

## **Mamie Till Mobley: An Unsung Hero of the Civil Rights Movement**

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### ABSTRACT

It has been argued that the death of Emmett Till was the catalyst to the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s through the late 1960s. Despite the numerous times the lynching of Emmett Till has been analyzed and evaluated, there is little information that points to the importance of the actions of his mother, Mamie Till Mobley. This research aims to prove that although Emmett Till's murder was an important push towards the Civil Rights Movement, it was in fact the actions of his mother following his death that led the country toward a reckoning with their brutal treatment of African Americans, especially in the Deep South.

**Keywords:** Mamie Till Mobley, lynching, lynching in Mississippi, Civil Rights Movement, Emmett Till, NAACP

## **Mamie Till Mobley: un héroe anónimo del movimiento de derechos civiles**

### RESUMEN

Se ha argumentado que la muerte de Emmett Till fue el catalizador del Movimiento de Derechos Civiles de finales de la década de 1950 hasta finales de la de 1960. A pesar de las numerosas veces que se ha analizado y evaluado el linchamiento de Emmett Till, hay poca información que apunte a la importancia de las acciones de su madre, Mamie Till Mobley. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo demostrar que aunque el asesinato de Emmett Till fue un impulso importante hacia el Movimiento por los Derechos Civiles, fueron de hecho las acciones de su madre después de su muerte las que llevaron al país a un ajuste de cuentas con el trato brutal de los afroamericanos, especialmente en el Sur profundo.

**Palabras clave:** Mamie Till Mobley, linchamiento, linchamiento en Mississippi, Movimiento de Derechos Civiles, Emmett Till, NAACP

## 玛米·提尔·莫布利：美国民权运动中被埋没的英雄

### 摘要

论证认为，艾米特·提尔（Emmett Till）之死是20世纪50年代至60年代末期美国民权运动的催化剂。尽管Emmett Till被处以私刑一事经过了无数次分析和评价，但几乎没有研究指出其母亲玛米·提尔·莫布利（Mamie Till Mobley）所付出的行动的重要性。本研究旨在证明，尽管Emmett Till的谋杀是民权运动的重要推动力，但事实上其母亲在其去世后的行为才导致全国思考他们对非裔美国人、尤其是对南方腹地的非裔美国人的残忍对待。

关键词：玛米·提尔·莫布利（Mamie Till Mobley），私刑，密西西比私刑，民权运动，艾米特·提尔（Emmett Till），全国有色人种协进会（NAACP）

There are a handful of names that are synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement. Images of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and Malcolm X are conjured when discussing leaders in the fight for justice and equality for Black Americans. The lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in August 1955 has been called the catalyst to the Civil Rights Movement. There is little doubt about the impact of this tragedy on the movement. However, the actions of Mamie Till Mobley, Emmet Till's mother, following the death of her son, should be recognized as the true push towards the Civil Rights Movement. Her decision to have an open casket and to be present at the murder trial, her push for justice for Emmett, and her subsequent work as an activist, sparked actions in the South that were felt around the world.

The historiography on the murder of Emmett Till can be described as mutually expansive and lacking. Emmett Till's lynching is mentioned in most works on the Civil Rights Movement, however, it is often mentioned just briefly. Mamie Till Mobley's actions are mentioned with even less frequency, if at all. In 1962, journalist Ralph Ginzburg published *100 Years of Lynchings*, the first edition of his compilation of news articles that reported lynchings from the previous hundred years. *100 Years of Lynchings* contains three news articles written about the murder of Emmett Till. The first, published in the *Washington Post-Times-Herald* on September 1, 1955, describes the lynching and what allegedly led to Till's kidnapping and killing. The other two articles, published by two other newspapers, describe the arrests and trials of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, both of whom were

charged with the crimes in connection with Till's death.

In 1990, filmmaker Henry Hampton and writer Steve Fayer, in their work *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*, discussed Emmett Till's murder with a combination of interviews with several people who had firsthand knowledge of the incident and their own writings on Emmett's case. What this work provides is the intimate thoughts of those that knew Emmett or those that participated in seeking justice for the teen. Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, is one of the voices featured in this narrative. It is apparent that the intent of these authors is to allow the voices of those who were there to tell the story. However, they failed in their attempt to highlight the importance of Mamie Till Mobley's actions.

John Lewis, in his book *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, briefly discusses the lynching of Emmett Till. However, his point is to make a comparison to himself. He writes, "As for me, I was shaken to the core by the killing of Emmett Till. I was fifteen, black, and at the edge of my own manhood just like him. He could have been me. *That* could have been me, beaten, tortured, dead at the bottom of a river."<sup>1</sup> While powerful, this also does little to highlight any importance on Mamie Till Mobley's impact on the Civil Rights Movement.

Not surprisingly, the most complete account of Emmett's lynching and his mother's actions was written by Ma-

mie Till Mobley herself. In *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime in America*, Mamie Till Mobley discusses Emmett's slaying and her own actions in great detail. This work allows for a more complete analysis on the impact her actions had on the movement as whole. Furthermore, this work allows us to examine her thought process and how she arrived at the decision to, as she described it, "Let the world see what I've seen."<sup>2</sup> However, she stops short of identifying how her own actions shaped the Civil Rights Movement.

In 2017, Timothy B. Tyson published his book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*. This work seems to be another more complete account of the lynching of Emmett Till. Furthermore, Tyson uses the only known interview with Carolyn Bryant, the woman that accused Emmett of whistling at her, which ultimately led to his murder. Tyson discusses Mamie Till Mobley more extensively than any other author, offering a better-rounded source of information on her. In terms of peer-reviewed articles on Mamie Till Mobley, there is a severe lack of scholarship.

The sources available show two things. First, most authorities on the Emmett Till case agree on its importance to the Civil Rights Movement. Second, and most importantly, they show a seemingly unintentional disregard for the role that Mamie Till Mobley played in the aftermath of the death of her son. Mamie Till Mobley allowed her son's racially motivated murder to do something few others had been capable of doing up until that point, and

that is grab the attention of the entire world.

Violence against Blacks in America did not begin with the case of Emmett Till. The brutalization of Blacks began congruently with their forced arrival in the Americas at the start of the slave trade. The violence bestowed upon them did not end with slavery. More alarmingly, violence against them increased during the Reconstruction period following the end of the Civil War. This violence has carried on into the twenty-first century.

The increase in cruelty against Black Americans following the Civil War is both well-documented and severely underreported. White Southerners were angry. They had lost the Civil War and to them, along with it, their way of life. Those that owned slaves struggled to move forward without their labor system. This created an environment and a culture of hostility towards the newly freed slaves. While former slaveowners seemingly had no other choice but to accept the fact that slavery was over, they did not have to accept the idea that Blacks were equal to them. Thus began a long history of racially motivated intimidation and violence toward and often murder of the Black population.

In an article that focuses on race riots, Melinda Meek Hennessey describes the overall causes of some of the race riots in the South during Reconstruction. She notes, "fifty-five percent of the riots began with an attempt by whites to break up a black political meeting or to keep blacks from vot-

ing."<sup>3</sup> Many Southern Whites viewed the disenfranchisement of the Black population as a successful method of keeping them relegated to second-class citizenship.

The period of Reconstruction also ushered in an era of terror which can be credited to the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. According to Julian Bond of the Southern Poverty Law Center, "The Klan itself has had three periods of significant strength in American history—in the late 19th century, in the 1920s, and during the 1950s and early 1960s when the civil rights movement was at its height."<sup>4</sup> The Klan's main purpose was to incite fear and to assist in maintaining control over the Black population in their respective towns.

In a letter published on December 3, 1868, a witness wrote about some Klan activities, "About a week ago Saturday night the Ku Klux came into town to regulate matters ... five hundred in all. They shot one very bad negro.... They also hung three or four negroes nearly dead, and whipped several others in order to make them tell them about their nightly meetings, and what their object was in holding the same; also as to who their leaders were."<sup>5</sup> Much like the restriction on enslaved persons meeting in groups during the antebellum years, white Southerners were fearful of Blacks meeting in groups as well. Since there were no laws forbidding the congregation of Blacks in the South following the abolishment of slavery, it was the opinion of groups like the KKK that Black people should be regulated and prevented from meeting.

Due to the severe violence, racism, and Jim Crow laws in the South, many Blacks migrated to Northern cities like Detroit and Chicago. The movement of Blacks to the North occurred between 1916 and 1970 and is often called The Great Migration. Mamie Till Mobley's family was no different.

Mamie Till Mobley was born in Mississippi on November 23, 1921. Her family emigrated to a small town outside of Chicago the following year. When Mamie was eighteen years old she married a man named Louis Till. Louis worked at the Corn Products Plant in Argo, Illinois. She became pregnant right away and Emmett Louis Till was born on July 25, 1941. Although Mamie was incredibly happy in motherhood, her relationship with her husband had soured and Louis Till became violent. In their final altercation, Mamie threw hot boiling water on him after he had attacked her. In the end, she was able to take out a restraining order against her husband.<sup>6</sup>

Mamie raised Emmett with the help of her mother. In an interview, Mamie describes her relationship with Emmett as being like brother and sister. She said, "We never did much fighting until he and I moved alone, and it would become necessary to discipline him every so often."<sup>7</sup> Like many Black mothers in the North, Mamie had to work in order to provide for herself and Emmett, so she relied on her mother often, creating a close bond between Emmett and his grandmother, who became more like mother and son in many instances.

At fourteen years old, Emmett had never been far from his mother and grandmother. In August 1955, when his great Uncle Mose arrived in Chicago for the funeral of a relative, Emmett, enamored with stories of the South, begged his mother to let him return to Money, Mississippi with his uncle. According to Mamie, "The answer was no. Absolutely not. I was against it, my mother was against it."<sup>8</sup> It took a great deal of convincing both Mamie and her mother to let Emmett go to Mississippi to visit, and even when they agreed, they did so reluctantly.<sup>9</sup>

The North was not untouched by racism during that time; however, it was incomparable to the extent and danger of the racism that existed in the Deep South. Mamie Till Mobley had to have a talk with Emmett. It was a talk that most Black mothers and fathers had with their children throughout Jim Crow South. Educating their children on how to behave around and toward the white people they might encounter was often a matter of life or death.

Mamie recalled the conversation she had with him, "Chicago and Mississippi were two different places, and white people down South could be very mean ... even to black kids." She recalled telling him, "If you're walking down the street and a white woman is walking toward you, step off the sidewalk, lower your head. Don't look her in the eye. Wait until she passes by, then get back on the sidewalk, keep going, don't look back."<sup>10</sup> Considering the fate of Emmett Till, that piece of advice is the most chilling.

In a manner typical among teenagers, Emmett did not take his mother too seriously, even brushed her off a little. However, he made sure to reassure her that she had raised him well and that he knew how to act.<sup>11</sup> On August 20, 1955 Mamie took Emmett to the train station, where he hurriedly kissed her goodbye. That was the last time that Mamie Till Mobley saw her son Emmett alive.<sup>12</sup>

This was the first time he had truly been away from home, away from his mother and grandmother, and away from what would ultimately prove to be the safety of the North. He had only been in Mississippi for a few days when he would make a mistake that would cost him his life and change the trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement. The accounts of what happened, what Emmett did or did not do, vary slightly depending on who is asked. However, the foundation of the story remains the same.

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On August 24, 1955, Emmett, his cousin, and some friends met outside of Bryant's Grocery Store. Some of the boys that were with Emmett that day recalled that Emmett was showing off pictures in his wallet and had been bragging that he had a white girlfriend back home in Chicago. One of the boys told Emmett that there was a white woman working inside the grocery store and dared him to go inside and speak to her. Emmett went inside of the store to purchase some candy and as he walked out, he allegedly said, "Bye baby," to Carolyn Bryant.

As Emmett and the boys stood outside of the grocery store, Carolyn Bryant came outside to her car and it was then that Emmett wolf-whistled at her. This seemingly insignificant action scared the boys with Emmett so much that they grabbed him, jumped in their car, and sped off. The boys were so scared that they did not want to tell Uncle Mose what happened. As with most small towns, news travelled quickly, and somehow Emmett's uncle heard about the incident anyway. It seemed that many people in the town had heard about the boy from Chicago that had made a pass at a white woman in town.

When Carolyn Bryant's husband found out about what had allegedly taken place, he was furious. Together with his brother J.W. Milam, he decided that they would teach Emmett a lesson. On August 28, 1955, around three o'clock in the morning, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam arrived at Mose Wright's home and demanded to speak to the boy from Chicago. They woke Emmett up and forced him out of the house. Even if his uncle had wanted to try to protect him, he knew that he could be creating an even greater danger if he defied those men. Milam and Bryant told Mose Wright that they were just going to talk to Emmett about what happened and that they would bring him back when they were finished.

Although Mose Wright stayed up waiting for Emmett to be returned, he never was, and the next time he saw Emmett, he was dead. During the trial, the prosecution asked Mose Wright when he next saw Emmett. He replied,

“I saw him when he was taken out of the River. He was in a boat then.... He was dead.”<sup>13</sup> Mose Wright was able to identify Emmett’s badly mangled body by the ring he was wearing. It was a ring that belonged to his father, engraved with the letters L.T. His mother had given it to him just before he left Chicago.

By this time, Mamie Till Mobley had already been notified that Emmett had gone missing and she was notified when Emmett’s body had been found. Emmett’s body had been brutalized and had a cotton gin fan tied to him, presumably to help the body sink in the river. The Sheriff who was responsible for the case decided that Emmett’s body should be buried immediately, “And so someone notified a few of Till’s Mississippi family members that the body was to be buried right away and that they might want to be present.”<sup>14</sup> Author Timothy B. Tyson makes the following observation: “That they immediately complied probably illustrates the extent to which it was not safe for African Americans to challenge white men in 1950s Mississippi.”<sup>15</sup>

Mamie had no plans to let her son’s body be buried in Mississippi. Against the wishes of the Sheriff, Mamie was able to get one of her family members to secure the coffin to be sent to Chicago with the agreement that the coffin would never be opened. However, Mamie had no intention of keeping her sorrow and grief to herself. Media outlets in Chicago “were already starting to cover the lynching.”<sup>16</sup>

When Emmett’s body arrived in Chicago, Mamie Till Mobley was de-

termined to identify his body herself, even if that meant she had to open the coffin herself. The funeral director there agreed to open the coffin and to call Mamie Till Mobley to come back once he got it open and was able to remove Emmett’s body. When Mamie received the call to return to view Emmett’s body, she described the smell that met her about two blocks away from the funeral home, “At first, I thought about the stockyards, where they slaughtered hogs and cattle.... This was much worse. This was overpowering.... It was the smell of death and it was everywhere.” She continued, “I will ever forget that smell. It was Emmett.”<sup>17</sup>

In her book, Mamie goes on to describe how she examined every inch of Emmett’s body. She said, “Step by step, as methodically as his killers had mutilated my baby, I was putting him back together again, but only to identify the body.”<sup>18</sup> One of Emmett’s eyes was hanging out of the socket, the other seemed to be missing. All but two of his teeth were missing. The bridge of his nose had been chopped. It looked as though someone had taken a hatchet to the top of his head and sliced it from ear to ear, “The back of his head was loose from the front part of his face.” Finally, Mamie saw the bullet hole, “That’s when I had to stop... With all the grisly things I had just witnessed in silence, it was that one bullet hole that finally caused me to speak, ‘Did they have to shoot him?’ I mean, he had to be dead by then.”<sup>19</sup>

After Mamie finished her thorough, and obviously heartbreaking, examination of Emmett she made the

most selfless decision she could have made. She decided that she would have an open casket. The funeral director offered to try to fix up Emmett's body as best he could. Mamie refused, stating simply, "No, let the people see what I've seen. I want the world to see this, because there is no way I can tell this story and give them the visual picture of what my son looked like."<sup>20</sup> And so, the world saw.

Although Ralph Ginzburg had compiled a 252-page book of news stories reporting the lynchings of Black Americans, not one of those stories up until that point received the national and international attention that the lynching of fourteen year-old Emmett Till received. The United States was no longer able to keep its dirty little secret of the American South contained. Mamie was determined for the South to have to reckon with its history of brutality against Black Americans. She was equally determined to get justice for her son.

In an interview, Reverend Al Sharpton noted, "The easiest thing would have been to say, 'No, close the casket. I can't bear it,' but she somewhere found the strength to say, 'I'll bear my pain to save some other mother from having to go through this,' and because she put the picture of this young man's body on the conscience of America, she might have saved thousands of young black men and young black women's lives."<sup>21</sup> According to the *Chicago Tribune*, more than 40,000 people viewed Emmett Till's body.<sup>22</sup> *Jet Magazine* also published the photos of

Emmett Till's brutally mangled body for the world to see.

If anyone thought Mamie's forcing of America to face the world for its history of racism and violence towards Blacks was enough, she was not finished. Following Emmett's public funeral and burial, Mamie Till Mobley shifted her focus on the upcoming trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. While she was encouraged not to attend the trial on the grounds of it being too dangerous for her and her family, Mamie would not hear of it. She was going to be present for the trial of the men that murdered her son. Up until that point, Mamie had been outspoken about what had happened to her son and her family had received threats.

Mamie's mother recalled, "A number of letters and many telephone calls... they threaten us with words like n-----s, savage, or uncivilized people, people that want to be ornery... they threaten that our house will be bombed."<sup>23</sup> These threats did not make a difference to Mamie. She was going to face the entire town for what they allowed to happen to her son.

Mamie travelled to Mississippi, and with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was able to secure witnesses to testify for the prosecution. The presence of the NAACP was an irritant to Sheriff H. C. Strider, "I'd like for the NAACP, any colored organization anywhere to know that we are here giving all parties a free trial and intend to give a fair and impartial trial and we don't need the help of the NAACP



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and we don't intend for them to help. We never have any trouble until some of our Southern n-----s go up north and the NAACP talks to them and they come back home."<sup>24</sup> At the time, Medgar Evers was quietly conducting an investigation with the help of other activists to get people to testify and then to help them get to safety if they did.

Emmett Till's great uncle Moses Wright was the first to testify. It was a moment that those who were there to witness would never forget. The danger he put himself and his family in to see that justice was served is astounding. Not only did he give witness about the night that Emmett was taken from his home, but he stood up and positively identified both Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam as the men who arrived at his house to kidnap Emmett.

Mamie Till Mobley also bravely gave her testimony. She discussed how she had told Emmett to behave when he

was in the South. She walked the jury and the courtroom through how she found out that Emmett had been kidnapped and subsequently found in the river. Finally, she discussed how she examined his body. The lawyer for the defense attempted to indicate that perhaps Emmett's murder was staged in an attempt for Mamie to collect on a life insurance policy, but Mamie stood firm that she had yet to receive any money and that the money was not important to her. When it was time for Carolyn Bryant to testify, Mamie was escorted out of the courtroom. At the conclusion of the trial, Mamie decided to leave. She knew that both Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were going to be found not guilty for the murder of Emmett and she did not need to hear the jury say it.

Following their trial, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam agreed to be interviewed by William Bradford Huie for *Look Magazine*. Due to the double

jeopardy rule, where a person cannot be tried again for a crime they had been found not guilty for, Bryant and Milam were not fearful of any retribution for telling their version of the truth. In their accounting of what happened, Emmett was smart-mouthed and did not seem to know his place. Milam was determined to show him. None of what Milam and Bryant describe explains the brutality of Emmett's injuries, beyond being shot and a cotton gin fan tied to him. "The youth turned to catch that big, expanding bullet at his right ear. He dropped. They barb-wired the gin fan to his neck, rolled him into 20 feet of water."<sup>25</sup>

The impact of Mamie Till Mobley's decisions following the death of Emmett were about to have an even greater impact. Back home in Chicago, Mamie Till Mobley became an activist for the Civil Rights Movement. She began to travel the country speaking out about the injustices Black Americans faced in the South and in the country as a whole. When Rosa Parks refused to get up from her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, Emmett Till was on her mind. She had seen his picture in *Jet Magazine* and had written to a friend, "This case could be multiplied many times in the South, not only Miss. [sic], but Ala, Georgia, Fla."<sup>26</sup> Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger

sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Certainly, Emmett Till's lynching was a tragedy of historic proportions. However, had Mamie Till Mobley not forced the world to see what had been done to her son, his story would probably have just been another entry in Ralph Ginzburg's collection of news reports of lynchings. According to the NAACP, "From 1882–1968, 4,743 lynchings occurred in the United States. Of these people that were lynched 3,446 were black. The blacks lynched accounted for 72.7% of the people lynched. These numbers seem large, but it is known that not all of the lynchings were ever recorded."<sup>27</sup>

According to these statistics, thousands of men and women had been lynched in the years leading up to August 1955. While all are unexplainable tragedies, the lynching of Emmett Till had one notable difference: Mamie Till Mobley. Her strength, will, and determination ensured that her wish came true. "As much as my son had to die, that I don't want his death to be a vain thing, if it can further the cause of freedom, then I will say that he died a hero."<sup>28</sup> Emmett Till's murder will always remain at the forefront of any conversation about the Civil Rights Movement and it is because of Mamie Till Mobley that the country entered an era of change.

## Notes

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*Mamie Till Mobley: An Unsung Hero of the Civil Rights Movement*

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