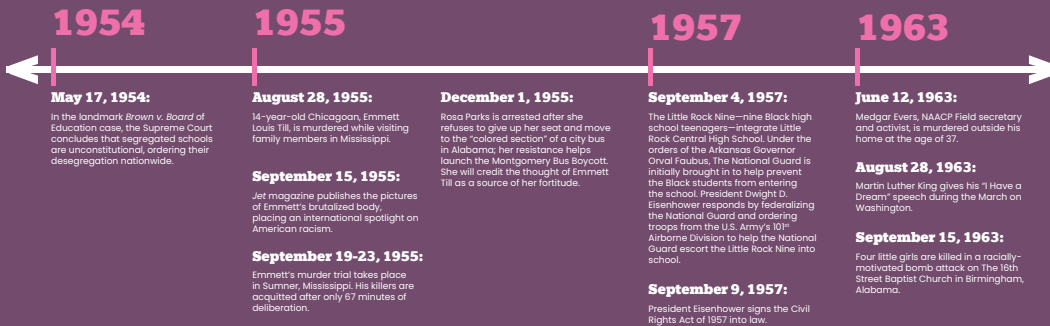


# THE TILL TRILOGY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT



## The Fight for (De)segregation Versus The Citizens' Council

by Faedra Chatard Carpenter

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court announced its ruling in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, unanimously determining that the racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. This ruling overturned the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that had previously deemed that racially segregated facilities (public transportation, and other public works and programs) were both legal and appropriate—as long as the facilities and services were "equal." Despite the innumerable efforts of civil rights activists to challenge and dismantle this "separate but equal" doctrine, this social order (known as "Jim Crow Laws") would remain in place for 60 years—until the 1954 verdict of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* case not only led to school desegregation, but it also helped concretize the understanding that "separate but equal" dynamics within public services and/or public establishments were inherently unequal. In doing so, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case fortified an important legal principle for proponents of the Civil Rights Movement.



However, this affirmation of human civil rights was met with fierce, active opposition from segregationists. Immediately after the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, organizations that had long strove for maintaining the status quo of racial inequality in America were revitalized and new, like-minded organizations quickly formed. Among the very first organizations to rally new troops of intolerance was the Mississippi Association of Citizens' Council. Organized in July 1954, just two months after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the Citizens' Council proudly championed its racist ideologies, becoming a symbol and formative force for the disciples of anti-segregation within Mississippi and beyond. Unsurprisingly, among the Council's most vocal and visible leaders was the U.S. Senator of Mississippi, James Oliver Eastland.

It was at the first statewide meeting of the Citizens' Council in December 1955 that Senator Eastland spewed some his most disparaging, contemptuous—and oft-quoted—remarks on the topic of *Brown v. Board of Education*:

"We in the South cannot stay longer on the defensive. We must take the offense. We must carry the message to every section of the U.S. Those who would mix little children of both races in our schools are following an illegal, immoral, and sinful doctrine...."

As reported by *Time* magazine, Eastland was addressing over 2,000 planters, small businessmen, and politicians from his home state of Mississippi. His speech, full of vile and hateful rhetoric, was applauded 68 times.

And so, this is the Mississippi militia that Emmett Till, his family, and those seeking justice on Emmett's behalf were up against in the summer of 1955. The victory of *Brown v. Board of Education* was certain, but it was a victory that was constantly under siege—in great part due to the likes of Senator James Eastland and the Citizens' Council in Mississippi.

## "Just for the Record": Lynching in America

Lynching in America  
by Faedra Chatard Carpenter

It was September 10, 1955, and emblazoned on the front page of the *Chicago Defender*, under the major headline and story about Emmett Till's death—and adjacent to a picture capturing his youthful, hot-adorned visage—is a short but effective aside listed, "Spitting Fire Over Lynching." In the text that follows, a *Chicago Defender* reporter pointedly asserts, "for the record, Noah Webster's dictionary defines 'lynch' as 'to inflict punishment especially death upon, without the forms of law.'" In so doing, the reporter chastises Hugh White, Mississippi's then-governor, for his conscious avoidances of the term in relation to Emmett Till's gruesome killing.

The *Chicago Defender's* sardonic tone was, in itself, an exposé: the *Defender* reporter knew that Governor White's repeated refusal to recognize Emmett Till's murder as a lynching was a tactic of avoidance and denial, an attempt to evade the tortuous—and truthful—history of racialized lynchings in America. To cast Emmett's killing as "straight out murder" and "not a lynching" would shift attention to singular individuals (Emmett, included) without interrogating the racist culture that fostered such violence—and the leadership that allowed and encouraged it.

Lynching was—and is—an act of terror. Post-Emancipation, both the knowledge and threat of lynching was used to fuel fear and control the social, political, and economic advancement of Black people. With the abolition of slavery, lynchings became strategic tools for the hindrance of Black progress. As a means of murder without due process, lynchings were executed based on accusations or mere suggestions of criminality, as well as petty offenses or the perception of a social transgression.

Carried out by a lawless mob (of a few or a few thousand), lynchings involved the kidnapping or seizure of their victims; followed by their brutal beating, torturing, and/or mutilation; and the eventual shooting, hanging, and/or burning of their bodies. These horrendous acts were often facilitated by the aid of local sheriffs and officers, and many were presented as a form of public entertainment. When marketed as the latter, these public executions would boast a county-fair atmosphere, replete with concession barkers and vendors, postcard-creating photographers, and the dispersing of souvenirs (which included victims' body parts).

A public, carnival-styled death was one of the few typified lynching abuses that young Emmett Till did not endure. Instead, his mob of murderers disposed of his mangled body by weighing it down with a cotton gin fan and throwing it in the Tallahatchie River. But news of Emmett's murder became public shortly after. Moreover, after Emmett Till's disfigured body was pulled out of the Tallahatchie, the September 10th issue of *Norfolk's New Journal and Guide* denied the fact that Emmett was "the fourth Negro to be lynched in Mississippi since May 31." The other three victims were two ministers and a farmer—all of whom met their fate for encouraging people to vote.

While the summer of 1955 clearly reveals that Mississippi was ripe with a history of ubiquitous racial violence, it was not alone. According to the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), eleven other Southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) share in having the unfavorable distinction of being U.S. states with the greatest number of recorded lynchings. According to the EJI's research, there are 4,084 documented incidents, from 1877-1950, of Black lynching victims in U.S. Southern states and, among these, Mississippi accounts for the greatest number of victims in any one state: 654.

It must also be emphasized that this research only covers U.S. Southern states between the years of 1877-1950, saying nothing about the victims prior to 1877 or from 1951 to the present—Emmett Till included. So, "just for the record": the record—and the full story of America's history of lynching—still suffers from evasion; the story is still incomplete.



## A Press for Justice

by Isaiah Matthew Wooden

It didn't take long for word to spread about the abduction of a "Chicago Negro youth" from the Mississippi home of his grand-uncle, Moses "Mose" Wright, by a mob in the middle of the night. Indeed, as Davis W. Houck and Matthew A. Grindy recount in their book *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press* (2016), the local newspaper, the *Greenwood Commonwealth*, ran a story about the incident on the front page of its August 28, 1955 afternoon edition, just a few short hours after the crime had taken place.

When other mainstream news outlets began covering the story in the days that followed, they were quick to speculate about the youth's actions and behaviors, offering them up as possible motivations for his kidnapping. Thus, by the time a seventeen-year-old white fisherman discovered the mangled and bloated body of Emmett Till floating in the Tallahatchie River on August 31, 1955, many in the white press were already using their copy to mount defenses for the youth's attackers, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam.

Meanwhile, in Black press publications like the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, *St. Louis Argus*, *Ebony Magazine*, and *Jet*, a more troubling story—a story of unrelenting racist violence and injustice—was unfolding. The September 10, 1955 edition of the *Chicago Defender* featured a column under the headline "Grieving Mother Meets Body of Lynched Son," which detailed how Emmett's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley (then Mamie Till-Brodley), sobbed and nearly collapsed when she went to claim the pinewood box housing her only child's body at Chicago's Central Station. While Emmett's open-casket funeral had already drawn thousands to Chicago's southside by the time the *Defender* printed the story, it was nevertheless crucial in refocusing attention on the fourteen-year-old's humanity and the heinousness of his killing. *Jet* magazine's decision to publish David Johnson's photo-graph of Till-Mobley solemnly staring at her son's mutilated body a few days later proved even more galvanizing. *Time* magazine notably declared it one of the most influential images of all time in 2016, observing that it "forced the world to reckon with the brutality of American racism."



Many in the Black press saw in their work on the Till case an opportunity to stake a claim for justice and, indeed, to change the course of history. When, for example, several of the Black journalists covering the trial learned about efforts to hide and prevent important witnesses from testifying, they launched into action, joining forces with an interracial coalition of local leaders, law enforcement, and fellow

reporters to search for them. "When the court opened in the morning the new witnesses were on hand. Newspapers blared the story of the new witnesses, the fact that these people could give an account of seeing Till go into the barn and hearing the outcries; evidence which strengthened the state's case. But none mentioned the all-night manhunt," Simeon Booker, who reported on the trial for *Johnson Publishing*, reflected in a 1968 essay printed in *Nieman Reports*. For Booker and his colleagues, working collaboratively to find those witnesses was a significant point of pride—even if their testimony ultimately did not sway the twelve white male jurors in Sumner to convict Bryant and Milam.