Justice, Delayed But Not Denied

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(CBS) For many, the name Emmett Till may not sound familiar, but what happened to him in 1955 stunned the nation, causing shock waves that still reverberate today.

Till was a 14-year-old black youngster who was murdered in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman. His death was a spark that ignited the civil rights movement in America. Two white men were put on trial for killing him, but in spite of strong evidence against them, an all-white jury acquitted them in about an hour.
This past spring, the U.S. Justice Department opened a new investigation, based on evidence suggesting that more than a dozen people may have been involved in the murder of Till, and that at least five of them are still alive. Those five could face criminal prosecution. **Correspondent Ed Bradley** reports.

Till was only 14 when he was kidnapped, tortured and killed. The two men who were acquitted of his murder were Roy Bryant and his half brother, J.W. Milam.

The failure to punish anyone for the crime made headlines across the country and around the world, exposing the racial hatred and unequal justice for blacks that was pervasive in the segregated South, where laws dictated where blacks could eat, drink and sleep.

But Till wasn't from the South. He was from Chicago, and he was visiting relatives in Mississippi in August of 1955, when his nightmare began. Till's 16-year-old cousin, Rev. Wheeler Parker Jr., traveled to Mississippi with him. The family was reluctant to let Emmett take the trip, afraid his free-spirited nature could get him into trouble in the deep South.

"He was the center of attraction. He loved pranks, he loved fun, he loved jokes. You know, he just was there in the center of everything. He was kind of a natural-born leader," says Parker, now 65.

Why would that be a problem? "In Mississippi," says Parker, laughing. "It'd be a problem because the Mississippians, what he thought was just fun, or a joke, wasn't funny to them."

Did he prepare Till with how he should behave in Mississippi? "Oh yes, that's routine," says Parker. "You're always prepared to go to Mississippi to stay alive. Because once you got to Mississippi, you had no protection under the law. You couldn't call anyone for help, once you were there, if you got in trouble."

For Till, the trouble started at Bryant's meat market and grocery store in Money, Miss. Back then, most of the customers at this store were black workers from nearby cotton plantations. A white couple, Roy Bryant and his 21-year-old wife, Carolyn, owned the store. She was behind the counter the afternoon that Till and his cousins came in to buy some candy. As he was leaving the store, Till whistled at Carolyn, and she went to get a gun.

Till's cousin, Simeon Wright, was only 12 on the day when they went to Bryant's grocery store. Today, at 62, he says the sound of Till whistling is as vivid to him now as it was 50 years ago: "When he whistled, we ran. We jumped in the car and we got outta there. ... That was something you didn't do."

Till and his cousins raced home that day and hoped nothing would come of what Emmett had done. But three days later, Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, went looking for Till in the middle of the night and found him and his cousins at the home of Rev. Mose Wright, Till's great-uncle.

Till and Simeon, Wright's son, were asleep together in one room. Parker was in another room, and he was awakened by the sounds of angry voices.

"Fear just gripped me because in my heart, I say, 'I'm getting ready to die.' And at 16, I wasn't ready to die. And I could just feel like the whole bed was shaking," recalls Parker. "In these guys come with the pistol in one hand, and the flashlight in the other. And for some reason, I closed my eyes, and I opened them, and they just passed right on by me. And went to the next room."

"I woke up and I looked, and I saw two men standing over the bed. One had a gun, which was J.W. Milam. I saw Roy Bryant. They ordered me to lay back down, and go back to sleep. And they ordered Emmett to get up and put his clothes on, and my mother was pleading and begging with him not to take him," says Simeon.

"My dad was pleading with him. And my mother then at that time offered to give them money to leave Emmett alone. And Roy Bryant kind of hesitated. But J.W. Milam, he didn't hesitate at all. He didn't even think about taking money. He came there to take Emmett, and that's what he proceeded to do."

Before taking Till out of the house, Wright says Milam threatened his father: "Before they left my room, he turned and asked my daddy how old was he. My daddy told him that he was 64. And J.W. Milam said, 'If you tell anybody about this, you won't live to get 65.'"

What did he think then? "This man wasn't afraid of the law. Here, he marched into my home, take out my cousin. And wasn't afraid the law was gonna bother him," says Wright. "Not only scared, but there was a sorrow, a sadness over the whole house. You could cut the grief in the house. Because after they left, no one said anything, hardly. All I could hear my dad say was, 'Mmmm, mmm, mmm.'"

On Aug. 31, 1955, three days after he had been abducted, Till's mangled body was found by a boy fishing in the Tallahatchie River, not far from Money. A 75-pound fan from a cotton gin was attached to his neck by barbed wire. He had been badly tortured: an eye was detached, an ear cut off, and he appeared to have been shot in the head.

His death was a powerful and lasting symbol of southern racism in the 20th century.

H.C. Strider, the local sheriff, a plantation owner and ardent segregationist, tried to have the body buried immediately in a cemetery in Money, hoping no one in the outside world would ever find out what happened to Till.

But Emmett's mother, Mamie, battled with Mississippi authorities, and was able to have her son's body returned to Chicago so she could identify him before she buried him. Mamie Till was determined never to let anyone forget the brutal way in which her son was killed.

She described the chilling story in one of the final interviews she gave before her death last year at 81: "I looked at the bridge of his nose and it looked like someone had taken a meat chopper and chopped it. And I looked at his teeth because I took so much pride in his teeth. His teeth were the prettiest things I'd ever seen in my life, I thought. And I only saw two. Well, where are the rest of them? They had just been knocked out. And I was looking at his ears, and that's when I discovered a hole about here and I could see daylight on the other side. I said, 'Now, was it necessary to shoot him?'"

Approximately 50,000 people, nearly all of them black, turned out for Till's funeral, in an enormous public display of grief and solidarity. Mamie Till ordered the funeral director to place her son in an open casket, and permitted a shocking photograph of Till's corpse to be published in Jet magazine and seen across the country.

This ignited protests, civil disobedience and a backlash that would consume the South through the '60s.

The same day that Till was buried, Bryant and Milam were indicted on charges of kidnapping and murder. Their trial was held in the small Mississippi town of Sumner, and the star witness was Rev. Mose Wright, who bravely stood up in the courtroom and pointed his finger at the two men as the ones who had abducted Till at gunpoint.

Another key witness was 18-year-old sharecropper Willie Reed, who said that on the morning after Till was abducted, he saw Emmett on a truck with six people: Bryant, Milam, two other white men, and two black men who worked for Milam.

Soon after, Reed said he saw the same truck parked in front of a barn, managed at the time by Milam's brother, and heard the screams of a young boy he presumed was Till. Today, at 67, Reed says he still cannot get those sounds out of his mind.

"I heard this screaming, beating, screaming and beating. And I said to myself, 'Milam and them beating somebody in the barn,'" says Reed. "I could hear the beating. I mean, I could hear the licks."

According to Reed and another witness, four white men came out of the barn, including Milam, who walked right up to Reed, carrying a .45-caliber pistol.

"He [Milam] asked and said, 'Listen, did you all hear anything?' I said, 'No, I haven't heard anything,'" recalls Reed. "Somebody was being beaten. But then, you see Milam come, like I said, with khaki pants on and a green shirt, and a .45 on his side. Then he asks you, what you gonna say? 'I didn't hear anything.'"

Fearing for his life after testifying against Milam and Bryant, Reed was smuggled out of Mississippi. He went to Chicago, where he suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized.

Why did he decide to speak out? "I couldn't have walked away from that like that. Because Emmett was 14, probably never been to Mississippi in his life. And he come to visit his grandfather," says Reed. "And they killed him. That's not right. When they had the pictures, when I saw his body and what it was like, then I knew that I couldn't say no."

As the trial drew to a close, attorneys for Milam and Bryant warned the all-white jury that if they voted to convict, "Your forefathers will turn over in their graves."

It took the jury just an hour and seven minutes to return a verdict of not guilty. One juror said it wouldn't have taken that long, but they stopped to take a soda-pop break to "make it look good." Milam and Bryant were congratulated by their many supporters, and kissed their wives in celebration.

Four months after the trial, knowing that double jeopardy protected them from being tried again, Bryant and Milam admitted to a reporter from Look magazine that they had in fact tortured and murdered Till. They were paid $4,000 for their story.

Till's family has had to live with that truth for nearly 50 years. But now, with a new government investigation under way, Simeon Wright hopes someone will finally be held accountable for the murder of his cousin.

"J.W. Milam, Roy Bryant confessed that they killed Emmett. The people of the state of Mississippi said they didn't. We need to reconcile that statement," says Wright. "And we need to send a message to those who are committing crimes against blacks like this that you can get by but you can't get away – that justice eventually is gonna find you."

The U.S. Justice Department says a number of other people who may have been involved in the kidnapping and murder of Till are still alive today. ***60 Minutes*** spent much of the last five months tracking them down.

When the U.S. Justice Department announced recently that it was opening a new investigation into the 1955 murder, it said the case was a "grotesque miscarriage of justice," and that it is examining evidence pointing to the possible involvement of more than a dozen people.

Bryant and Milam, who were tried and acquitted, are dead, but a number of others are still alive and could face criminal charges for their roles in Till's abduction, beating, murder and attempts to cover it up.

The Justice Department says the case has been re-opened largely because of Keith Beauchamp, an amateur filmmaker from Louisiana. Like a lot of people in this country, he was moved by the shocking photograph of Till's corpse that he saw while looking through old magazines when he was just 10 years old.

And ever since, Beauchamp has devoted much of his life to uncovering the truth about what happened to Till. "After seeing the photograph, it shocked me tremendously and my parents came in and sat me down and explained to me at that time the story of Emmett Till. And it hit me hard. It really hit me hard," he says.

"Everyone has a story when they first saw that photograph, but it stuck with me that how could this person be killed this way, a youth that was like me. It was amazing to me that something like that could happen."

Beauchamp said that after reviewing thousands of old documents and talking to numerous witnesses with knowledge of the crime, he believes that at least 14 people may have been involved in the kidnapping and murder of Till and that five of them are still alive.

He's described much of this to federal and state investigators: "Their reaction was overwhelming. They couldn't believe that a person this young would be so interested in finding out the truth. I guess they were really stunned that I did so much research on this case."

So was Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which has oversight of the Justice Department. After meeting with Beauchamp and his attorney Ken Thompson, and examining the research Beauchamp was gathering for a documentary film he was working on, Schumer urged the department to re-open the Till case, saying it was never fully investigated 50 years ago.

"It is a stain and will be a stain on both the Mississippi law enforcement officials, and the United States Justice Department that it took a young filmmaker to bring to light what they should have brought to light," says Schumer.

In 1955, Mamie Till tried to get her government to bring the truth to light. She sent a telegram to President Eisenhower urging that "justice be meted out to all persons involved in the beastly lynching" of her son.

In spite of FBI records and news reports at the time citing specific individuals, President Eisenhower didn't take any action. Till's mother died before the government re-opened the case this past spring, a case based largely on the research of Beauchamp.

Among his discoveries was Henry Lee Loggins, now 81 and living in Ohio. At the time of the murder, Loggins was working for Milam. FBI files from 1955 refer to witnesses who claimed they saw Loggins on the truck with Till after he was abducted.

One respected black newspaper at the time even reported that Loggins allegedly held Till down as Milam and Bryant tortured him. Loggins was also reportedly ordered by them to attach the fan from a cotton gin around Till's neck just before tossing him into the Tallahatchie River. Loggins is now under investigation by the Justice Department.

When Bradley talked to him recently, he denied the allegations that have dogged him for half a century. "I wouldn't sit here and tell a lie. I wasn't with them peoples. I ain't saw nothing," says Loggins, who adds that he would tell the FBI the same thing.

Five other black men, now dead, have also been implicated in some way in the abduction and murder of Emmett Till. If any of the allegations are true, the question is why?

"Knowing now that black men could possibly been involved, I just keep thinking, you know, about what could have been going through Emmett Till's mind, you know, seeing this," says Beauchamp.

"We believe that they were forced to participate in the crime. It was gonna either be them or Emmett Till. It was shocking at first because for so long you've heard, you know, white men were involved. And that was it. It was a white and black thing. You couldn't help, but you know, be amazed.

It seems clear that black men were involved. Till's late great-uncle, Mose Wright, said there was a black man on the porch when Milam and Bryant came to take Till. He also said he heard a woman's voice that night, coming from a truck parked outside. He believed it was Bryant's wife, Carolyn, the woman Till had whistled at several days earlier inside her husband's grocery store in Money, Miss.

Wright's son and Till's cousin, Simeon, says his father told him the same thing: "There was another man standing on the porch. My dad talked about it. There was another person in the truck, because when they marched Emmett out to the truck and they asked the person inside the truck, 'Is this the one,' my dad said he heard a woman's voice identifying Emmett as the boy that did the whistling."

At the time, Simeon says, they believed it was Bryant's wife: "And after 48 and some odd years, nothing has arisen to dispel that belief."

Apparently the local authorities back then believed it, too, and, according to FBI communiqués, an arrest warrant was issued for Carolyn Bryant on suspicion of kidnapping, but she was never arrested or charged.

Today, ***60 Minutes*** has learned that Carolyn is a focus of the Justice Department's new investigation, suspected of having assisted her husband and Milam in the abduction of Till. She was divorced in 1979, and has since remarried, and moved several times.

She had all but disappeared from public view until ***60 Minutes*** found her, now 70 and known as Carolyn Donham, in Greenville, Miss. While a ***60 Minutes*** cameraman was able to take pictures of her, she wouldn't answer the door when **Bradley** went to her house.

Moments later, her son, Frank Bryant, arrived and **Bradley** tried, without much success, to talk to him and to get his mother to answer some questions. ***60 Minutes*** called the house later in the day and neither Frank nor his mother would discuss the Till case any further.

60 Minutes has learned that the Justice Department could complete its investigation within a year, and criminal charges against at least five people could follow. But the Justice Department
and the FBI declined to comment.

What would be justice in this case? "In my opinion, there ought to be a full trial," says Schumer. "And if there are convictions, even though the people are old who did it, they ought to go to jail."

While that finally may bring a measure of justice to the family of Emmett Till, it also brings back the pain after 50 years.

"They'll never go away, and I'm still saying, 'How could that happen? Why would anyone hate anyone to beat him, to kill him, and to torture him like that," asks Simeon Wright. "How can a human being do that to another? All because of a whistle?"