

Emmett Till (below) was lynched in Mississippi for allegedly offending Carolyn Bryant (inset); his open casket (right) helped spark the civil rights movement.



Emmett Till Revisited

Fresh evidence in the 1955 murder is just one reason for the renewed focus on Jim Crow-era lynchings

BY VERONICA MAJEROL

ANALYZE
THE
ARTICLE

PRINT
THE
ARTICLE

His lynching is one of the most infamous crimes in America's history.

In the summer of 1955, a 14-year-old black boy named Emmett Till was abducted at gunpoint by white men in Money, Mississippi. They beat the young boy. Then they shot him in the head and threw him into the Tallahatchie River. Emmett, who lived in Chicago, was in Mississippi visiting relatives. He was killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman in a store. At the murder trial, witnesses clearly identified the perpetrators. But an all-white jury in a deeply segregated South acquitted them.

The perpetrators walked free.

Many experts say the brutal killing, as well as the gruesome photos that circulated of Till's mutilated body at his funeral in Chicago, helped galvanize the civil rights movement.

Now, more than 70 years later, Emmett Till's story has taken yet another disturbing twist.

Carolyn Bryant Donham, the now 82-year-old woman who had accused Till of offending her in the store, has admitted that a crucial part of her courtroom testimony was a lie. She says she had falsely testified that Emmett "grabbed her around the waist and uttered obscenities."

"You tell these stories for so long that they seem true," she said in an interview with Timothy B. Tyson. Tyson recounts Bryant's confession in his new book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*. "But that part is not true. . . . Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him."

4,000 Lynchings

New evidence in the death of Emmett Till has his family seeking answers (see "A Guide to the Emmett Till Case," p. 19). And it's just one reason why lynching is getting renewed attention. (Lynching can be defined as killing someone in retaliation for an alleged offense, carried

*Carolyn Bryant was her name at the time of Emmett's murder, but she later remarried.

BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES (EMMETT TILL); CHICAGO SUNTIMES VIA AP IMAGES (OPEN CASNET); ED CLARK/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES (CAROLYN BRYANT)

A crowd gathers
to watch a lynching
in Paris, Texas, 1897.



out without legal authority by one or more people.)

In January, a police chief in LaGrange, Georgia, issued a public apology for a 1940 lynching of a black teenager. The boy was accused of trying to assault a white woman.

And researchers at the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama, recently published the most detailed study to date on lynching in the South. It was the

‘Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him.’

black men, women, and children were lynched in the 12 Southern states where lynching was most common (*see chart, p. 18*). Such murders went unpunished in

result of more than five years of research and 160 visits to sites around the region. It documented at least 800 more victims than had previously been reported.

From 1877 to 1950, the study found, more than 4,000

most cases. They were often carried out with the approval and even help of local officials. They continued through the 1960s and ’70s. Blacks, and some whites, were often targeted for demanding equal rights for African-Americans.

That lynchings became common in the South after 1877 is no coincidence. The year marked the end of Reconstruction (1865-77). That’s the period after the Civil War (1861-65) when former slaves briefly gained certain civil rights in America.



Police Chief Louis Dekmar (left) asked local N.A.A.C.P. president Ernest Ward (right) to help him set up a public apology for the 1940 lynching of a black teen in LaGrange, Georgia; a 1940 *New York Times* article about the lynching (above).

FOTORESEARCH/GETTY IMAGES (LYNCHING); DUSTIN CHAMBERS/THE NEW YORK TIMES (LOUIS DEKMAR & ERNEST WARD); THE NEW YORK TIMES (ARTICLE)

The 14th Amendment (1868) gave blacks and former slaves citizenship and equal protection under the law. The 15th Amendment (1870) gave them voting rights. For the first time, African-Americans cast ballots. They also sat on juries. And they were even elected to Congress. Federal troops were sent to the South to enforce the laws. But once the last of the troops withdrew in 1877, Reconstruction collapsed.

“It sent a signal that the North in general and the federal government in particular were tired of dealing with what was called the Negro problem,” says David Pilgrim, a sociologist and the founder and curator of the Jim Crow Museum in Big Rapids, Michigan.

Second-Class Citizens

Southern resentment toward the North also intensified after the bitterly fought Civil War, Pilgrim explains. For example, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) began organizing campaigns of racial terror in the late 1860s.

“And now you’re being told the black man is your equal,” he says. “Well, your fear is that he’s not going to be your equal, he’s actually going to dominate you.”

It was that mind-set, according to Pilgrim, that led state and local governments in the South to pass a series of “Jim Crow” laws. Such laws systematically discriminated against blacks politically, economically, and socially. (The name Jim Crow came from a popular 19th-century minstrel character and was used in the South as a derogatory term for blacks.) The U.S. Supreme Court’s 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*—a case involving segregated rail cars in Louisiana—upheld Jim Crow by saying that “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional. Jim Crow laws and social customs that governed black-white relations in the South turned African-



A segregated theater in Leland, Mississippi 1937 (above, left); an anti-integration sign in Florida, 1959 (right); segregated water fountains in North Carolina, 1950 (below).



States Where the Most Lynchings Occurred, 1877-1950

1. Mississippi	614
2. Georgia	595
3. Louisiana	559
4. Arkansas	491
5. Alabama	363
6. Texas	344
7. Florida	307
8. Tennessee	238
9. South Carolina	184
10. Kentucky	170
11. North Carolina	122
12. Virginia	88

SOURCE: EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE, 2015 REPORT

Americans into second-class citizens.

One of the most widespread and irrational fears during the Jim Crow era, according to EJI, was that black men were preying on white women. Nearly 25 percent of the lynching victims EJI documented were black men accused of sexual misconduct against white women. Other blacks were killed for breaking social conventions. For example, they had failed to say “mister” when addressing a white police officer. Or they had demanded basic rights, like getting paid for the work they did.

“The Jim Crow system could not have existed without violence,” says Pilgrim.

Lynchings were often publicized in newspapers. They were carried out in black neighborhoods to terrorize residents. And they frequently attracted large white crowds, including public officials. People sometimes picnicked as they watched. Blacks were sometimes forced to watch too.

Few whites were ever brought to justice: Of all the lynching cases after 1900, only 1 percent resulted in a criminal conviction,

GRANGER, NYC/THE GRANGER COLLECTION (THEATER, SIGN); ELLIOTT ERWITT/MAGNUM PHOTOS (WATER FOUNTAINS)

according to EJI. Its study concluded that the communities where lynchings happened have done little to deal with their violent pasts. The trauma remains for black members of their communities.

“There is an astonishing absence of any effort to acknowledge, discuss, or address lynching,” the report states. “There are very few monuments or memorials that address the history and legacy.”

“I’m Profoundly Sorry”

But the town of LaGrange, Georgia, population 31,000, recently became an exception. In January, Police Chief Louis Dekmar, who is white, issued an apology for the 1940 lynching of Austin Callaway.

Callaway is believed to have been 16 or 18 years old when he was killed.

Many of LaGrange’s residents had never heard of Callaway’s lynching. That’s because local newspapers at the time **attributed** his death to “the result of bullets fired by an unknown person or group of individuals.” But in 2014, Jason M. McGraw, a student at Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, was doing a research paper about the teenager’s death. He uncovered the real story.

On Sept. 7, 1940, Callaway was arrested. He was charged with trying to

‘There are very few monuments or memorials that address the history’ of lynching.

assault a white woman. That same day, a band of white men dragged him from his jail cell. They drove him 8 miles away. They shot him in the head and arms. And they left him for dead. Callaway was later found on the side of a road. He was taken to a

hospital, where he died.

After Chief Dekmar learned more about the case, he approached the president of a local N.A.A.C.P. chapter. He asked him to help him set up a public apology for the lynching.

“I sincerely regret and denounce the role our police department played in Austin’s lynching, both through action and inaction,” he told a crowd at a traditionally black church. “And for that I’m profoundly sorry. It should never have happened.”

Chief Dekmar said that, in the age of Black Lives Matter, he hoped his apology could also improve relations between minorities and the police. Some white residents, however, were skeptical. They thought that the apology would have no practical effect.

“I don’t care if they apologize or don’t,” said Jessie East, 74, who works at a local furniture and appliance shop. “It’s not going to change a thing that happened 77 years ago.”

But Deborah Tatum, a relative of Callaway’s, thought the apology was a step toward healing. “I believe God when he tells us that there is power and freedom in forgiveness,” she said.

Hank Klibanoff has spent years delving into civil rights-era crimes. Now he heads the Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University in Atlanta. He thinks the apology is enormously important, even after so much time has passed.

“I think he’s just saying what we did was wrong, what we as a people did,” says Klibanoff. “We weren’t here, we didn’t do that, but it was wrong. And I think it gives people cover to [apologize] more. And I hope it will.” •

Additional reporting by Alan Blinder and Richard Fausset of The New York Times.

A Guide to the Emmett Till Case

The most notorious lynching of the 20th century has gone unpunished for 62 years. Here’s how it unfolded.

Aug. 24, 1955: Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago visiting his relatives in Money, Mississippi, goes into Bryant’s Grocery & Meat Market to buy some bubble gum. A white woman, Carolyn Bryant, who owns the store with her husband, Roy, will later testify that Emmett grabbed her waist and uttered obscenities. Teenagers will testify that they heard Emmett whistle at the woman.

Aug. 28: Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam abduct Emmett from his uncle’s home, then brutally beat him, shoot him, and fasten a large metal fan to his neck before tossing him into the Tallahatchie River.

Aug. 31: Emmett’s body is pulled from the river. It’s so mutilated that the ring he’s wearing, bearing the initials of his father, Louis Till, is used to identify him.

Sept. 3: Emmett’s mother holds an open-casket funeral in Chicago, insisting “the whole nation had to bear witness to this.” Thousands line up to see Emmett’s disfigured body; a photo of it published by *Jet* magazine is widely circulated, galvanizing the civil rights movement, then just beginning to gather steam.

Sept. 23: An all-white jury (blacks were prevented from serving in many parts of the South) acquits Bryant and Milam, despite accounts by black witnesses pointing to them.

January 1956: Bryant and Milam admit to killing Emmett to *Look* magazine, which pays them \$4,000. (Under U.S. law, the men couldn’t be tried twice for the same crime. Both are now dead.)

2004: The Justice Department reopens the case to find out whether anyone still alive might have been involved in Emmett’s death. The case is closed again in 2007 without any new charges.

2017: Timothy Tyson’s new book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, recounts Carolyn Bryant Donham’s confession that she lied about Emmett grabbing her waist and uttering obscenities.

She has also written a memoir, which she has instructed Tyson not to publish until 2038. Emmett’s family is asking authorities to reopen the investigation into his death, according to the Associated Press.

