

EMMETT TILL'S BODY WAS first taken to Greenwood in Leflore County, even though his body was found in Tallahatchie County (after he was killed in Sunflower County). Then it was moved back to Tallahatchie County by an undertaker in Tutwiler to be embalmed and shipped by rail to Chicago. (The trial of Bryant and Milam took place in Tallahatchie County, where Till's body was found.)

Woodrow Jackson of Tutwiler cannot forget the day he was assigned to embalm Till. His boss got the call and instructed Jackson, a black, to drive 42 miles over to Greenwood to pick up the young man's corpse and bring it back to the Tutwiler Funeral Home.

"There was a patrol car in front and another one in back. Billy Ray Cole, a state highway patrolman from Tutwiler, told me not to stop for anything, and I didn't," Jackson said. He reached Tutwiler at approximately 4 p.m. and worked on Till's body all through the night, until 8 the next morning.ⁱ

"It was terrible and that's why it took a long time. I remember thinking his body must have been in the water for three or four days, and maybe longer. It was clear to me that he died from blows to the right side of his head."

When Jackson finished his work, "We put his body in a shipping case and sent him home to Chicago by train. I never met his mother, but I always hoped I helped her in some way."

IN CHICAGO, HORRID pictures of the young man's corpse soon appeared in *Jet* magazine, drawing national and international attention. Over 100,000 people walked by Till's open casket before the funeral took place; hundreds of thousands read about his murder. Emmett Till's mother insisted the world see what was done to her son.

While Mamie Till experienced difficulty in getting her son's body shipped out of the Delta, she had already made the decision to have an open casket funeral. Mamie wanted the world to know that her son's right eye was missing, his nose was broken, and there was a hole on the side of his head. *Jet* magazine ran photos of Till's body. Fifty thousand people attended the funeral and soon the Mississippi Delta murder became an international story.

But down home in Sunflower County, Milam and Bryant were gathering support. Whites in their community claimed the two men were innocent, and contributed to their defense fund, filling up the money jars that had gone up in the small grocery stores and gas stations.ⁱⁱ

RUMORS KEPT CIRCULATING about Emmett Till's death, especially in Drew, only a few miles away from the small machine shed where Till was taken, tortured and murdered. From the start, the whisperers held that a woman's voice was heard in the dark when Till was taken from his uncle's home.

"There were so many rumors. We all knew right away that Emmett Till was killed in Sunflower County and not over in Tallahatchie County," the retired Tutwiler embalmer said. "There were others involved besides Milam and Bryant. And we knew that some of the witnesses were held in Charleston's jail during the trial."

Mose Wright, before he died, had also claimed hearing a woman's voice from the truck; Wright was Till's great-uncle and was at home when Milam and Bryant entered the house to get Till. Simeon Wright, his son, who later became a Chicago minister, told of hearing his father talk about the crime and involvement of a woman, saying:

"They took Emmett out to the truck to ask, 'Is this one?' And a female voice said "Yes."

A conversation among friends ...

Like countless black males before him, Emmett Till received the ultimate punishment for threatening Mississippi's rigid Jim Crow laws of racial behavior. In the past, the press would have ignored such a killing. However, this time it was very different for several reasons, several black Delta residents said.

"He was just a kid, that's why this murder was so different than all of the rest." Nettie Davis of Drew makes her point for a second time during an early evening conversation. Davis and others are patient in offering their

northern guests what facts they know about Emmett Till's murder on this cool, fall evening forty-eight years after the murder.

Their memories bring a fresh reality to the story this night. You need to understand. There had been other murders. Joe Pullen, George Lee. Horrible murders. But Emmett was a young boy, just 14, and he didn't know the rules. "Emmett's mother said she tried to tell him, but he couldn't have really understood how much different things were in the Delta than they were in Chicago," Davis states.ⁱⁱⁱ

How could black parents ever protect their children in those days? What if you had a precocious child who might be misunderstood? How would you keep a child quiet? And safe?

"Well, you didn't take your children out very much," one man offers. "You tried to protect them by keeping them away from places where they could get into trouble or be hurt or see something bad. But you didn't want to talk a lot about these things, because a child shouldn't have to be so scared."

A friend of Davis's remained on the periphery of this conversation, but then pulled in his chair closer and began to talk of his own experiences regarding his sister and the crime against Emmett Till.

She was also fourteen years old at the time of Till's death and was a student at the Drew School. She was so traumatized and angry at the time, she has never spoken to a white person since, he said. Maybe it would be good for his sister, if she would speak to someone now about her feelings.

He drew out his cell phone and offered to try and set up an interview with her. After a few rounds over the phone with her brother, the sister said she *might* talk after all. An appointment was made for a week later but fell through when she backed out on the morning of the scheduled interview.

THE MAN'S SISTER WAS not alone in her trauma. Mississippi writer Ann Moody in her autobiography recalled her own reactions and those of other youngsters around her when hearing about Till's murder. Moody was walking to her after-school job the evening she heard the news:

There was a whole group of us, girls and boys, walking down the road headed home... However, the six boys in front of us weren't talking very loud ... they were just walking and talking among themselves.

All of a sudden they began to shout at each other... "That boy wasn't but fourteen years old and they killed him. Now what kin a fourteen-year-old boy do with a white woman?"

"That boy was from Chicago.... He probably didn't even think of the bitch as white."

I walked up to one of the boys. "Eddie, what boy was killed?" "Moody, where've you been?" he asked me. "Everybody's talking about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed ... by some white men..."^{iv}

Employed as a domestic servant by "one of the meanest white women in town," Moody was confronted the moment she reached her employer's home:

Mrs. Burke entered the kitchen.

"Essie, did you hear about that fourteen-year-old boy who was killed...?" she asked me.

"No, I didn't hear that," I answered, almost choking on the food.

"Do you know why he was killed? He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman. A boy from Mississippi would have known better than that. This boy was from Chicago. Negroes up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything. He just came to Mississippi and put a whole lot of notions in the boys' heads here and stirred up a lot of trouble," she said passionately.

"How old are you, Essie?" she asked me after a pause.

“Fourteen. I will soon be fifteen, though,” I said.

“See, that boy was just fourteen too. It's a shame he had to die so soon.”^v

Moody went home “shaking like a leaf on a tree.” Mrs. Burke had tried to instill fear within her many times and had given up. “But when she talked about Emmett Till there was something in her voice that sent chills and fear all over me. Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me – the fear of being killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears.”

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ⁱ From an interview with Mr. Jackson by the author in 2004.

ⁱⁱ “The Murder of Emmett Till,” *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ From an interview with Nettie Davis of Drew by the author, 2003.

^{iv} Anne Moody, “Coming of Age in Mississippi,” (New York, NY, 1968), 123-126.

^v *Ibid.*