

GH 101: First Place

The Unintentional Hero

By Jasmine Woods

A grainy black-and-white close-up photograph of the infamous 14-year-old African American boy, Emmett Till, lifeless and mutilated. He is lying in a casket in a black suit, his face is disfigured and unrecognizable, and he is missing patches of hair. His head is swollen yet at the same time sunken in at some places. This stark contrast between his crisp, formal looking clothing exemplifies the horrors of his facial appearance. It is shocking and disturbing to see, especially if you have not been properly prepared to view it. However, according to his mother, this image was nothing compared to how he looked before his body got touched up. This included removing an eye that was hanging out, closing up the eyelids, and the removal of his swollen tongue. His mother said, “You would have had to have seen Emmett when I first saw him to really appreciate what Mr. Rayner had done before my son’s body was viewed by the public and photographed for public view. What I had seen was so much worse than what other people would ever see” (Till-Mobley 140).

But before this Emmett Till that the world knows, there was the Emmett Till that his mother remembers: a dashing young boy dressed in a formal hat, dress shirt and tie for Christmas Day, less than a year before his untimely death. His hat would appear to be a brownish color, while his dress shirt appears to be white with a slim, black tie. His collar covers all of his neck and even almost touches his chin—which reminds us that he is in fact just a child who is perhaps awkwardly growing into puberty. He looks to our right somewhere off camera with a slight smile on his face and a glint in his eye. A bright light illuminates his face from our left, casting a

shadow around the other part of his face. Compare these two “before and after” photos, you can really see what a monstrous crime was committed against him.



Emmett Till was born on July 25th, 1941 in Chicago, Illinois to parents Mamie and Louis Till, who separated shortly after his birth. According to his mother, he helped around the house while she worked. He cooked, cleaned and even did laundry. He was a nice, light-hearted boy who always liked to tell jokes, pull pranks and make people laugh. Chicago being a northern city meant his middle school was desegregated which meant that he did not have to face the harsh views of southern whites, nor did he fully understand their severity. In 1955, at only 14-years-old, he was sent to visit his family in Money, Mississippi. During this visit, he went with his cousins to a store that was owned by a white couple by the names of Roy, 24, and Carolyn Bryant, 21. Carolyn was running the store while her husband was away. The story from here is unclear. Reports and rumors go anywhere from childish flirting on a dare, to crude sexual advances from Emmett to Carolyn. The flirtation is described as a wink, a whistle, skin-to-skin contact as he paid for his bubble gum, or a “Bye, baby” as he left with his cousins. The possible sexual advance is described as Emmett gripping her waist and telling her that he has been with

older white women before. According to Simeon Wright, Emmett's younger cousin, no one dared Emmett to do anything, and nothing actually happened in the store. However, Emmett did whistle at Carolyn Bryant as she hurried to her car after he left the store, leading Simeon to believe he just wanted to get a rise out of his cousins and friends. Of course, he didn't quite understand that this simple mistaken decision could cost him his life (Wright 50).

Whatever the story, nothing he could have done would excuse what happened next. Four days later as he lay next to Simeon, Emmett was kidnapped in the dead of night by Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam. They severely beat him, shot him in the head, tied a 75-pound cotton gin around his neck with barbed wire, undressed him, and threw his dead body in the Tallahatchie River. His body was found three days later swollen from the water and trauma. The only way his great-uncle Moses Wright (whom he was staying with at the time) could identify him was by a silver ring Emmett wore with an engraving that read, "L.T. May 25, 1943" (standing for his father Louis Till.) "The events of that evening led to one of the most brutal and most publicized race murders in American history" (Harold and DeLuca).

Alongside being widely publicized, the case was also closely followed throughout the trial. This ultimately produced a very lengthy transcript. Harold and DeLuca write:

The all-white, all-male jury found the two brothers not guilty after little more than an hour of deliberations. *Emerge* magazine reports that they would have rendered an innocent verdict even sooner, but the town's sheriff-elect sent a message to jurors telling them "that they should wait a while before announcing their verdicts to make it "look good"

A juror later said that during that time, they stopped to drink pop. It is clear to see that this trial was only going to go one way from the beginning. To add insult to injury, Bryant and Milam later confessed to the murder to a journalist of *Look* magazine for only \$4,000 (Harold and DeLuca). They were, of course, protected by double jeopardy. Milam had this to say: “As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place” (Anderson).

Emmett’s body would have immediately been buried in Mississippi if not for his mother’s calls to local and state authorities demanding his body be sent back to Chicago. Once it arrived, his mother viewed the body and bravely decided to have an open casket saying, “Let the people see what I’ve seen.” She was determined to expose the world of racism they lived in. Instead of just holding a closed-casket funeral and passively accepting her reality, she took the image and helped show something with it. Susan Sontag writes that “a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent mean of acquiring it, of gaining control over it” (137). The comparison between his before and after photos was what was the most striking about it. The photos were “circulated in *Jet*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam*, and *Crisis*” (Harold and DeLuca). *Jet* magazine featured the story and provided a photograph of Emmett’s mother and an unidentified man standing behind his casket. The camera was positioned almost at eye level with his corpse, providing a new horrific angle of his battered face. His mother gazes upon his face with a solemn look. She clutches a tissue between her hands, firmly held in support by a man staring directly at the camera with a look of calm fury—the worst kind of anger. The look on his face is the embodied the reaction of black America.



This is just the beginning of a revolution, namely, The Civil Rights Movement. “The murder of Emmett Till was reported in one of the very first banner headlines of the civil rights era and launched the national coalition that fueled the modern civil rights movement” (Tyson 2). More than 50,000 people crowded the streets of Chicago to view Emmett’s body and behold the terror at his funeral, and “after many thousands of blacks filed past [his] casket . . . protest meetings were held in Northern black communities such as New York, Chicago, Denver, Cleveland, and Youngstown, as well as Baltimore and Los Angeles” (Whitfield 85).

Lynches were nothing new and were an active part of many communities, but to see the aftermath of what white supremacy can do was what catalyzed the need for justice. Only a few months after his murder, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to “give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery city bus” (“Emmett Till’s Death”). She later said that she “thought about going to the back of the bus. But then she thought about Emmett Till and she couldn’t do it” (“Emmett Till’s Death”). Whitfield writes, “Till’s life ended a little over three months before the inauguration, early in December, of the Montgomery bus boycott—the first major Southern black declaration of war against racial injustice in the era after Reconstruction” (86).

Other notable names in African American History “who expressed outrage over the Till case” (Whitfield 86) or actively used it as the push for justice were W.E.B Du Bois, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammed Ali to name a few. Long story short, the circulation of the Emmett Till case and photos did a great deal to encourage the black community to fight for their civil rights. “These images [even] made it impossible for white families in other parts of the country to stay indifferent, to stay neutral” (Goldbeger et al.).



The Civil Rights Movement was successful in some respects, but we as a nation still have a long way to go. Still recently, Emmett Till’s name is in the media because memorials dedicated to him are continuously vandalized by white supremacists to this day. Eric Levenson notes that “the first sign went up along the river in 2007 and was stolen the following year. No arrests were ever made. When the marker was replaced, it was riddled with bullet holes. In 2018, a third sign was put up at the site, but only 35 days went by before it was shot up again.”

After that last attack, a bulletproof marker and many cameras were put up in an effort to preserve and protect it for as long as possible. But even then, a gang of white supremacist gathered there solely to disrespect it; they quickly disbanded at the sound of police sirens.

What's more, it was later discovered that Carolyn Bryant lied because "every lie has an audience" and "a lie is told because the person telling it thinks there is a chance that someone will believe it" (McIntyre 155). Her audience being the other white citizens in her town, particularly the jury, and even if the jury had not believed it, the lie would still have surely worked in her and her husband's favor. In 2017, six decades after the grisly attack, Carolyn Bryant ended up confessing that part of her testimony was fabricated in a book called *The Blood of Emmett Till*. Timothy B. Tyson writes that she had said "Till had grabbed her around the waist and uttered obscenities, [but eventually admitted], 'That part's not true,'" and she later added, "nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him" (6).

Emmett Till unknowingly sacrificed his life for the betterment of his people because without this terrible and painful mark in our history, who knows how much longer black people would have been subjected to social injustice in their communities. Who knows how long it would have taken for the masses to rise up, come together and demand a better world for themselves, their children and their future? Harold and DeLuca write that, "The imagery of the Till Case . . . became a crucial visual *vocabulary* that articulated the ineffable qualities of American racism in ways words simply could not do." No amount of description could do justice to what the eye can gather for itself from looking at powerful photos like these. You have to see it to believe it, and without these photos, many may not have believed it ever happened at all. These images stain out nation's history, but they are a reminder of what we fight for and how far we've actually come.

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