

December 1, 2002

A Hate Crime That Refuses to Give Up Its Ghosts

By RICK BRAGG

MONEY, Miss. — THE mechanical cotton pickers do not pick them clean, like human hands used to do. The fields in and around this corner of north Mississippi look ragged and half-combed, scraps of white blowing in the wind from leaning, shredded stalks.

Thin blacktop cuts between fields and swamp and islands of trees, some of the roads linking up with other seemingly pointless routes that go nowhere in particular, others just petering out into dirt roads that vanish into the weeds a few miles on.

In the middle of it all, a country store stands in ruin, its roof caved in and its interior a jumble of rotted timbers. Sunlight dapples its glass-littered floor, and vines, dying now with the onset of fall, twist up its sides. But the white-washed red-brick walls stand straight and solid.

Even decay, here, seems to be a half-finished job.

It was in this store, 47 years ago, that a 14-year-old black youth visiting from Chicago was said to have whistled at a white woman working behind the counter, an act that would elicit his death. A few days later, in that August of 1955, two men forced their way into a shack where the boy was staying with relatives and took him. A few days after that, the boy's body was found in the Tallahatchie River. The two white men would be arrested and tried but never convicted, never punished. Others rumored to be part of the crime would grow old, anonymous.

Outside this place, the story of a murdered boy named Emmett Till would shame the nation and become a ghost tale to caution black children about the worst of human nature in a time when racial prejudice was justification for almost anything, even the murder of a boy who was said to have whistled at a woman in a store.

But here along the lonely blacktop, both black people and white people will say that they remember, yes, but not a lot, that most of the people associated with the crime are dust and bones, that they would just as soon not speak about it. Here, like the roads that go no place special and the leftover cotton and that store that refuses to fall down under the weight of time, the story of Emmett Till is just one more half-done thing.

HUNDREDS of miles away, in a kitchen in Chicago, an old woman of long memory defies her doctor and prepares a feast for her 81st birthday. For Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett's mother, the table will be set with turkey, beef roast, oyster dressing, gravy, mixed greens, collards, cabbage, macaroni and cheese, string beans and rutabagas.

She is not a woman, her friends say, who leaves anything half done.

"We will have sweet potato pie," she said.

It is not the way a woman who has given up on living celebrates her birthday. Mrs. Mobley enjoys living, because on every day she lives she reminds the world of the sweetness of her son, of the wrongfulness of his murder and of the God who took him for a reason. "He wanted to be a motorcycle policeman," she said, but God made him a martyr.

Now, perhaps as much as in any time since she chose to open his casket to the world so people could see the cruelty done to him, "it looks like Emmett is surfacing once again," Mrs. Mobley said.

She is writing a book, along with Chris Benson, a Chicago lawyer and writer who grew up with the specter of Emmett's death, on the case and the legacy of her son. And she is the emotional anchor of a new documentary, "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till," a film by Keith Beauchamp, who, like Mr. Benson, is haunted by an image of the murdered boy in an open coffin.

"Of the thousands of lynchings that occurred since Reconstruction, the one name everybody remembers is Emmett Till," said Mr. Benson. "It burned the race problem into our consciousness, the first international coverage, the first real media event of the modern civil rights movement. And no one ever had to pay."

Some state officials in Mississippi have even said that the new attention being shown to the case, as well as new information about the involvement of others in the murder brought out in the documentary, could lead to a reopening of the long-cold investigation.

Roy Bryant, the store owner and the husband of the woman behind the counter, and J. W. Milam, his friend, were the primary suspects, and they admitted — in a magazine interview that they later said was untrue — that they had abducted and killed Emmett. They are both dead.

BUT there may have been others — one witness said it was a caravan of cars that came after Emmett, not a single one — and Mrs. Mobley would like to see all the rats run out from under the bed.

But even in years when it seemed there would never be any more justice for her son than what he got in Mississippi, she kept his memory alive with words, at talks and speeches and discussions.

For her, this is just the latest round in a fight that has lasted more than half her long life, and will last for quite some time to come.

"At first, I just wanted to go in a hole and hide my face from the world," she said, thinking back to the day she knew her son was dead. But she soon learned that would not work, so she started to talk. In time, it became almost an evangelism.

"It gives me a chance to get out what is clogged up inside, because if I don't talk, it stays in and worries me," she said. "If I can let it go, even though I cry sometimes, I have some relief."

She has counseled thousands of children in poor neighborhoods, from hazardous lives.

"The Lord told me, 'I have taken one, but I shall give you thousands in these troubled times,' " she said.

In her mind, her son was not merely the victim of an inhuman act by men, but a sacrifice. It is not something she has wrapped around the raw place in her memory over time, but something she knew from the start.

"I really have no idea what I would have done if I had not believed in God and called on him for his help," she said. "I know when his presence filled my room. He told me that Emmett was not mine, that he was his, that I should have been thankful to have had him, that he was down here to do a job and he had done it well.

"God sent his son so that men might have a choice between eternal life and eternal damnation. My son Emmett came so that men might have peace and freedom here on earth."

In the written history of the crime, it is more base than that. Some people said Emmett wolf-whistled at the woman behind the counter, after telling some friends that black men could be friendly with white women up north.

But Mrs. Mobley doubts that. If her theory about what happened is true, then the killing is even more monstrous than ever believed.

"At age 5, he came down with polio," Mrs. Mobley said of her son. "He would go out and play every day, and at night he would burn up with fever. The doctor told my mother to quarantine the house."

He recovered, but "he hesitated in his speech, and then he developed a full stutter," she continued. "We wanted him to be able to express himself and not take all day doing it. I started teaching him various speeches, like the Gettysburg Address and the Preamble to the Constitution. And when he would stutter, I would just say, 'Just whistle,' because the whistling relieves the tension."

She believes he was just tongue-tied as he came out of the store after buying a piece of bubble gum, and he whistled, and a few days later Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam beat him to death for it.

The key point made by Mr. Beauchamp in his documentary is that Mr. Bryant and Mr. Milam "did not act alone," he said. "More people were involved in the murder: three other white men and four black men."

An even deeper horror is that the black men, he believes, were forced to participate — that they were so frightened of their employers that they would even stand by as a black youth was murdered.

Mr. Beauchamp's research produced one man who said he witnessed this, though he was not involved in the murder itself. It is this witness who could lead investigators to other suspects, some of them still alive, Mr. Beauchamp said.

"I heard this story as a child," he said. "But it is deeper than I ever thought."

It is terrifying for the people who grew up with the story of Emmett Till to believe that it is darker still.

"It haunts," said Mr. Benson, Mrs. Mobley's co-author. As a child, growing up in the North, it was a puzzling thing. "To realize that there were people very bad out there who could hurt us, for things that seemed not important? The story was told as a cautionary. 'This is out there, and you have to be careful.'"

Mrs. Mobley said: "I have not spent one minute hating. Once, I had a dream I was walking alone across a bridge, a long, long bridge, and I looked down and the waters were real black, and the waters were troubled, and they were moving, cresting."

Even though she could not see them, she knew her son's killers were down in that water. "And the Spirit said, 'I have suspended you high above.'"