needed a weight to hold Till's body down and recalled a gin fan he had seen at the Progressive Ginning Company at Boyle, Bolivar County. They took Till across the "new bridge" at Glendora and drove about two miles north to Swan Lake, near the Boyce home. Milam made Till strip, tied the gin fan around his neck and shot him, dumping the body into the river.

The next account was published in 1956, a pamphlet issued by Mississippi Regional Council of Negro Leadership. After giving an account of Till's kidnapping, beating and killing, the author stated that the only missing gin fan in the area came from an abandoned gin in Itta Bena, close to a store operated by another Milam brother. (P. 21)

In 1963, Hugh Stephen Whitaker wrote a master's thesis at Florida State titled "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Emmett Till Case." Whitaker repeated the account from the *Look* article that the gin fan came from Boyle and that the killing took place on the banks of Swan Lake. (Pp. 114-115) However, Whitaker did question Milam's story and drew a map showing the path travelled by the killers and their victim.

Stephen J. Whitfield wrote one of the first book-length treatments of the Till murder published in 1988. Whitfield relied on the *Look* story, stating that the gin fan came from Boyle (p. 21) and that Milam and Bryant dumped the body into the Tallahatchie River in an area where Milam hunted squirrels. (p. 21) About two-thirds of the book recounts the response to the Till trial.

Ellen Whitten wrote an article I found on the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation website titled "Injustice Unearthed: Revisiting the Murder of Emmett Till." Whitten, in part relying on Whitaker's thesis, added the mileage allegedly travelled a total of 200 miles. She questions whether everything could have happened within the time frame. She suspected Milam "fabricated" the story since the truth could have implicated other people. She "infers" the body was dumped from the new bridge, citing p.119 of Whitaker's thesis which cited press reports that blood was found on the bridge. (I have seen no indication in any other source about blood on the new bridge.) Whitten also



questions whether the river would have been sufficiently high in August to carry the weighted body downstream.

In 2005, filmmaker Keith Beauchamp released a documentary entitled *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*. Beauchamp interviewed Mamie Till Bradley, Simeon Wright, Wheeler Parker and Willie Reed, among others. He also identified and interviewed witnesses who had never been heard from before, including Ruthie May Crawford. Crawford testified she saw what occurred inside the Money store and all Till did was place his money in Bryant's hand. Another interview was with Henry Lee Loggins. Some people suspect that Loggins was one of the two black men identified by Willie Reed and later seen cleaning out Milam's truck. However, Loggins denied any involvement with Milam and Bryant. In the film Beauchamp claimed he knew the identities of fourteen people involved in the Till murder, including five blacks. He further claimed five of these people were still alive in 2005.

The FBI reopened the Till case in 2005. A report was issued on February 9, 2006. The FBI report does not identify the source of the cotton gin fan. The report does not identify the site where Till's body was dumped in the Tallahatchie River. In a section entitled "Persons Involved" the report identifies a man, name redacted, who was identified by several witnesses as being involved in either the kidnapping or the cover up. Based on context, I believe this refers to Henry Lee Loggins. The report noted he has "consistently denied any involvement or first hand knowledge of the crime." P. 28

In reviewing the *Look* magazine admissions, the FBI concluded there number of "inconsistencies or differences." (p. 87) Bryant told a confidential informant that they had not been to Boyle that night and identified the barn in which they beat and killed Till on Leslie Milam's farm. The time of the sunrise on August 28, 1955 was inconsistent with Milam's statement's about being concerned they would be seen. The total time to travel the distances started in the article would not allow time for all events described. The proximity of buildings in Glendora would have allowed witnesses to hear a beating in Milam's shed. Witnesses place Milam and Bryant in Drew.

The FBI reported that a Confidential Source interviewed J.W. Milam on three occasions. P. 89 Milam reported he and others had been drinking before the kidnapped Till. They took Till to Money where they beat him. They wanted to scare him further and tried to find a bluff on the Mississippi River. Unable to find the bluff they took Till to Leslie Milam's farm near Drew and beat him again. Milam, Bryant, Leslie Milam, Hubert Clark, Melvin Campbell, "TooTight" Collins and Name Redacted were present. Things got out of hand and Till was killed in the barn near Drew. Collins and Name Redacted cleaned up the blood and spread cotton seed on the floor. Milam, Bryant and Melvin Campbell took Till's body to a bridge in a secluded area, affixed the gin fan to his neck and dumped his body in the Tallahatchie River.

A cooperating witness taped conversations with Roy Bryant in 1985. p. 91 Bryant and the witness drove to the store in Money, the Wright home and the barn near Drew. Bryant denied any intention to kill Till, that he wanted to take him to a hospital after beating him, that they never went to Boyle, that they never returned to Glendora and that he was the only living person who knew what happened.

Prior to his death, Leslie Milam confessed to Name Redacted that was personally involved in the murder, that he knew it wrong and that he had been bothered by it, but never identified anyone else involved. P. 92



Based on what I have read, I believe the truth of the *Look* magazine account is highly questionable. Although Milam and Bryant were not subject to another trial, the parties who assisted them were. Those people include Bryant's wife and Milam's brother. The story that the gin fan came from Boyle is discounted by Bryant's later admission they had not gone to Boyle that night. The story that Till was alive until he was shot on the banks of the Tallahatchie River is discounted by Milam's and Bryant's later admissions to FBI informants. The timeline is seriously questionable. The story is contradicted by eyewitnesses placing the men in Drew, as well as Milam's and Leslie Milam's admissions.

However, nothing establishes that the gin fan came from Glendora. Witnesses place Milam, the truck and Till's body in Glendora in the morning hours of August 28, and the truck was seen going "toward" the gin and out of town.

Henry Lee Loggins involvement is problematic. In the only recorded statement he gave, he denied any involvement. The FBI report stated he had "consistently" denied any involvement of first hand knowledge. The Greenwood grand jury declined to indict Loggins. Since the names are redacted it is difficult to follow whether Loggins was affirmatively identified as one of the black man near Milam's truck when witnesses saw it in Glendora the morning of August 28, whether Loggins accompanied Milam when the truck left town, or whether he was later seen cleaning blood out of the truck.

#### Sources Reviewed

- Adams, Olive Arnold. *Time Bomb, Mississippi Exposed*. Mound Bayou: Mississippi Council of Negro Leadership, 1956.
- Crowe, Chris. *Getting Away With Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*. New York: Phyllis Fogelman Books, 2003.
- Huie, William Bradford. "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." *Look* 20 (January 24, 1956): 46-49.
- Huie, William Bradford. "What's Happened to the Emmett Till Killers." *Look* 21 (January 22, 1957): 63-68.
- Huie, William Bradford. *Wolf Whistle*. New American Library: 1959.
- Metress, Christopher, ed. *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002.
- The Murder of Emmett Till*. Produced by Stanley Nelson. PBS, 2003.
- Pollack, Harriet and Christopher Metress, eds. *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008.
- "Prosecutive Report of Investigation." Federal Bureau of Investigation, February 9, 2006. Retrieved from [foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/till.htm](http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/till.htm)
- Till-Mobley, Mamie and Christopher Benson. *Death of Innocence, The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. New York: Random House, 2003.



*The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*. Produced by Keith Beauchamp. Think Film, 2005.

Whitaker, Hugh Stephen. "A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Emmett Till Case." M.A. Thesis. Florida State University, 1963.

Whitfield, Stephen J. *A Death in the Delta, The Story of Emmett Till*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Whitten, Ellen. "Injustice Unearthed: Revisiting the Murder of Emmett Till." William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, retrieved from <http://www.olemiss.edu/winterinstitute/documents/till-whitten-paper.htm>

ADDENDUM September 17, 2010

I have reviewed David and Linda Beito's book, *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power*, which has two chapters on the Till case. After discussing the kidnapping from the Wright house, the authors describe "the controversy about what happened next has taken on almost Rashomonesque proportions over the decades." (P. 116) The authors interviewed Henry Lee Loggins, who "flatly denied any involvement." (P. 152). The authors do not address the origin of the gin fan or the location where Till's body was placed in the river.

In an earlier article, which was largely reiterated in *Black Maverick*, the authors concluded proving the involvement of anyone other than Milam and Bryant in the murder was unlikely. Key witnesses are dead, memories are unreliable..."we believe the evidence is too thin, too circumstantial, and too contradictory, for definitive answers." "Why It's Unlikely the Emmett Till Murder Mystery Will Ever Be Solved." *History New Network*.

Addendum to Sources Reviewed

Beito, David and Linda Royster Beito. *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Beito, David and Linda Royster Beito. "Why It's Unlikely the Emmett Till Murder Mystery Will Ever Be Solved." *History News Network*. April 26, 2004. <http://www.hnn.us/articles/4853.html>.