

The Effects of Media Exposure:

Emmett Till's death in 1955 as the catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

This author's work looks to examine the aftereffects of the murder, trial and the publication of the Emmett Till's photograph in 1955 through the newspapers of the time period and how Emmett Till shaped the future of American history through the Civil Rights Movement. The death of 14 year old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, as a news headline, could have just stayed within the locality of his murder and his story would have simply ended without much controversy. Yet, the people who witnessed his mangled face, saw his disfigured visage in *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender* cried out in anguish on how such a gruesome act could have occurred in the United States. Emmett Till and his photograph become the catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement in America and forced African Americans of that time to realize the culture of racism, deference and racial violence in the South would never die out peacefully as many hoped it would. Till's death embodies the vision of the Civil Rights Movement and propels the movement not just in America, but garners worldwide attention to the racial divide occurring in the United States. This all occurring to the disbelief of the world who saw the true character of US domestic policy and society because of the exposure of his murder by the newsprint media.

Introduction

Equality, the driving force behind the Civil Rights Movement, was aimed to break down the racial barrier in the United States for African American citizens and create equal opportunities for black men and women in America for the first time in the history of the nation. The Civil Rights Movement was real to many foreign leaders and nations around the world who watched and vocalized their frustrations at the United States who claimed to be the beacon and model for democracy and freedom; only through wide and extensive coverage by the media did the world see exactly how segregated and divided the US actually was. The United States had always had issues stemming from slavery with racial integration before and after the country's inception with the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In this document, inscribed are the words of the founding fathers and a hopeful, newly founded nation who declared, "...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it..." (US 1776). The only fault within these words is that the message they stated was not adhered to and the ideals of freedom and equality for all men in the United States was not upheld for all races. The struggle of the African American people in America has been a long and tumultuous journey to improve their lives, fight the oppressive institution of slavery and battle the prejudices of racism to become free people in the US. Through the ideas and struggles of people directly and indirectly involved in the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans slowly altered the legal framework of American society

and through a combined effort and unwillingness to remain oppressed, guaranteed their freedom in the US and assured the many deaths attributed to racial violence had not died without meaning nor in vain.

African Americans fighting injustice and inequality could not have won without the motivators of the Civil Rights Movement; the first catalyst of which being the murder of Emmett Till in 1955. This was the first pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement because this event reached international press and recognition as a horrific tragedy and a moral shortcoming of the United States government and the culture of its citizens. The media of newsprint and journals during the time period was able to reach abroad internationally, allowing previously unreachable audiences across the world to see what the true face of American society and culture was, not just what the US government said they stood for.

Specifically for Emmett Till, an unprecedentedly large audience saw the photograph of a mutilated beyond recognizable 14 year old boy from Chicago, who died at the hands of two white racial “moderates” in Money, Mississippi. The effects of the media coverage upon Till’s murder cannot be ignored as without his picture spreading across the nation and thereafter the world, his scarred and battered visage in *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender* would not have allowed the otherwise uninformed public to learn about the true character of race hatred in the US. The death of Emmett Till in August of 1955 awoke the concerned population within the US and was the first push to lead the Civil Rights Movement to fight back against white supremacy, racial inequality and a social culture of assumed black inferiority, deference and subservience to unjust white authority. The goal was to guarantee social and legal equality in

America for the first time, both before and after its creation as a sovereign nation, for its African American citizens.

Background

The Emmett Till murder case in 1955 was a rallying cry among people in the black community as a call for justice and a need for the reinforcement of the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision that outlawed “separate but equal” facilities.¹ Segregation was illegal in the United States after the victory of the Brown case in 1954, to the celebration of international onlookers, but socially the practice was still occurring in the area of the South; predominantly in the old slave holding states. It was customary, similar to slave culture, for a black man to not look a white woman in the eyes as they were passing each other on the sidewalk. It was also expected for African Americans to get out of the way as white people were walking down the street, or there could be trouble. This was the culture that had been cultivated in the Deep South of the US and unknown for many Northerners, the aim of the South was to bring back or keep slavery as alive as possible.

Emmett Till was visiting family in Money, Mississippi in 1955 and arrived at his uncle Moses Wright’s home on the 21st of August.² A few days of picking cotton for his uncle, Emmett and a few of his relatives head into town on the 24th to purchase some refreshments and bubble gum. Emmett had been boasting to the other teenagers who were with him about having a white girlfriend back in Chicago. The other kids noticed a woman tending to the

¹ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 US 483 (1954).

² “The Murder of Emmett Till: Timeline,” PBS, accessed March 23, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/timeline/timeline2.html>.

grocery store and dared Emmett to go inside and talk to her. Till proceeded to enter the establishment and exchanged words with the woman, Carolyn Bryant, in an inappropriate manner as well as unthinkable for any southern black male of the time to approach an older white lady.³ Upon his exit it is believed he said some version or similarity of the phrase, “bye baby” to Mrs. Bryant as he left the grocery store her husband owned.⁴ Even though Emmett was warned by his mother before he left for Mississippi,⁵ being from Chicago, Emmett did not realize the consequences and ramifications of what he had done. His relatives quickly realized the gravity of the situation when they noticed Mrs. Bryant was searching for a gun and they dragged him into their car and sped away, while he apparently blew a “wolf whistle” at Mrs. Bryant.⁶

There is some discrepancy on if Till actually whistled at her to flirt with her as he left or if it did happen and was misinterpreted by Mrs. Bryant. Till’s relatives state that Emmett had a stutter since he was little and occasionally he would whistle if he started stammering to regulate his speech and speak clearly. It is clear Emmett did not fully understand the status quo in Mississippi and his obliviousness of “traditional” white and black social interactions led to his kidnapping by Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam.

At first Emmett’s cousin, Curtis Jones, did not know what they should do as they drove back to Wright’s home but it appeared for a while that nothing might come up about the

³ David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Louisiana: University Press, 1990), 88.

⁴ Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 17.

⁵ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 2.

⁶ Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*, 17.

incident with Emmett and Carolyn Bryant and he would be safe. "That was Wednesday. So that Thursday passed, nothing happened. Friday passed, nothing happened. Saturday, nothing happened. So we forgot about it."⁷ Sunday on August 28th, Bryant and Milam appear at Wright's door with their .45 Colt pistols at approximately 3 A.M. looking to beat and frighten Emmett by threatening to toss him off a bluff into the river⁸; Bryant and Milam were arrested the next on suspicion of kidnapping. Three days later Emmett's lifeless and battered body is pulled from the Tallahatchie River with a cotton ginning fan tied around his neck with barbed wire and a .45 caliber bullet hole through the side of his head.⁹

Emmett's body is sent in a casket back to Chicago on the 2nd at the insistence of his mother so she could witness the body of her son. The funeral was held the next day and Till's mother elects to have his casket open to let everyone see what had happened to her son. Bryant and Milam were indicted on the 6th of September on charges of kidnapping and murder and were set to begin trial later that month on the 19th. The jury when the trial began, consisted of twelve white southern men while all women and African Americans were prohibited from serving on the jury.¹⁰ Naturally the twelve white men acquitted Bryant and Milam of the charges of murder and in a separate trial in November, they are acquitted of kidnapping charges as well. Once Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were acquitted, the public roared

⁷ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 4.

⁸ Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta*, 20.

⁹ "The Murder of Emmett Till: Timeline," PBS, accessed March 23, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/timeline/timeline2.html>.

¹⁰ Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2006), 43.

back in anger against the decision¹¹ and the United States government for not stepping in and properly investigating the matter themselves. The two acquittals for the murder and kidnapping charges infuriated the black community as well as white sympathizers in the South and appalled whites in the North. “With his death, a powerful, lasting symbol was born,”¹² the black community (especially in Chicago) joined together in a manner not previously seen and Civil Rights Movement had its catalyst for gathering momentum and bringing together all African Americans in the North and South to fight for equal rights for the next decade.

Deference

An emphasis and explicit understanding of the culture of the South needing to be discussed, is the idea of deference in the South and how this idea was the underlying cause for the death of Emmett Till. Deference in the South was the submission of the Negro man and woman being viewed and treated as inferior to white authority and the quiet acceptance of many in the black community to this authority, unless they want to be punished for violating social norms that harken back to the time of slavery in the US. White southerners who were against the abolishment of slavery did everything in their power to keep the black population in the South under their watch and control and maintain the white superiority over them.

Not every white southerner upheld or agreed with the racist attitudes of the time, even Milam and Bryant were considered “moderates” by any standards before the Till murder.

Bryant’s store in Money catered to a heavy black population where they were free to purchase

¹¹ Dan Sewell, “The Murder That Breathed Life into the Civil Rights Movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1995, accessed May 8, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-08-27/news/mn-39312_1_civil-rights-movement.

¹² *Ibid.*

goods and stay around the store without fear of any sort of consequences. Entry through the front and the rear of the store while also being able to socialize just outside the establishment was rather uncommon in the South. While the business was operated in this way, Bryant and Milam still believed and held onto the old slave owning ideology of black subservience and inferiority to white authority.¹³ This underlying belief is what turns them to kidnap and murder Emmett Till because Emmett had unknowingly insulted the “honor” of Bryant by flirting with his wife. Bryant by this “code” had to discipline the boy and at least give him a good beating or else he was liable to being branded a coward in the eyes of his fellow whites.¹⁴

Author C. Vann Woodward in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, explains this culture and belief clearly with the passage, “The public symbols and constant reminders of his inferior position were the segregation statues, or ‘Jim Crow’ laws...That code lent the sanction of law to a racial ostracism that extended to churches and schools, to housing and jobs, to eating and drinking.”¹⁵ The culture of the South and their desire to reinstall slavery in the states and force subordination upon the black population, keeps segregation alive against the rulings of the courts and through the law because the law enforcement of Mississippi is run by racial bigots¹⁶ and they control the black population of the state through force and coercive tactics.

Primary Source Compilations

¹³ Hugh Stephen Whitaker, “A Case Study in Southern Justice: The Murder and Trial of Emmett Till,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 194, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.proxy.uwec.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=f8ffea06-a360-4d94-886f-f4871d4508a3%40sessionmgr115&vid=2&hid=117>

¹⁴ Whitaker, “The Murder and Trial of Emmett Till,” 192.

¹⁵ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 7.

¹⁶ Woodward, *The Strangle Career of Jim Crow*, 174.

Oral testimonies and personal narratives about the events that transpired before and after the capture of Emmett Till provide valuable information about the attitudes and thoughts of the individuals that were a part of his story. Primary source books *Voices of Freedom* and *Death of Innocence* collect the oral histories of Emmett's family and people involved with the case and use their words and thoughts to add more depth and meaning to the events surrounding his murder and the acquittal of his killers.

Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950's through the 1980's by authors Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer tell the history and significance of every major event that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. They give good description and background for all of the events and strengthen what they write down with the oral histories of people involved to paint a more complete picture and add a personal aspect to each event in the Civil Rights Movement. Significantly, the first of these events (chronologically) being the Emmett Till murder in 1955, right before the infamous story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. Hampton and Fayer describe the events leading to Emmett's death through the oral testimonies given to them by Emmett's relatives like Curtis Jones, the cousin who was sleeping beside Emmett when he was kidnapped from his Uncle Moses Wright's home by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam.¹⁷ The personal testimonies add a new dimension to the entire story of the death of Emmett Till and the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement overall. One cannot begin to understand the impact of these events without hearing or reading the personal feelings and emotions of someone who lived through this uneasy time in American history.

¹⁷ Hampton and Fayer. *Voices of Freedom*, 4.

The most recent primary source book being considered for this author's research is a book written by author Christopher Benson and co-authored with Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett Till's mother. This work examines the entirety of Emmett's murder in 1955, including an extensive look into the personal background and life of Mamie before and after her son's death. The book chronicles all of her thoughts and emotions during this tragic time in her life and how Emmett Till's death made her a stronger woman and a prominent figure for the Civil Rights Movement. The foreword by Reverend Jesse L. Jackson compares Emmett's death to the death of Jesus Christ and as important as the Big Bang Theory, which led to the creation of the universe. The loss of Emmett Till and the strength of his mother, "turns a crucifixion into a resurrection,"¹⁸ signaling the buildup of support for the Civil Rights Movement and how Emmett Till and Mamie Till influenced and strengthened it. Mamie Till finally voicing her whole story unabridged after all those years, after-the-fact allowed the reader to see the thoughts of arguably the most important person's role after Emmett's death. This work adds the deepest oral testimony to a fairly well-known event in American History and personalizes it so the reader understands not simply that Emmett's photograph is released to the press but why she releases it for the world to see and allow the world to see his face as she saw it for the first time in his coffin.

Historiography: Secondary Source Research

For this research, this author is not alone in understanding the importance of Emmett Till's sacrifice and identifying his death as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement and the

¹⁸ Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), xiii.

gathering of the black community to work together against racism. The first secondary source work by chronological date being utilized is C. Vann Woodward's, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Woodward discusses in his book the culture of repression and black inferiority in the South during the 1950's and '60's. This is a short but well written piece on how the Jim Crow laws of the South were upheld by some whites in the South and its affects and goals of returning the US as close to slavery as possible for the black population.

Stephen J. Whitfield's secondary work titled, *A Death in the Delta*, which focuses on a large variety of secondary literature on various aspects of the Civil Rights Movement with a small amount of primary source newspaper articles to discuss the details around Emmett's death. Whitfield gives a detailed and thorough retelling of the death and trial in 1955 and broadens Emmett's death into discussing the effects and implications on the politics of the US and the Civil Rights Movement, ultimately strengthening the movement and giving it a starting point to move forward from. While Whitfield does not focus on the articles and headlines of the time period, his work is still a benchmark in the scholarship on Emmett Till and his work is primarily used to understand the culture of the South in the 1950's and why there is strong resistance of whites against blacks in regards to racial equality.

In *Black, White and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present*, author David R. Goldfield looks at the heated and often violent race relations during the 1950's and continuing through 1976 up until today. Goldfield looks to shed light on the advances leaders and people within the Civil Rights Movement gained during their time in the 1950's and 60's and how these events helped continue African Americans to fight for economic and political equality in the US. Goldfield follows a similar discourse as Woodward and Whitfield,

but continues his research into the modern day and with an added focus on the economic disparity among the black community as compared to their white counterparts.

Looking at Hugh Steven Whitaker's case study "The Murder and Trial of Emmett Till," of the mishandling of the Till case details the security of men like Bryant and Milam had within the law in Mississippi even though it was evident they were guilty. Citing authors like Whitfield, Whitaker looks at the injustice surrounding the murder of Emmett Till through the culture of the South, as similar scholars note as well, but also looking at the situation involving the court proceedings and how Mississippi law is able to acquit two men of kidnapping and murder. Whitaker discusses the removal of potential key eye witnesses to tamper with the case as part of the injustice against Till, the influence of the jurors through the White Citizens Council and how many in the white population did in fact rally around Bryant and Milam despite the evidence against them and the photographs of Emmett Till after he was beaten and later recovered from the river.

Author Clenora Hudson-Weems in *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* stands firm on the idea of Emmett Till's death as the first major catalyst of the launching of the Civil Rights Movement and fueling the need for the black community to come together to no longer remain complacent. Starting as a 1988 doctoral dissertation, Hudson-Weems is one of the early authors to signify the importance of Emmett Till's death upon the Civil Rights Movement and setting the stage for the Montgomery Bus Boycott just a few months after his death. The early evidence of Emmett Till as the catalyst and first motivation for a concentrated Civil Rights Movement makes Hudson-Weem's research incredibly important in terms of framing the death of Emmett within the Civil Rights Movement and making his

sacrifice an important part of the narrative and story of the struggle of African Americans in trying to secure their equality in the US.

The secondary literature being considered for this research reinforces this author's thesis of Emmett Till truly being the catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement and how the culture of deference and black inferiority in the South needed to, and was ready to be challenged. The black community and sympathetic whites simply needed a spark to ignite their passions and understand the culture that had permeated throughout the South was not willing to simply just die down peacefully. Emmett's murder was the final push for the African American community to stand together and hold strong against white supremacy and racism in the US.

Media Coverage

The bulk of the research being examined for this author's work is the newspaper articles and headlines when Emmett Till's body was recovered from the river in Money, Mississippi. When examining the newspapers and articles of the time period, they showcase a unified anti-racist stance by black authors. Understandably these articles are trying to raise awareness in the United States and get the black community unified against racial discrimination and

violence while simultaneously convincing the moderate white citizens to join the cause for civil rights. The newspapers offer excellent viewpoints on the state of US domestic racial relations and showing the desire for change on the part of affected African Americans in the US.

Over in Europe, the magnitude of Emmett Till's death was not lost upon the various witnesses to his story and infamous picture as they too wrote and detailed their critiques of the American government and its appalling mishandling of domestic race relations. British author and lecturer in Education from the University of London King's College E.J. King, took to writing his article in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* in November of 1956 to attempt to explain to his fellow citizens just how the United States could say they stand for equality but ultimately fail short of this assumption.

In his short article he addresses early on the practice of segregation in the US and how some states were legally racially integrated, and how other states and even more local governmental institutions could and effectively ignored the laws set before them, thereby maintaining segregation and a culture of white supremacy over the African American population. He addresses briefly the Emmett Till case in the argument that legal action tended to be ineffective as well as above the normal expenses and delays that would otherwise transpire in a court proceeding. There was also the practice of Southern courts refusing to indict suspects even if there is substantial evidence against them, in which the evidence quite often found unorthodox avenues of being thrown out of court to protect the white suspects. He continues the article by stating, "...to leave the cities and high country and to come into Negro

country is like moving back through three or more centuries of political thought”.¹⁹ King accurately and correctly describes the social and political culture of the United States during the 1950’s and condemns the actions the US has taken in race relations and its lack of equality. King is one of many voices internationally that is appalled by the violence and hate culture toward African Americans in the US and challenges the government to change its domestic policy for the benefit and equality of African Americans.

The death of Emmett Till and the aftermath of the severity of his wounds spread quickly amongst the nation and to a large international audience. Emmett’s body was pulled out of the Tallahatchie River on August 31st and by September 1st, the very next day, over half a dozen newspapers from across the country had the story out to the public. These stories were in publications ranging from a paper in Indiana (Logansport²⁰), four separate papers in Texas (Brownsville²¹, Waco²², Galveston²³ and El Paso²⁴), two papers in Wisconsin (Racine²⁵ and Sheboygan²⁶), one in California (Oxnard²⁷) and another in Massachusetts (Lowell²⁸).

¹⁹ E.J. King, “Segregation and American Society,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 5, no. 1 (November 1956): 5, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uwec.edu/stable/3118672?seq=3>.

²⁰ “Body of Slain Boy is found,” *Logansport Pharos Tribune*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/logansport-pharos-tribune-logansport-indiana/1955-09-01/page-16>.

²¹ “Quotes from the News of the Day,” *Brownsville Herald*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/brownsville-herald/1955-09-01/page-10>.

²² “Negro Boy Accused of Acting ‘Fresh’ In Mississippi found Dead in River,” *Waco News Tribune*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 1955, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/waco-news-tribune/1955-09-01/page-1>.

²³ “Body of Kidnaped Youth found in River,” *Galveston Daily News*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/galveston-daily-news/1955-09-01/page-14>.

²⁴ “Plan Murder Charge in Death of Negro Youth,” *El Paso Herald Post*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/el-paso-herald-post/1955-09-01/page-19>.

The articles themselves within the newspapers clearly have the same story from the *Associated Press*' field reporter and are circulating a similar story about Emmett behaving inappropriately to a white woman, followed by him being captured by two assailants and finally his body being found three days later in the Tallahatchie River. The articles do differ on their placement of the Till story within the paper itself and shows in some cases how easy or difficult his story is to see by a quick glance or a glossing over through the other stories of the day. The article in the *Waco News Tribune* in Texas has the article in a large, bold font at the bottom of the front page of the paper; whereas the story in the *Brownsville Herald* is ten pages in and under a non-descript heading and would be easily over looked. Similarly, the story in the *Sheboygan Press* has Till's story near the end of the print on the 42nd page out of 45 total pages in the paper.

It would be nothing more than mere speculation to try and assume the number of people that could have read the story of Emmett Till on those first few days because of the wide variety of the location of the stories. Aside from a few of the papers that have been examined for this research, Till's story did not seemingly generate front page priority or garner front page worthy attention from many of the newspaper publications. Although it is significant to note the speed with which the story itself is presented in all of these mentioned publications,

²⁵ "Lay Plans for Prosecution in Murder of Negro Boy, 15," *Racine Journal Times*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/racine-journal-times/1955-09-01/page-25>.

²⁶ "Plan All-Out Prosecution of Negro Boy's Murderers," *Sheboygan Press*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/sheboygan-press/1955-09-01/page-42>.

²⁷ "Negro Youth, 15, Murdered on 'Wolf Whistle' Charge," *Oxnard Press Courier*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/oxnard-press-courier/1955-09-01/page-2>.

²⁸ "Plan All-Out Probe in Murder of Chicago Boy in Mississippi," *Lowell Sun*, September 1, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com.proxy.uwec.edu/lowell-sun/1955-09-01/page-29>.

and the fact of the story of the recovery of his body has the opportunity to be immediately known the next day across the country from California to Massachusetts is a testament to the availability of the media to release the story to the public in a timely manner.

When Emmett's casket had reached Chicago and his mother on September 2nd, she went against recommendations for a closed casket funeral and demanded the casket be opened for viewing to everyone because, "After the body arrived...I decided that I wanted the whole world to see what I had seen. There was no way I could describe what was in that box. No way. And I just wanted the world to see."²⁹ By extending the viewing over the weekend of the 3rd-6th, thousands of Chicagoans were able to see the battered face of Emmett Till in person each day.

The word had gotten out to the public and many citizens were shocked and upset that the racial issue in the US had reached the point of the death of a 14 year old boy. Myrlie Evers, the wife of the late civil rights activist Medgar Evers, accurately summed up the fears of many African Americans after Till's death because, "...it said even a child was not safe from racism and bigotry and death."³⁰ This idea crystallized in the minds of African Americans after the story broke of his death and people in Chicago saw his mutilated face for themselves. Emmett Till's death shows the level of hatred and willingness to commit to violence between some Southern whites and the African American population. Emmett Till becomes the spark and the catalyst for African Americans because they realize that not a single black person, regardless of gender

²⁹ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 6.

³⁰ Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 6.

nor age is safe from racial violence of white supremacy and Southern racism unless they try to fight it.

The funeral gathered an unprecedentedly large audience of thousands of eager and curious onlookers who wanted to witness what happened to Emmett. There are a few sources with estimates of anywhere upwards to 70,000 individuals³¹ who saw the mutilated face of Emmett Till on September 3rd. Just a week after the burial of Till, Roy Wilkins, a top officer in the NAACP is quoted in a newspaper article saying, "It would appear from this lynching that State of Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children."³² It is clear from this article and countless others that white supremacy will stop at nothing to maintain its hold on American culture and will not allow the Civil Rights Movement to alter the status quo of southern society and "traditions" of white superiority.

Even with the tragic death of Emmett Till a few voices in the black community like Dr. J.H. Jackson, president of the National Negro Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc., believed it was of the utmost importance to keep a level head and maintain good will toward whites because blacks should not come, "to believe that the day for good will among the races has passed."³³ He goes on to comment that the Mississippi police officers should be commended for their

³¹ "Bury Youth Who Dared to Whistle at Miss. Woman," *Crusader*, September 9, 1955, accessed December 1, 2013. America's Historical Newspapers.

³² Arkansas State Press. 1995. "NAACP Head Says Lynching of Schoolboy Laid to White Supremacy Drive in Miss "Murdering Children." September 9. Accessed December 1, 2013. America's Historical Newspapers.

³³ "Keep Good Will, Negro Group Told," *Kansas Whip*, September 16, 1955, accessed November 30, 2013, America's Historical Newspapers.

handling of the case, a sentiment lost on many people's minds who eventually saw Till's casket photograph or even more if they saw Till's body in person in Chicago.

The exposure of Emmett Till's murder reached new heights on the 15th and 17th of September when the popular magazine *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender* newspaper, respectively, released the now famous photograph of Emmett Till in his casket.



Figure 1: Photograph, Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1955, *Jet Magazine* accessed, March 24, 2014.

The publications circulated greatly in the US and Till's unrecognizable face shocked and horrified readers on how such a tragedy could happen on US soil.

On September 23rd, after the acquittal of Bryant and Milam, a thousand Parisians gathered in Paris, France as a part of the International League against Racism to condemn and protest the actions of the US and the Mississippi courts. The meeting presented to the United Embassy in Paris an approved protest motion that stated the verdict, "consecrates the legality

of lynching in the US and insults the conscience of the civilized world.”³⁴ At the same time of the Paris protest Congressman Adam Clayton Powell aboard the S.S. *United States* stated, “That the lynching of Emmett Louis Till in Mississippi had disgraced the U.S. all over Europe and North Africa.”³⁵ The way Emmett Till died disgusted audiences in the US and around the world, exposing the hypocritical nature of the US at this time and foreign countries began losing faith and good will towards the US government and its presence abroad.

Protest Till Acquittal



OVERFLOW CROWD fills street outside Metropolitan Community Church during mass meeting memorializing slain Emmett Till, 14. Meeting protested “not guilty” verdict in murder trial of two half-brothers.

Figure 2: Photograph, Kansas City, 1955, *Kansas Whip*, accessed March 24, 2014.

³⁴ “1,000 Attend Paris Protest of Mississippi Verdict,” *Plain Dealer*, September 23, 1955, accessed November 24, 2013, America’s Historical Newspapers.

³⁵ “Powell Says Till Verdict Stirs All Europe,” *Plain Dealer*, September 23, 1955, accessed March 24, 2014, America’s Historical Newspapers.

Emmett Till's death angered many African American citizens and sympathetic whites in 1955 because of the assertion of typical Southern white values and the immunity any class of white male had against black men and women. The south has always prided itself upon its "high-class" Southern manners and ideas of chivalry when in reality they were far from gentlemen. An editorial in the *Crusader* on September 30th, 1955 describes how the generation of mulattoes and miscegenation of the white and black race terrified Southern whites even though they were the ones taking part and perpetuating their own fears. A southern plantation owner back during slavery and a southern male in the 1900's could still sexually advance himself and take advantage of a slave woman or black women without fear of consequence or punishment, he had full immunity to retaliation by another African American. On the other side, a black male could not even look at a white woman directly in the eyes without fear of retaliation by his master or another white male because the black race was inferior and sub-human compared to white males. The author of the editorial sympathizes with afflicted and struggling African Americans in the US, and calls for everyone to make a contribution like Emmett Till indirectly did to do away with the "old codes" and traditions of the South of white supremacy.³⁶ Another article printed on the 30th criticized the effectiveness of the Mississippi police authorities stating, "Because the murdered boy was a Negro, police work was indifferent and inadequate almost to the point of being nonexistent."³⁷ The author of the article heavily condemn the justice system and law enforcement in Mississippi, similar to author Hugh Stephen Whitaker, but does believe there is slight hope for them to repair their negative image

³⁶ "Emmett Till's Contribution," *Crusader*, September 30, 1955, accessed March 21, 2014, America's Historical Newspapers.

³⁷ "Mockery of Justice in Mississippi," *Kansas Whip*, September 30, 1955, accessed March 21, 2014, American's Historical Newspapers.

if the courts indict and jail Bryant and Milam for kidnapping Emmett. The author believes while this would only have a small effect it would still be a step in the right direction for the Mississippi justice system. Unfortunately, the grand jury court in Mississippi on October 7th, 1955 refused to try both men and in another groundbreaking decision, ruled to acquit both men of kidnapping on top of the murder acquittal of the previous month to the dismay of African Americans and sympathetic white supporters.

Look Magazine Confession

On January 24th, 1956, barely three months after the growing tensions amongst African Americans from the acquittals of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam of both charges of kidnapping and murder, *Look* magazine published a story following up with Bryant and Milam about the Till murder, after they had been paid four thousand dollars. To people's amazement and confirmation of the true knowledge of the outcome of Emmett Till's murder trial, both men admitted³⁸ they indeed had kidnapped, beaten, tortured, shot, killed and thrown Emmett Till's lifeless body that night into the Tallahatchie River with a seventy pound cotton gin fan barb wired to his throat. Public outcry demanded for justice to be upheld in Till's death but there was nothing any law enforcement or judge could do to the two men. They were protected by the double jeopardy law in the US that did not allow someone to be tried for the same crime twice, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam would thereafter be free of any judicial punishment they should have been given.

After the Confession

³⁸ "The shocking story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look*, January 24, 1956, accessed March 17, 2014. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_look_confession.html.

After the two men, Bryant and Milam, had gone on record in *Look* magazine detailing their murder of Emmett Till and the disposal of his body, they were boycotted by the large black population of Money, Mississippi. Bryant eventually lost his store as the bulk of his customers, who were black, did not frequent his grocery store after the confession. Both men were out of work and were even ostracized by some of the white community in and around Money, Mississippi for their vicious actions and the general cruelty of their crime.³⁹ While the two men did escape indictments on kidnapping and murder to avoid a prison sentence, they did not escape the judgment and condemnation of their peers because of the truly violent circumstances of the murder of a young black boy, Emmett Till.

Conclusion

The initial stories and articles on the murder of Emmett Till called for the African American community to stand together amidst racial inequality and race violence. The story and photograph of the mutilated face of Emmett in his casket had captivated the country and set in motion the strengthening of the will and courage of the African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement to begin to push back against the centuries of racial inequality and enforced deference on the black population. The resolve of the Civil Rights Movement grew even greater once the public had proof of the murder when the killers' confession was published in *Look* magazine and African Americans knew they could not let another tragic incident like this happen again. Emmett Till served as the catalyst for a movement that would encapsulate the world and have all eyes upon the US in hope that African Americans would be given the

³⁹ "The Murder of Emmett Till: Timeline," PBS, accessed March 23, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/timeline/timeline2.html>.

equality and freedom they fought and died for. Emmett Till and others like him throughout the history of the US should be remembered and celebrated for their sacrifices that ensured the validity of the words of the Declaration of Independence that indeed all men are created equal. Emmett Till's death and his mother's insistence to publish his photograph becomes the rallying cause for the Civil Rights Movement to end racial violence and end the enforcement of oppression, subservience and deference against the black population of the US. The future of this country would have unfolded very differently had Emmett Till lived through that fateful night. Emmett Till embodies the face of racial violence against African Americans in this country and through his death, unleashed a chain of events through the Civil Rights Movement to motivate a people and a movement to no longer sit idly by, nor sit and just hope things would get better. Emmett Till's sacrifice and the ability for the news media to share and expose this tragedy, made the African American people fight for the justice and equality they knew they deserved but was unfairly and unjustly kept from them simply on the basis of their skin.

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