



Johnny B. Thomas says his father's involvement, if any, in the crime was under duress.

TILL

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been murdered in the South. But Emmett Till was from Chicago. His mutilated body was displayed in an open casket there, as ordered by his mother. She wanted the world to see how racism ravaged her son.

"There were rallies and meetings here in protest," Tyree said of Columbus.

"This was brought home to us: It could happen anywhere," he said. "I was horrified. It was the first real lynching I felt. We read about others, but we felt part of this one."

Interest in the case has been renewed since the Justice Department last year announced it was reopening the investigation. Authorities believe participants in the crime could still be alive.

In June, Emmett's body was exhumed for testing from Burr Oak Cemetery in Alsip, Ill. His mother's body also rests there. She died in January 2003 at age 81.

Legacy of shame

Emmett haunts Money and America. Before three civil-rights workers were killed in Mississippi and four little girls died in an Alabama church bombing, there was Emmett Till, whose death etched the brutality of bigotry into the minds of Americans. A few months later, Rosa Parks recalled the killing when she refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Ala., to a white passenger.

But in Money today, the murder lingers like a shameful family secret the town wants to forget.

Here, where words flow slow and steady like warm honey from the mouths of Delta residents, talk of Emmett Till leaves a sour taste.

"When you bring it back up, it drives people apart," said Jimmy Tindall, 58, Leflore County undersheriff, who is white and was born in the county. "It would be different if they had someone to prosecute. There's nobody. What will you get out of it, just bring back bad memories?"

Even blacks hope the legacy of the lynching will fade because it opens old wounds, said state Sen. David Jordan, who is black.

"Others just don't know," he said. "They don't realize because their parents didn't tell them about it."

The lynching is still fresh for Simeon Wright, 62, Emmett's uncle who shared the bed with him the morning he was kidnapped. When Wright visits the Delta from his Countryside, Ill., home, the smell of cotton floods his senses, bringing frightening memories to surface.

He remembers hearing tires spinning down the gravel road from his home carrying Emmett away.

"They claimed they would bring him back, but they didn't," he said. "Every car that passed was a disappointment. They said they would bring him back, but



The trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam opened on Sept. 19, 1955, in Sumner, Miss. Seating was racially segregated, with black spectators restricted to a rear corner.



The courtroom as it appears today

they never did."

They had come at 2:30 on the morning of Aug. 28, 1955, Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam. They kidnapped Emmett, beat him, shot him and pushed his body, weighted down with a large cotton gin fan, into the Tallahatchie River.

An all-white, all-male jury acquitted the two white men in little more than an hour. Bryant and Milam later sold their story, in which they confessed to the slaying, to the old *Look* magazine.

After the trial, Martha Baker's father drove Moses and Simeon Wright to the train station in nearby Winona so the pair could flee to Chicago.

"Our dad took them away, and we didn't know if they (whites) knew that. We were afraid they would come for us," said Baker, now 82, who lives down the road from Money in Greenwood.

Fear has been an enemy to Money, robbing it of its future, Simeon Wright said.

Persistent decline

"That area really hasn't recovered from 1955," he said. "Now it's like a ghost town."

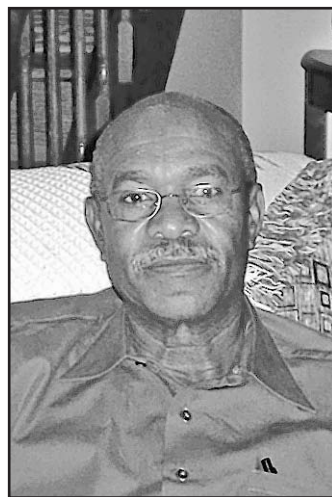
In the years after Emmett Till's murder most of the town's young black men left for Chicago or elsewhere, he said.

Labor shifts from fields to factories also pushed people out of Money, Jordan said. In 1955, about 300 people lived there; now, about 60 do.

The prospect of raising three young black boys in the Delta after Emmett Till's murder terrified Samuel Gresham's parents. So they moved from Greenwood to Chicago in 1957.

"One of the reasons they left is because of Emmett Till," said Gresham, 56, now president of the Columbus Urban League. "It was time to take their boys out of Mississippi."

Those who stayed have witnessed the civil-rights struggle



Simeon Wright, Emmett Till's uncle, was an eyewitness to his abduction.

and progress in Mississippi. Jordan, Greenwood's first black city councilman, pushed legislators to rename part of Rt. 49 the Emmett Till Memorial Highway.

The highway is part of Mississippi's road to redemption, said Wheeler Parker Jr., Emmett's cousin. Parker, 66, attended the highway dedication last month. He lived next door to Emmett in Summit, Ill. The boys traveled to Mississippi together. Parker was in the Wright home when Emmett was kidnapped.

"It was kind of unbelievable," Parker said of Emmett's highway. "It was like 'Is this the Mississippi I used to know?' To see all those black politicians was exhilarating. Down there they seem more empowered and respected. I applaud those who stayed there to make changes."

The fact there is an investigation shows progress in the state, said Jordan.

Jordan recalled watching the trial of Bryant and Milam as a new student at nearby Mississippi Valley State University. He recalled black and white



Wheeler Parker Jr., Emmett's cousin, also was in the house when Emmett was taken.

reporters sitting at separate tables and spectators at the trial wiping sweat from the defendants' faces in the sweltering courtroom.

"It was a mockery of justice," Jordan said. "No one was serious about it. The impression I got was they acted as though Milam and Bryant were the victims."

Most crimes then with black victims and white defendants resulted in quick acquittals — if there was even a trial. In recent years, however, the reopening of civil-rights-era cases has resulted in convictions.

In 1994, Byron de la Beckwith was convicted of the 1963 murder of Medgar Evers outside his Jackson, Miss., home. In June, Edgar Ray Killen was convicted of manslaughter in the 1964 deaths of civil-rights workers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney in Philadelphia, Miss.

The state of Mississippi is also serious about seeking justice for Emmett Till, said Assistant District Attorney Hallie Gail Bridges.

"If someone has committed a murder and we can prosecute

them, they need to be prosecuted," said Bridges, who is white. "If fairness offends some people, then they just have to be offended."

Johnny B. Thomas fears his father could be among those still living who could be implicated. Henry Lee Loggins, now 82, worked for Milam, and if he was involved in Emmett's kidnapping and killing, "it was as a slave, 'cause that's all you were in 1955.'"

Loggins left the Delta in 1955 and moved to Dayton, where he remains. He had a stroke in May and lives with Thomas' sister, whom Thomas would not name.

His father doesn't talk much about the case, Thomas said; he's one to keep his feelings to himself. Loggins has been interviewed by the FBI, Thomas said.

"I fear he has been dead as long as Emmett Till, if as alleged he was there through this horrific ceremony, and could not come forward," said Thomas, 51, now the mayor of Glendora, about 12 miles north of Money. "How do you think he would feel?"

But Thomas, who grew up without his father, believes the case should be reopened to bring closure to the area.

Civil-rights commemoration

Today Glendora will host a festival honoring the area's civil-rights legacy. Thomas is raising funds to develop a civil-rights museum and make the festival an annual event.

But even if someone is prosecuted, interest in the case will remain, said Tim Kalich, editor of the *Greenwood Commonwealth* local newspaper.

"It is a case that for 50 years just won't die," he said. "I'm not sure if that fascination will end if there is a prosecution. It's a scar that you don't know if it will ever heal or to what extent it will heal."

Readers haven't tired of the Emmett Till story in his 23 years at the paper, Kalich said. The newspaper finds fresh angles to feed their interest.

That's a change from how local newspapers covered the murder 50 years ago.

"It was not a shining moment in the way we covered the African-American community," said Kalich, who is white.

Clara Blanchard is also making sure Emmett Till's story remains alive. Blanchard teaches U.S. history to eighth-graders at Greenwood Middle School. There is no reference to Emmett Till in their textbook, which ends in 1877.

So Blanchard keeps her own file of press clippings about the case — including photographs of his body — to show students how "from something so innocent, something tragic can happen."

The discussions are lessons on history, law, science, DNA and humanity.

"I want them to see what stupidity, hatred and stereotyping will do to people," said Blanchard, 54.

Her students want to visit the old Bryant's store.

The Rev. Preston "Butch" Kelly,

56, has seen hundreds of visitors stop at the store. They stand and stare, or rub the brick walls with peeling white paint.

"I understand there is a hunger for people all over the world to see something like this," said Kelly, the white pastor of Riverside Baptist Church, a block down from the old store.

But sometimes, he said, the visits seem more like a judgment of the town than a historical journey.

"Nobody appreciates people just coming in walking around to look at you and they don't talk to us," Kelly said. Most blacks and whites in the town wish more attention was placed on the racial progress of today instead of the hatred of the past, especially since Emmett's killers are dead, he said.

Milam died in 1980, Bryant in 1990, both of cancer. Carolyn Bryant, now Carolyn Donham, is still living in Greenville, Miss.

"I wish we could get past it, learn from it and be sure it never happens again," Kelly said.

Jordan hopes to turn the store into a civil-rights museum.

Brothers Harry Ray and Martin Tribble and their sister, Annette Morgan, own 25 acres in Money, including the site of the old grocery.

Their father, Ray Tribble, served on the jury that acquitted Bryant and Milam. He died in 1998.

The brothers were toddlers when Emmett was killed, and they said they didn't know the land's historical significance when they bought it in the 1980s. Their father never discussed the case, and people rarely talked about it.

"We're not on either side; it's history," said Harry Tribble, 55. "Some people want me to take a bulldozer to it. I can't do that. It's too important. I respect history."

Still, the Tribbles don't know what they'll do with the property.

The value of the crumbling store is also clear to others. Last April, someone stole the two glass doors through which Emmett Till walked into the store.

They were put up for auction on eBay and got an opening bid of \$500, said Ken Spencer, chief investigator for the Leflore County Sheriff's Department.

An appraiser said the doors were valued at about \$2,000, Spencer said, and with their historical significance they could attract as much as \$50,000.

Until someone decides, or comes up with the money, Bryant's Grocery continues to fall in on itself. Some broken windows are boarded up; through the others, people can look in at the rotting shelves. A 14-year-old Emmett Till might have leaned against them while hanging out with his friends.

There's nothing to show it was a catalyst for change.

"That gave some impetus to the civil-rights movement," Columbus' Clifford Tyree said. "It created a greater sense of awareness and need for change. It was horrific."

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