

Tallahatchie
CIVIL
RIGHTS
DRIVING TOUR



TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY
MISSISSIPPI

Tallahatchie

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On August 28, 1955, 14-year old Emmett Till was kidnapped in the middle of the night from his uncle's home near Money, Mississippi. Till, a black youth from Chicago who was visiting family in the South, had been accused of whistling at a white woman in Money. At least two men, one from LeFlore and one from Tallahatchie County, took Emmett in the night, murdered him, and threw his body into the Tallahatchie River. His badly abused body was found days later in nearby Tallahatchie County.

In September, a grand jury in Sumner, Mississippi, indicted Roy Bryant and JW Milam for the crime of murder. An all-white, all-male jury later acquitted the two men of this charge—after a deliberation of just over an hour. Within four months of their acquittal, Bryant and Milam had confessed to the kidnapping and murder.

Before the trial began, Till's mother had sought assistance from federal officials—under the terms of the so-called “Lindbergh Law” (which made kidnapping a federal crime)—but received no aid. Only a renewed request in December 2002 from Till's mother, supported by Mississippi District Attorney Joyce Chiles and the Emmett Till Justice Campaign, yielded a new investigation.

The Till murder was an international news event; at his funeral in Chicago, thousands of mourners viewed the abused body. His mother's courage to show “the world what had been done to her boy” was a catalyst for the modern civil rights movement. Not only did Moses Wright, Till's

uncle, bravely testify against Till's murderers, but his heroism and that of other witnesses would later inspire Rosa Parks, who—just a few months after the trial—refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. The young people who would compose many of the grassroots organizations during the civil rights movement were called the “Emmett Till Generation.”

We the citizens of Tallahatchie County recognize that the Emmett Till case was a terrible miscarriage of justice. We state candidly and with deep regret the failure to effectively pursue justice. We wish to say to the family of Emmett Till that we are profoundly sorry for what was done to your loved one.

We acknowledge the horrific nature of this crime. Its legacy has haunted our community. We need to understand the system that encouraged these events and others like them to occur so that we can ensure that it never happens again. Working together, we have the power now to fulfill the promise of “liberty and justice for all.”

We believe that racial reconciliation begins with confronting the truth. We call on the state of Mississippi—all of its citizens in every county—to begin an honest investigation into our history. While it will be painful, it is necessary to nurture reconciliation and to ensure justice for all. By recognizing the potential for division and violence in our own towns, we pledge to each other, black and white, to move forward together in healing the wounds of the past, and in ensuring equal justice for all of our citizens.

Civil Rights

1. SUMNER COURTHOUSE



Here on September 23, 1955, two white men, Roy Bryant and JW Milam, were acquitted of murdering 14-year-old Emmett Till. Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, and uncle, Moses Wright, courageously testified in



the 5-day trial, which drew international attention. The most dramatic moment came when Moses Wright was asked who abducted Emmett, and he stood and point-

ed at the defendants, saying "Dar he." A jury of white men found the two 'not guilty' after deliberating for only 66 minutes. Bryant and Milam later confessed to the murder.

2. DELTA INN

The Delta Inn was built circa 1920 in Sumner as a railroad and residence hotel by Mr. Zachariah Edward Jennings. The jury in the Bryant/ Milam trial for the racially motivated murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till stayed here in September 1955. During the trial, the KKK burned a cross in front of the Inn.



3. TUTWILER FUNERAL HOME



On August 31, 1955, Woodrow Jackson prepared Emmett Till's body here at the Tutwiler Funeral Home, to return to Emmett's mother in Chicago. Emmett's uncle, Crosby Smith, had to sign a document promis-

ing not to open the casket. Once the body reached Chicago, Mamie Till-Mobley defied that order, promising to show the world what was done to her son. The public outcry over the condition of Emmett's mutilated body is considered to be one of the main sparks that ignited the Civil Rights Movement.

4. GLENDORA GIN

An old metal fan used for ginning cotton was taken from this gin, the Glendora Gin Company, by Roy Bryant and JW Milam. After shooting 14-year-old



Emmett Till in the head, the men attached the fan, weighing about 70 pounds, to Till's mutilated corpse with barbed wire before dumping him adjacent to the Tallahatchie River. The old gin now houses the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center.

5. MILAM'S HOUSE

This site was the home of JW Milam, who with his half-brother, Roy Bryant, murdered 14-year-old Emmett Till on August 28, 1955. The men had been acquitted for the murder 4 months before confessing to journalist William Bradford Huie, during which Milam claimed he and his brother initially beat Till in the barn behind the house. Milam forced some of his black employees to wash out the bloody truck, which had been used to carry Till's body to the Tallahatchie River. He later admitted to burning Till's clothes in the backyard.



6. KING'S PLACE



Here, in 1955, a black reporter, James Hicks, discovered information pertinent to the trial for the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till. A young woman revealed to Hicks the real name of Leroy "Too Tight" Collins, as well as Henry Lee Loggins, alleged witnesses in the Till trial who had been incarcerated in the Charleston jail under false names and charges. Hicks was the only reporter to go into the black community to research evidence in the Till case. Adjacent to this site was the store of JW Milam, one of Till's murderers.

7. CLINTON MELTON

The September 1955 acquittal of JW Milam and Roy Bryant for the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till fueled further racial violence. Clinton Melton was a proud black man who was gunned down here 2 1/2 months later by Milam's friend Elmer Kimbel, allegedly over a dispute about filling up a gas tank. On the day before Kimbel's trial in Sumner, Melton's widow, Beulah, was apparently forced off the





road near Glendora and drowned in Black Bayou, leaving five children orphaned. Kimbel was acquitted of Clinton Melton's murder.

8. RIVER SITE

On August 31, 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till's body was found 2.3 miles to the southeast of the marker. A fisherman discovered the body in the Tallahatchie River, where it had been dumped, presumably



as a warning to the nearby black community. A cotton gin fan had been tied around Till's neck with barbed wire. Till's uncle, Moses Wright, identified the swollen and mutilated body only because he recognized a ring Emmett wore on his finger. The FBI later confirmed the identity through DNA testing. *To reach the marker, drive north from Glendora on Swan Lake Road. In about 2 miles, turn right onto Sharkey Road, and then cross the bridge over the Tallahatchie River. The marker is at the intersection of Sharkey Road and River Road.*

9. HOME OF MOSES WRIGHT

(located in Leflore County)

Moses Wright, great uncle of Emmett Till, lived here and allowed Emmett to stay here during his summer vacation to Money, Mississippi from Chicago in 1955. Emmett arrived in Money on August 21. On August 28, Roy Bryant, JW Milam and their collaborators arrived at Wright's home at 2:30 in the morning and kidnapped Till for "wolf whistling" at Carolyn Bryant. When Emmett's body was found in the Tallahatchie River days later, Moses Wright identified the body. During the trial of Bryant and Milam, Wright testified, courageously accusing the two white men of kidnapping Emmett. After the men were acquitted, Wright believed himself to be in danger and went to Chicago.

10. SHURDEN PLANTATION

(located in Sunflower County)

At the 1955 trial, Willie Reed testified that he saw Emmett in the back of a truck when the truck arrived at the Drew plantation, at 6:30 Sunday morning, August 28, 1955. He identified JW Milam as one of the white men present that morning. Willie Reed's grandfather, Ed Reed, testified that he saw the plantation manager, Leslie Milam, at the shed that morning. Amanda Bradley testified that she saw 'a big, bald headed man,' which everyone recognized as JW Milam.

It is little realized that the killers tortured Emmett in that shed for almost three hours. Willie Reed also testified that three black men were on the back of the truck guarding Emmett that morning. Another potential witness, Frank Young, reported to Dr. TRM Howard at Mound Bayou that Sunday morning he had observed the white men at the tractor shed and heard Emmett's screams. Frank Young had every intention of testifying at the trial, but he came up missing and was unable to testify.

After the trial, Willie Reed, Amanda Bradley, and Ed Reed all feared for their safety and fled for their lives. Yet Willie Reed came back in November 1955 to testify at the kidnapping grand jury in Greenwood, as did Moses Wright.

11. MONEY STORE

(located in Leflore County)

Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, owned by 21-year-old Carolyn and 24-year-old Roy Bryant, was housed here and primarily served sharecroppers in the area. On August 24, 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till came to the store with friends to buy refreshments.



While there, Till whistled at Carolyn Bryant. This act violated the white Southern taboo that prevented sexual relationships between white women and black men. The event precipitated Till's kidnapping and murder, by Roy Bryant and JW Milam, Bryant's brother-in-law, and other collaborators. Both Roy Bryant and JW Milam were acquitted for these crimes but confessed to them four months after the trial. Following the trial, many of the store's clients boycotted, and the store went bankrupt as a result.

12. LEFLORE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

(located in Greenwood, in Leflore County)

In November 1955, a Leflore County grand jury met to consider a kidnapping indictment of Roy Bryant and JW Milam, who had admitted to kidnapping



Till. The grand jury refused to pass true bill of indictment. Moses Wright and Willie Reed returned from safety in Chicago to Greenwood to testify,

to no avail. Although the grand jury refused to indict the two men, the testimony of Wright and Reed demonstrates their continuing courage.



TALLAHATCHIE COUNTY TOUR SITES

1. Sumner Courthouse
2. Delta Inn
3. Tutwiler Funeral Home
4. Glendora Gin
5. Milam's house
6. King's Place
7. Clinton Melton
8. River site



321

Buzzard Bayou Lake

321

32

Webb

32

Albin

Cassidy Bayou
Tallahatchie River

49

COUNTY

Swan Lake

Swan Lake

4,5,6,7

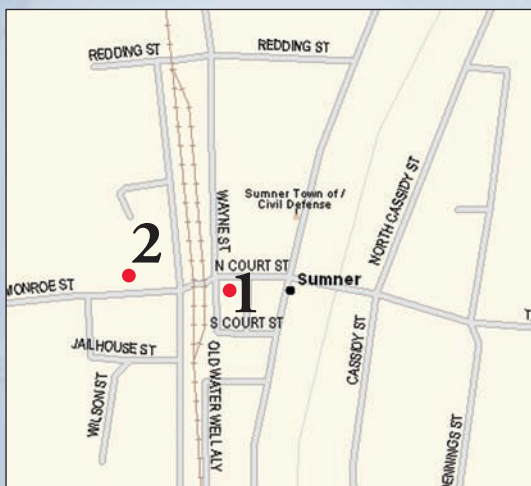
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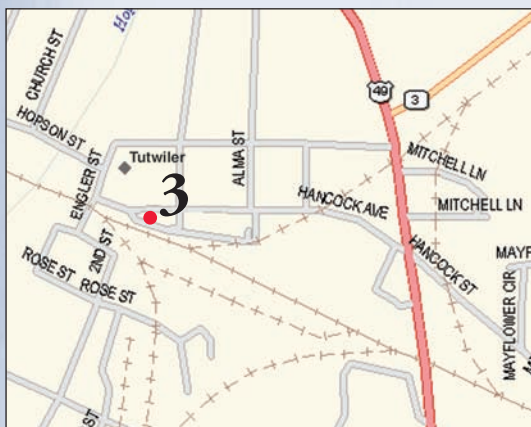
Glendora

49

SUMNER



TUTWILER



GLENDORA



BIOGRAPHIES



BOBBY BANKS was born September 21, 1952, in Grenada County, Mississippi. After graduating from high school, he took a job with Tallahatchie County, learning all he could about county work. In 1994, he was elected Supervisor of District 4, when he and Jerome Little became the first African-American supervisors to serve in Tallahatchie County. He continues to serve as District 4 Supervisor.

ERNESTINE DIXON was born October 21, 1957, in Glendora, MS, and received an AA in Business Administration from Coahoma Community College. From 2001 to 2005 she served as the first female African American mayor of Webb, MS. She now works as a Medical Assistant.

SOLOMON GORT, JR., (1936-1989), was born in Bolivar County, Mississippi. He had a distinguished career of service, which took him throughout the South, as well as to California, Illinois, New York, and Washington DC. Mr. Gort's work reflected his commitment to Christian ministry, as well as public policy, including consulting for the USDA, Head Start, Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the Tuscon Early Childhood Model, the Choctaw Reservation, and the Hampton Institute. He served as Executive Secretary of the Tallahatchie Development League in Tutwiler from 1971 until his death.



ROBERT L. GRAYSON, of Tutwiler, was born on May 10, 1941. He became the first African American mayor of Tutwiler in 1993. He is a veteran of the war in Vietnam, for which he received the Purple Heart, among other awards. He worked for the Mississippi Department of Corrections for thirty years, and has dedicated his life to public service, including Vice Chairman of Tallahatchie Housing Board, LLC Board, Council Board of Alderman of Tutwiler, Vice Chairman of Aaron E. Henry Health Care Center Board, and the National Conference of Black Mayors.

ROBERT E. HUDDLESTON serves in the Mississippi House of Representatives on behalf of the 30th House District. He was elected to the Tallahatchie School Board in 1980 and served for ten years. In 1995, he was elected to the House of Representatives, where he serves as Vice Chairman of the Executive Contingent Fund committee. He also serves on the Agriculture, Appropriations, Corrections, Medicaid, and Public Property committees.



WOODROW “CHAMP” JACKSON was born February 10, 1921 in Tchula, Mississippi. He is recognized for preparing the body of Emmett Till for return to his mother in Chicago in 1955. After serving in World War II, in 1948 he moved to

Tutwiler, where he was employed at the Tutwiler Funeral Home and the Tutwiler Furniture Store. He later worked for the Delta Burial Funeral Home until 2003.



DOROTHY M. MARTIN was born in Tallahatchie County on June 24, 1952. She attended Northwest Mississippi Junior College and graduated from Delta State University. She served as a deputy clerk in the county tax assessor's

office from January 1976 until October 1997. Mrs. Martin was elected Tallahatchie County Tax Assessor and Collector in November 1997 to fill an unexpired term, and re-elected in 1999, 2003 and 2007.



JEROME G. LITTLE was born in 1952 in Sumner, Mississippi. After serving in the Marine Corps from 1974 to 1977, he pushed for water rights for his family and community members of the Goose Pond subdivision in

Webb. Mr. Little was a part of the “Magnificent Seven,” a group of black men who had to sue Tallahatchie County several times in order to hold political positions. The seven men held countywide boycotts of stores and schools in cooperation with the county and state NAACP. In 1994, Mr. Little and Bobby Banks became the first African Americans to serve on the County Board of Supervisors. In 1996 he was elected vice-president of the Board, and in 2000 he was elected President. In 2006 he helped form the Emmett Till Memorial Commission.



JOHNNY B. THOMAS, born on November 30, 1953, is a native of Glendora and is currently the town's mayor. He attended Mississippi Valley State University and, in the 1970s, became a political and civil rights activist. He has the distinction of being elected Tallahatchie County's first African American County Supervisor, first African American Constable (1975), Alderman (1980), and the second African American mayor (1982). He is also president of the Tallahatchie County Branch of the NAACP.

NEOMIA "SIS" LAKES WIGGINS was born on September 28, 1917, near Charleston, Mississippi. She was the first African American person to register to vote in West Tallahatchie County, a move that required the police to escort her and guard her house. She worked at Sumner Elementary School, Delta Burial Corporation, Breland and Whitten Law Firm, and Head Start.



JOHN WILCHIE was born in Glendora, Mississippi. In 1979 he was appointed to carry out the remaining term of Justice Court Judge, and the following year he was elected the first African American Justice Court Judge in Tallahatchie County. He attended Mississippi Valley State University, as well as the University of Mississippi Judicial College. In 2004, he helped start the Sharkey-Hampton Lake Volunteer Fire Department, for which he serves as Fire Captain.



ROOSEVELT WILLIAMS was the first African American elected to the Tallahatchie County School Board of Trustees. He was elected in 1971 and served until 1991.

RESOURCE GUIDE

RESEARCH

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“The American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till.” Directed by Stanley Nelson. Public Broadcasting Service. 2003.

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PHOTO BY FLORENCE MARS

