



A
DEATH
IN THE DELTA
**THE STORY OF
EMMETT TILL**

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which is located about eighty miles north of Tallahatchie County. The sticky, shimmering, punitive heat in the summer could seem independent of the sun itself. And since the soil was slowly losing its extravagant fecundity, a morsel of local folk wisdom announced that, with its humid dawns and long twilights, "the Delta will wear out a mule in five years, a white man in ten, and a nigger in fifteen."⁴²



T W O

Chicago Boy

"Bobo" Till was born near Chicago on July 25, 1941. His father, Louis Till, had been born in Missouri, had moved to Chicago, became a soldier, and died in Europe in the summer of 1945, two years after his divorce from Bobo's mother. Mamie Till Bradley had been born in Tallahatchie County, and helped to make Chicago a city that sheltered more Mississippi-born blacks than anywhere in the United States outside Mississippi itself. In the 1940s, over 214,000 blacks migrated to Chicago. The overwhelming majority of them came from the South, and of them about half came from Mississippi. The fare from Memphis on the Illinois Central Railroad was \$11.10; and the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper familiar to many Delta blacks, encouraged sharecroppers to move north.¹ After the death of Louis Till, Bobo's mother remarried and was then divorced, and earned \$3,900 a year working as a voucher examiner in the Air Force Procurement Office. When she took a vacation that August, Mrs. Bradley planned to rest by sending away her son, who had just completed the seventh grade at the all-black McCosh Elementary School on the South Side.

He was known as a prankster, a risk taker, and a smart dresser who nevertheless did well in school. To his mother Bobo was trustworthy, considerate, and industrious; and she remembered him as having attended church regularly. Cousins remembered him as "the center of attention" who "liked to be seen. He liked the spotlight." Bobo was self-assured despite a speech defect—a stutter—that was the consequence of nonparalytic polio that he had suffered at the age of three.² He was about five feet four or five inches tall, weighed

about 160 pounds, and was muscular and stocky. Along with a cousin, also from Chicago, named Curtis Jones, Till was staying at the home of his great-uncle, Moses "Preacher" Wright, a sharecropper, and Wright's wife Elizabeth.

Bobo Till did not act like his Southern cousins. To the white gas station operators and storekeepers, he said "yeah" and "naw" instead of the customary "yassah" and "nawsah." Even more striking was the photograph he carried in his wallet of a white girl who he claimed was his girlfriend up in Chicago. He boasted of the attributes of "that white stuff" and enjoyed passing the photo around to his friends and relatives.³ Jones, himself the grandson of Moses Wright, later remembered that there were photos of both male and female classmates.⁴

On the evening of August 24, after Bobo had been visiting for a week, he joined seven boys and a girl—all teenagers, three of whom were also visiting the Delta—in a 1946 Ford and drove to Money, a hamlet of a couple of hundred residents located in Leflore County. The two had one paved road and consisted of three stores, plus a post office, a school, a gas station, and a building for ginning cotton. One of the stores, which featured a standard large Coca-Cola sign in front, specialized in selling snuff and fatback to black field hands who lived in the nearby tar-paper shacks. It was owned and operated by Roy Bryant, a twenty-four-year-old former soldier, and his wife Carolyn Bryant. She was from Indianola, the twenty-one-year-old daughter of a plantation manager and a practical nurse. Five feet tall and weighing 103 pounds, she had won two beauty contests while in high school. When the eight adolescents pulled up to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market about 7:30 P.M., Roy Bryant was carting shrimp to Texas, leaving his wife alone with Juanita Milam, the wife of Bryant's half-brother, J. W. Milam. About a dozen other young blacks, all but two of whom were males, were congregating outside the store at the time the Till party arrived.⁵

What happened next is a matter of continuing disagreement, a historical imponderable, though its consequences would be mortal and would resonate for years thereafter. It would become an international incident; but what transpired there remains mired in dispute and is likely to be forever clouded in uncertainty. It is said that when Sir Walter Raleigh was incarcerated in the Tower of London, he decided to write *A History of the World*. But when he witnessed an altercation beyond the bars of his cell and could not figure out

exactly what had happened, he wondered about the validity of the project—a parable of the precariousness and even futility of the historian's task that is itself self-reflexive, because the veracity of this anecdote is dubious. Even though the episode in Bryant's store in Money happened little more than three decades ago, it has been subject to divergent accounts.

Mrs. Bryant testified under oath in late September about the incident; and other important testimony came a few months after the trial from Bryant and Milam themselves, when they were immune from prosecution for murder. According to their version of events, supplemented by a journalist's interrogation of Till's relatives, the newcomer again bragged of his Chicago girlfriend that Saturday evening. A couple of the others then began taunting him, daring the Chicago boy to go inside the store and ask Carolyn Bryant for a date. Jones recalled that one of the local black boys had told Till: "Hey, there's a [white] girl in that store there. I bet you won't go in there and talk to her."⁶ Rather than slink away from the challenge that his boastfulness had provoked, he decided to enter the store alone.

While the other blacks watched through the window from outside, Mrs. Bryant came forward from the counter, with Till in front. He requested—and then got—two cents' worth of bubble gum, but then squeezed her hand firmly and asked: "How about a date, baby?" Carolyn Bryant immediately withdrew and began to move toward the back of the store, behind a partition, where her sister-in-law was staying.

Till jumped between two counters to block her path, raised his hands and held her waist, reassuring her, according to testimony that she later gave in court: "Don't be afraid of me, baby. I ain't gonna hurt you. I been with white girls before." Mrs. Bryant also testified that he used "unprintable" words. It was then that one of Bobo's cousins rushed in and pulled him away from the store. Carolyn Bryant ran to the Milam car, where she knew a pistol could be found. When she reentered the store with a gun, Till was still so eager not to lose face among his cousins and friends that he said "Bye, baby" and "wolf whistled" at her. Although Jones, who had been playing checkers with an elderly local black outside, was not an eyewitness to the incident, he later claimed that his cousin had said nothing other than "Bye, baby." In any event, after Mrs. Bryant had returned with a pistol, the group of blacks then drove away.⁷

Emmett Till's mother has displayed a natural desire to protect the sanctity of her son's character; and though she was not present, she too has offered an account of what happened. Mrs. Bradley claimed that, far from pretending to flirt, he whistled to stop his stutter. "He had particular trouble with b's and m's," she insisted. "He was trying to say 'bubble gum,' but he got stuck. So he whistled."⁸ Because her son had difficulty with certain letters, "I taught him, whenever he had trouble stuttering, to blow it out. . . . I can see him trying to say 'bubble gum' and blowing or whistling in Mrs. Bryant's presence."⁹ Though the *Jackson Daily News* seemed to accept that possibility, it was left to its editorial writer also to conjecture that Till was "feeble-minded,"¹⁰ presumably according to the dictum that no black male in his right mind would behave in a manner so brazen and so sexually threatening as Till was accused of acting. The *Daily News* speculation was an eerie foreshadowing of the 1958 case of Clennon King, a black history professor whose attempt to enroll in the summer school of the University of Mississippi was met by highway patrolmen and a lunacy warrant. King was placed under observation for thirteen days in the state mental asylum, and after his release fled the state.¹¹

A local news account said nothing about Till's whistle or that he had grabbed Mrs. Bryant's hand and waist—only that he made "ugly remarks" to her.¹² A recent biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., written by an award-winning black journalist, placed Till in Greenwood, where he was shopping in a department store and is supposed to have whistled at a white woman who was passing by. "None of the whites who saw the youth hauled out of town" by two white men "intervened," according to this manifestly inaccurate account. William Chafe, a historian specializing in civil rights, wrote that Till was "lynched because he allegedly had leered at a white woman."¹³ But Till's sixteen-year-old cousin, Maurice Wright, initially offered two different and logically unconnected explanations for what had happened. He told newsmen on September 1 that the Chicago youth had indeed emitted the two notes of the "wolf call." After Till had emerged from the store, Wright claimed to have told him, "Boy, you know better than that." The visitor "just laughed." Till thus appeared culturally dislocated. But Wright also explained that Till "had polio when he was three and he couldn't talk plain. You could hardly understand him."¹⁴ Another cousin visiting from Chicago, seventeen-year-old Wheeler Parker,

told *Jet* magazine soon after the lynching that Till had indeed whistled.¹⁵ Simeon Wright, a twelve-year-old son of Moses Wright, later concurred that Till "was definitely whistling at that girl"—which is all that the deputy sheriff of Leflore County initially claimed had happened.¹⁶

A shaken Carolyn Bryant immediately told Juanita Milam about the incident. A black male whom she had never seen before, physically larger than she was, and who was accompanied by black adolescents (most of them males), had grabbed her, held her, propositioned her, insulted her, and whistled at her. She had no way of knowing that the whole idea was probably a tasteless prank. Yet both Mrs. Bryant and her sister-in-law agreed to conceal the episode from their husbands. They said nothing about it an hour later, when J. W. Milam drove up to escort them back to his home in Glendora, Mississippi. By early Friday morning, when Roy Bryant returned from Texas, his wife had still said nothing—which was not the case with the blacks who had observed the incident.

For them it was a topic of excitement, a puncturing of the Jim Crow etiquette so brashly executed that it was worth sharing with others. By Friday afternoon a black who came into the store in Money informed its proprietor that a "Chicago boy" who was "visitin' Preacher" had breached the barrier of caste.¹⁷ According to Elizabeth Wright's brother the informant was Maurice Wright, the eldest of the cousins who had been with Till that Wednesday night at the store. Wright embellished his tale, claiming that Till had told Carolyn Bryant how pretty she was. Maurice Wright may have acted out of jealousy ("Here was this Chicago boy, dressed in fine clothes and carrying a little money in his pocket"), as Crosby Smith, Moses Wright's brother-in-law, suspected. Or the youngster may have wanted to compound the prank that had instigated the incident. Or he may have wanted a half dollar's credit at Bryant's store (as Mamie Bradley averred). But whatever Maurice Wright's combination of motives, the husband of the woman who had been insulted felt compelled to react.¹⁸

For Bryant's sense of honor was threatened. Since his Negro customers already knew what had happened, he felt obliged at least to "whip the nigger's ass" (though not to bring any formal charges against Till to the sheriff). The Bryants were too poor to own an automobile, and since Saturday was the busiest day in the store, it was not until Saturday night at 10:30 that he could ask his half-

brother to come later with his '55 Chevrolet pickup truck to punish the "Chicago boy."

Milam was thirty-six years old, stood six feet two inches, and weighed 235 pounds. Like his half-brother, he was the father of two sons. A much-decorated combat veteran of the European Theater in World War II, he made a living by renting Negro-driven mechanical cotton pickers for plantations in the Delta. "Big" Milam was the sort of man who prided himself on getting along with blacks, on knowing how to "handle" them. He had a ninth-grade education. Like Roy Bryant, Milam had a .45 Colt. Both men brought their automatic pistols to the home of "Preacher" Wright, which was an unpainted cabin behind a cotton field off a gravel road nearly three miles east of Money. Both white visitors were sober.¹⁹

Milam was the enforcer and was carrying a pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other when they woke the household to get the boy from Chicago. Moses Wright assured Bryant and Milam that he had severely admonished his nephew, pleading that the boy "ain't got good sense. He was raised up yonder. He didn't know what he was doing. Don't take him." The sharecropper said that it was only the boy's second visit to Mississippi. Wright's wife Elizabeth promised to "pay you gentlemen for the damages," but J. W. Milam could not be mollified: "You niggers go back to sleep." Till, one of four youngsters sleeping in the cabin, got dressed, was marched outside, and was told to lie down in the bed of the pickup truck. One of the men asked Wright, "How old are you, 'Preacher'?" He answered that he was sixty-four. "If you cause any trouble," Wright was told, "you'll never live to be sixty-five." Then the pickup truck disappeared into the night.²⁰

Neither Milam nor Bryant had ever seen Till before, nor did they know or ask his name. They drove across the Tallahatchie River Bridge at Money, heading for Big River near Rosedale. There, they said later, they intended to pistol-whip the lad and then frighten him by threatening to throw him off a hundred-foot bluff in what Milam later called "the god-damndest, scariest place in the Delta." But they could not find the spot in the dark, and it was five o'clock that Sunday morning when the truck returned to the Milam home in Glendora. Juanita Milam and the children were in Greenville, visiting her parents. Bryant and Milam then marched Till into the toolhouse and pistol-whipped him several times.

They claimed that to their amazement Till did not whimper or

beg for mercy or show remorse. He may not have suspected how much danger he was in. To the contrary, they asserted, he continued to boast of white girls with whom he was intimate, and once again he pulled out his wallet to prove his conquests. Milam was outraged and decided to kill him. "Chicago boy," he remembered—out of the courtroom—saying, "I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddamn you—I'm gonna make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand."

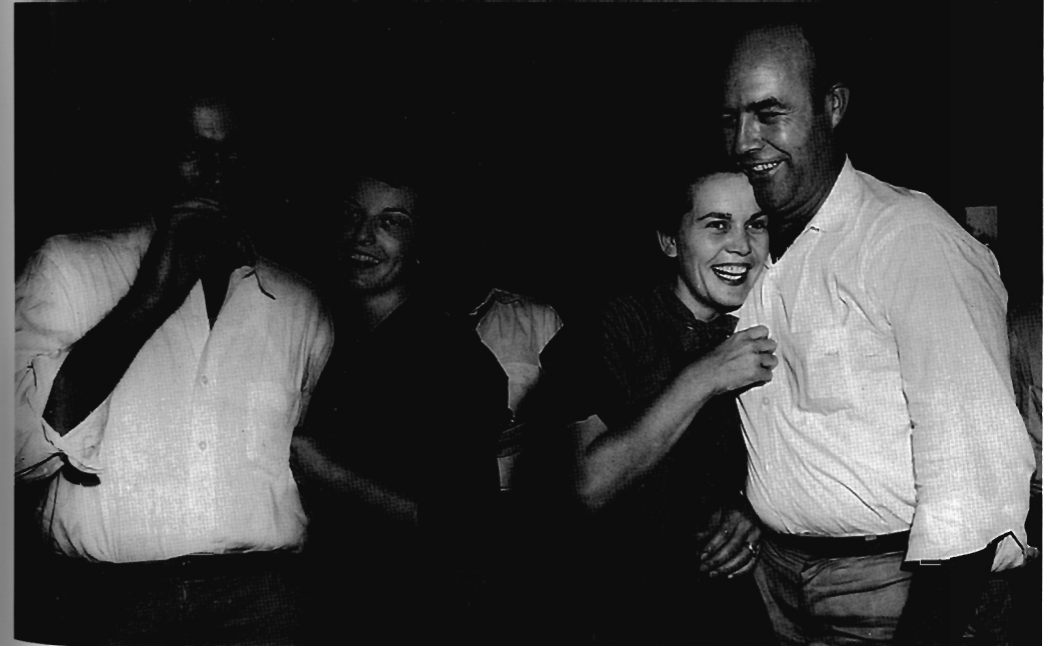
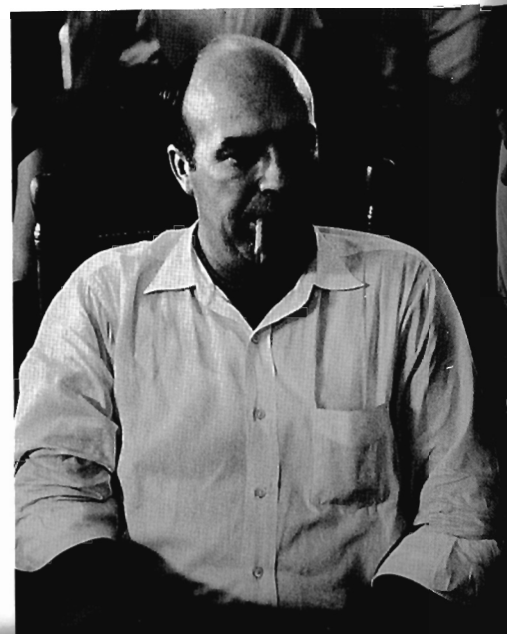
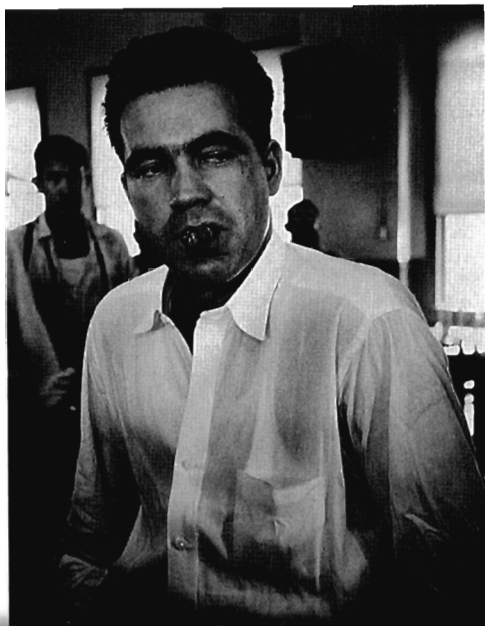
Needing something heavy enough to keep Till's body at the bottom of the river, Milam ordered him back into the truck. They drove to a gin near Boyle, where Till was forced to lift a heavy fan onto the truck. It was already daylight. They drove back past Glendora, near where Milam hunted squirrels. Till was told to carry the fan to the riverbank, then to strip. He did not cry. Milam remembered taunting him in the basic vocabulary of white supremacy: "Nigger, you still as good as I am?" Apparently the last words Emmett Till ever heard were Milam's second question: "You still done it to white girls and you gonna keep on doin' it?" Then, according to their own account delivered after the trial, Milam fired one bullet at Till's head, joined Bryant in tying the fan to the victim's neck, and dumped the body into the Tallahatchie River.²¹

The NAACP denied that the half-brothers' crime was a "murder of passion"—it was "futile, cold, brutal."²² On the contrary, if Bryant and Milam are accepted as credible witnesses, it was neither premeditated nor plotted, but was instigated by what they considered the abducted youth's provocative audacity. That may be a matter of interpretation, but in any event this was one cause célèbre in which no serious doubts have ever clouded the identity of the killers.

Soon after the abduction, Elizabeth Wright had asked a white neighbor to intercede, but he refused. According to one account, she and Moses Wright then drove to Sumner, the home of her brother, Crosby Smith, who went that Sunday morning to the sheriff in Greenwood, George Smith. Leaving his truck in front of the courthouse, Wright's brother-in-law accompanied the sheriff on a futile search along riverbanks and under bridges. "We went by custom when something like that happened," Crosby Smith later explained. "That's usually what they done to 'em." According to another account, Curtis Jones phoned the sheriff from a plantation



(Opposite page. Above) This moment was an epitaph in the eclipse of Jim Crow in the Deep South. Testifying for the state, Moses Wright pointed out the two defendants in the Sumner courthouse as the abductors of Emmett Till. When the district attorney asked for identification, the 64-year-old sharecropper first acknowledged J. W. Milam and said, "Thar he," and then pointed to Roy Bryant. During the trial Wright was in hiding; afterwards he fled the state. But his testimony signified that the intimidation of Delta blacks was no longer as effective as in the past. (UPI/Bettman NewsPhotos) While Roy Bryant (below left) was making a delivery of shrimp in Texas, the Chicago teenager entered Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market and engaged in the improper prank and advance toward Mrs. Bryant that later provoked the outraged husband to help murder Till. Roy and Carolyn Bryant were later divorced. He still lives in the Mississippi Delta, though incognito. (Ed Clark, Life Magazine © 1955 Time Inc.) J. W. Milam, 36 (below right), was the half-brother of Roy Bryant and—like him—a former soldier and the father of two sons. He rented mechanical cotton pickers for plantations in the Delta. Milam was pivotal to the abduction and the killing, and later spoke on the record most unashamedly of how and why the two men murdered Emmett Till. Milam died of cancer in 1981. (Ed Clark, Life Magazine © 1955 Time Inc.)



(Above) The Sumner jury deliberated for little more than an hour before acquitting the two defendants, and would have announced its verdict even earlier had the jurors not passed the time drinking Coca-Cola, one later reported. Since Bryant and Milam could not be tried again for the same offense, they celebrated the verdict with their wives in the presence of supporters and photographers. Shown from left are Roy Bryant, Carolyn Bryant, Juanita Milam, and J. W. Milam. (UPI/Bettman NewsPhotos)