

TRUTH IN LOVE

Memorializing Emmett Till and His Mother Exposes Cruel Moment in Nation's History

By Parris J. Baker
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When I was 14 or 15 years old – about the same age as Emmett Till at the time of his murder – I can remember vividly the absolute fear and anxiety etched on the face of my father as he entered my room. My dad, a former Academy High School football running back, was a big, muscular man. He wasn't afraid, so I had imagined, of anyone or anything, particularly white men. Willie Baker worked most of his life in manual labor jobs; construction mostly and later until he retired, 27 years for General Electric.

Looking back, I imagine my dad worked with a general sense of self-loathing. He often spoke of the contemptuous scowls and judgmental gazes tossed his way by white supervisors and co-workers; gazes that communicated and confirmed he was not wanted and therefore didn't belong. Always on edge, my father thought, whether his cognitions were real or imagined, that he had to both prove himself to and protect himself from white people. Willie had few white friends and disliked most white people. Some he hated – not because they were white, but because of the entitlement, the privileges, and advantages he believed was afforded to them because of their white skin color.

On this day when my dad walked into my room, something was different. His voice attempted valiantly to communicate self-control, cool, and emotional stability. However, what I remember was the raised veins and pulsating tension I saw in his forehead and temples. The practiced constraint, developed through

decades of hiding his true emotions, had waned under the relentless pressure. W.E.B. Du Bois referred to the practice of emotional constraint by African Americans in the presence of white people as “double consciousness.”^[1]

My father began the interrogation with the assurance of attorney Johnnie Cochran^[2] cross-examining a witness that he knows is guilty. As he slowly closed the door behind him, his opening questioning was, “I heard that you’re sniffing around a white girl – is that true?” Confronted and now trapped in my room, my first thought was “how did he find out? I was so careful. Who told him?” For years, my brothers and I understood that interracial dating was not allowed. No one had ever explained why it wasn’t allowed, but dating white girls was a no-no; it was taboo!

Not to be outdone, I mustered up a façade of false courage and snapped back quickly, “And if I am, so what!?” With the arrogance of Dirty Harry and the cool of John Shaft, my father walked toward me until we were face to face and he announced with chilling clarity, “If I ever ... see you with a white girl, I will kill you!”

Sixty-eight years ago, on August 28, 1955, Emmett “Bobo” Till, 14 years old, was murdered in Money, Mississippi by Roy Bryant, and his half-brother J. W. Milam. Carolyn Bryant, the 21-year-old wife of Roy, alleged that Emmett had “wolf whistled” at her; that Till had grabbed her hand and waist and propositioned her with the words, “You needn't be afraid of me. I've” – and here Bryant said Till used an unprintable word – “white women before.”^[3] Based on Carol Bryant’s accusation, her husband and his half-brother kidnapped Emmett, took him to the Tallahatchie River, and ordered him to undress.

Next, according to Bryant and Milam, they brutally beat Emmett Till, gouging out one of his eyes. An FBI autopsy report indicated that Emmett Till died of a gunshot wound to the head. The report also revealed that “Bobo” had suffered multiple fractures to his arms and legs and that his skull had been crushed. Barbed wire was used to tie a 75-pound cotton gin fan to his dead body. Emmett Till’s bludgeoned body was tossed into the Tallahatchie River. When discovered three days later, the youth’s body was unrecognizable, so disfigured and mutilated that his great uncle Moses Wright could only identify the body because of Emmett’s personalized ring, which belonged to his father Louis Till.



Bryant and Milam were arrested, but they were acquitted of the murder charges after deliberation from an all-male all-white jury that lasted just 68 minutes. A LeFlore County grand jury refused to indict either man on kidnapping charges, so the men were set free. Later, protected by double jeopardy laws, Bryant and Milam admitted to the murder

and were paid \$4,000 for describing the story for Look Magazine.[4]

The murder of Emmett Till and the pictures of his mutilated body acted as a catalyst for the commencement of the Civil Rights Movement because his mother had the courage to place her son in an open casket. Rosa Parks later remarked, “I thought of Emmett Till and I couldn’t go back” when asked why she refused to go to the back of the bus. Angered African Americans began to testify, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired[5]!” fatigued from fear, living in constant intimidation, and being repeatedly victimized, in full view and by the hands of white Americans. From the Reconstruction Era until the death of Emmett Till, there were more than 4,000 documented lynchings in America. Ms. Hamer referred to the state of Mississippi not as “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” but as “the land of the tree and the home of the grave.”

Like many African American families, my family migrated from Laurel, Mississippi, from Jones County to Erie County, during the Great Migration.[6] Money, Mississippi, located in LeFlore County, was almost 200 miles to the north of Laurel. Most Mississippians were all too acquainted with the racist cultural demands and the white expectations of Negro compliance. Mississippi has the dubious distinction of being the last state in the Union to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment.[7] It ratified the Thirteenth Amendment in 1995, but because the Mississippi had never certified with the U.S. Archivist, the ratification was not official. The Thirteenth Amendment was not officially certified until February 7, 2013.

A decade later, I asked my father about the night he threatened to kill me. Shaken by my forwardness, my father, through the transparency of his shame, told me that he loved me and was powerless to protect me from the vicious, inhumane, and whimsically barbaric behaviors of white men. White men had the socially sanctioned authority and de facto legal protection to invade homes, kidnap kids, and kill with impunity, anyone they wanted. Trembling with tears, repressed fear, and anxiety, he sobbed, “Before I let a white man put his hands on you and treat you like Emmett Till, I’d kill you myself!”



On July 25, 2023, on the 82nd birthday of Emmett Till, President Joe Biden signed a proclamation to establish the Emmett Till and Mamie Till Mobley National Monument. “At a time when there are those who seek to ban books, bury history, we’re making it clear – crystal, crystal clear,” he said, “while darkness and denialism can hide much, they erase nothing.” Ironically, between 2008 and

2019, the Emmett Till Memorial Commission has erected and replaced three memorial signs in the Graball Landing^[8] river site to commemorate the legacy and life of Emmett Till. The memorials were destroyed by continued vandalism, despoliation, desecration, and gunfire.

Accusations by white women who make false accusations, practice deliberate deceptions, and outright lie about being discomfited, threatened, or physically/sexually assaulted by African American men has been around for centuries. The “Birth of a Nation”^[9] portrayed Black men as dangerous, brute animals, driven by hypersexual aggression, criminals who had uncontrolled desires for white women. In “Birth of a Nation,” Gus, a freed Negro (played by a white man in black face) attempts to capture and rape Flora, a white woman. Flora jumps off a cliff to her death rather than being captured and raped by Gus. Gus is captured, judged, and hanged by members of the Ku Klux Klan. White justice had been administered.

Racial hoax^[10] is the practice of accusing someone of a specific race as the perpetrator of a crime against someone, the victim, of a different race, when the accusation is knowingly untrue. Recently, two examples of white women who claimed to be threatened by African American men were on full display: In May 2020, Amy Cooper refused to leash her dog when asked to do so by Christian Cooper (no relation), an African American in Manhattan’s Central Park. While calling 911, which was being recorded by Mr. Cooper, Amy stated, “I’m going to tell them there’s an African American man threatening my life.”



Three years later, in May 2023, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene accused a Congressional colleague, Rep. Jamaal Bowman, of calling her a white supremacist and said that description was equivalent to calling a person of color the N-word. Later, she said she felt threatened by Bowman because his physical mannerisms are aggressive and that Bowman led a mob to the Capitol. Video footage reveals that both Greene and Bowman were both laughing and verbally

jousting with one another.^[11]

Racial hoaxing was directly related to the murder of Emmett Till and has been associated with the deaths of many African American males. The following is a summary of deadly racial hoaxes:

1. **The 1906 Atlanta Race Massacre:** On September 22, 1906, newspapers reported four alleged, but unsubstantiated assaults upon white women by African American men. White mobs killed 25 to 40 African Americans. **The Tulsa Race Massacre:** On May 31, 1921, in the Greenwood district referred to as “Black Wall Street,” Sarah Page, a 17-year-old white girl accused Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old black man, of attempted rape. White mobs looted and destroyed 1,200 homes in the Greenwood community, killing an estimated 300 African Americans.
2. **The Rosewood Massacre:** In 1923, the town of Rosewood was destroyed because a white woman alleged she was assaulted by a Black man.
3. **Scottsboro Boys:** In 1931, nine African American adolescents were accused of raping two white women on a freight train in Scottsboro, Alabama. The all-male, all-white jury ruled that all nine boys were guilty and sentenced eight of them to death by execution.
4. **The Groveland Four:** Four African American men in July 1949 were accused and found guilty of raping a white woman and beating her husband in Lake County, Florida. In 2021, all four were posthumously exonerated.
5. **The Exonerated Five (the Central Park Five):** Four African Americans and one Hispanic youth were wrongly convicted of the rape and assault of Trisha Meili, a 28-year-old white women.

The brutal beating and murder of Emmett Till is an unforgettable and, for some, an unforgivable chapter in American history. The monuments dedicated to the life, legacy, and courage of Emmett Till and his mother Mamie Till Mobley will also reflect the barbaric and inhumane behaviors of an entire community.

There are many more Emmett Tills in the United States; African American men who are judged as dangerous just for the color of their skin. America didn't murder Emmett Till directly. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam confessed to killing him. However, we must ask an important question: Are our communities complicit in establishing and maintaining atmospheres of vitriolic hatred and vicious cruelty toward African American males?

American history will tell that true story, unless you live in Florida.

[1] DuBois, W.E.B. (William Edward Burghardt), *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by Brent Hayes Edwards. Oxford World's Classics. London, England: Oxford University Press.

[2] Johnnie Lee Cochran, Jr. was an African American attorney, best known for his 1995 defense of O.J. Simpson, using the now infamous phrase "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit!" O.J. Simpson was acquitted of the murders of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman.

[3] Linder, D.O. *Famous Trials: The Emmett Till Trial: An Account*. Retrieved on July 26, 2023. [here](#)

[4] Huie, W. B. (January 1956). Killers' Confession in Look: The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi. Retrieved on July 26, 2023: [here](#)

[5] Fannie Lou Hamer (December 20, 1964). Statement delivered in her speech at a rally at the Williams Institutional CME Church, Harlem, NY as part of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's Congressional Change.

[6] The Great Migration (1910 – 1970). During this period more than six million African Americans traveled from the American South to cities in Northern, Midwestern and Western states. The migration was motivated by African American families who wanted to escape the overt oppression and racism of the South and to pursue the promises of economic and education opportunities found in Northern communities.

[7] The Thirteenth Amendment, the abolishment of slavery, was ratified on December 18, 1865. On February 7, 2013, the Mississippi Office of the Federal Register made the ratification official.

[8] Graball Landing river site is in Glendora, Mississippi, near the Tallahatchie River where it is believed Emmett Till's mutilated body was recovered.

[9] *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Originally called *The Clansman*. Grimké, F. J. & Daniel Murray Collection. (1915) "The birth of a nation". Washington. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [here](#)

[10] Russell, K. K. (July 1995). *The Racial Hoax as a Crime. The Law as Affirmation*. Indiana University Bloomington. [here](#)

[11] Bowman calls out Marjorie Taylor Greene: [here](#)

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