

South and drove an irrational obsession with protecting white women from the imagined threat of black men. This attitude lay behind the savage reaction to the minor lapse made by Emmett Till.

### Things to Think About

- Although Emmett Till was born in Chicago, he had relatives in Mississippi. This was not an uncommon situation for African Americans, because of what is known as the "Great Migration," a movement that began around the time of World War I. In it, a vast number of African Americans migrated from the South to the cities of the North. What compelled them to make the move? What can you find out about this migration? How did the Great Migration affect U.S. society at the time and how does it still influence it today?
- Although the jurors in both the Till and Evers cases were given overwhelming evidence of the guilt of the defendants, they could still not reach guilty verdicts. Can you try to get inside the mind of these jurors? How could they justify their actions to themselves and to others? Why were they so afraid of black liberation?
- Medgar Evers conducted his activities with the full knowledge that they might cost him his life. What factors do you think inspired his courage? What causes can you think of that might deserve such dedication today?

### Internet Resources

- [http://soundprint.org/documentaries/more\\_info/emmett\\_till\\_l.phtml](http://soundprint.org/documentaries/more_info/emmett_till_l.phtml) – A site containing an audio file with a radio documentary on the murder of Emmett Till.
- <http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/early-civilrights/emmett.html> – A page on "The Murder of Emmett Till."
- [http://africana.com/tt\\_150.htm](http://africana.com/tt_150.htm) – From a site containing many brief biographies of African Americans, a useful brief summary of the Till case.
- <http://sidwell.edu/~lcozzens/civilrights/emmett-till.html> – From the Sidwell Friends School, a good summary of the Till murder case.
- <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/emmettill.html> – a page containing the lyrics of the song written by Bob Dylan, "The Death of Emmett Till" (1963).
- <http://members.aol.com/deverysa/index.html> – Probably the most comprehensive site on Till.
- <http://www2.rmcil.edu/users/ebishop/till.htm> – The text of an editorial on the Emmett Till case that appeared in the Chicago Defender on October 1, 1955.
- [http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/evers\\_medgar/](http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/evers_medgar/) – From the University of Mississippi, a site on Medgar Evers with a bibliography and links.
- <http://www.broadview.mccsc.edu/mlk/evers/index.htm> – A comprehensive site on Evers.
- [http://www.mec.cuny.edu/Welcome/evers\\_bio.htm](http://www.mec.cuny.edu/Welcome/evers_bio.htm) – A useful site from Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, N.Y.
- <http://www.americanhistory.about.com/homework/americanhistory/library/weekly/aa060997.htm> – From a site on American history, a detailed description of Evers's murder.

### Other Resources

For students:

- Sara Bullard.** *Free at Last: A History of the Civil Rights Movement and Those Who Died in the Struggle.* Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Belinda Rochelle.** *Witness to Freedom: Young People Who Fought for Civil Rights.* Puffin Books, 1997.

For adults:

- Brown, Jennie.** *Medgar Evers.* Melrose Square, 1994.
- Brundage, W. Fitzhugh, ed.** *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South.* University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Carson, Clayborne, David Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Patricia Clark Hive.** *The Eyes on the Prize Reader.* Penguin, 1991
- Evers, Myrlie B., and William Peters.** *For Us, the Living.* University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- Hudson-Weems, Clenora.** *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb in the Modern Civil Rights Movement.* Bedford Publications, 2000.
- Massengill, Reed.** *Portrait of a Racist: The Man Who Killed Medgar Evers?* St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- Nossiter, Adam.** *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers.* Addison-Wesley, 1994.
- Tolnay, Stewart Emory.** *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of the Lynching of African-Americans in the American South, 1882-1930.* University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Vollyers, Maryanne.** *Ghosts of Mississippi: The Murder of Medgar Evers, The Trials of Byron de la Beckwith, and the Haunting of the New South.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1995.
- Whitfield, Stephen J.** *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till.* Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991.

**For Us the Living: The Story of Medgar Evers** is a television film starring Howard Rollins, Jr., that was broadcast in 1983. The film **Ghosts of Mississippi**, starring Alec Baldwin, is based on the book by Maryanne Vollyers. The HBO documentary **Southern Justice: The Murder of Medgar Evers** is narrated by Julian Bond. All three are available on videotape.

## FREE AT LAST: CIVIL RIGHTS HEROES

### Part I EMMETT TILL / MEDGAR EVERS

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## FREE AT LAST: CIVIL RIGHTS HEROES

The civil rights movement in the United States is usually considered in terms of its leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., or of its dramatic events, such as the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. But often the catalysts for progress were people who fought from within a larger group or performed individual, and seemingly small, acts of heroism. Some were victims who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time but whose fate stirred the nation. These are some of those stories.

### Part I EMMETT TILL MEDGAR EVERS

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old black youth who had recently traveled from Chicago to Mississippi. In 1955, after supposedly whistling at a white woman, he was brutally beaten and then shot. Medgar Evers was a field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was heavily involved in getting African Americans to register to vote. In June 1963 he was assassinated in front of his home in Jackson, Mississippi. Their murders and the subsequent trials advanced the civil rights timetable by vividly bringing the horrors of racism to national attention.



## The Murders That Would Not Be Forgotten

There was a time when virtually no white person could be convicted of killing a black person in the South, no matter how obviously guilty that person was. Two sensational murders put the nation on notice that things were about to change.

Beginning in the 1870s, a system of statutes known as “Jim Crow” laws created a legally inferior status in the South for African Americans, who were denied equal justice and social services. In addition, African Americans suffered sporadic and vicious outbreaks of “lynch law” — people would seize suspected criminals (many of them innocent) and murder them, often after terrible tortures.

Sometimes the “crime” for which a black person was murdered hardly qualified for that term. Such was the case of Emmett Till. Because he had allegedly insulted a white woman on a summer day in 1955, two white men assumed they had license to kill him. If they thought they would get away with it, they were correct, because they were never convicted. But if they thought Emmett Till would be forgotten, they couldn't have been more wrong.

Medgar Evers, as field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was at the forefront of the movement to get blacks to register to vote. This made him a prime target for segregationists. His murder in 1963 was the first racial killing to garner national attention since the killing of Till eight years before. After his death, an interesting shift in vocabulary signaled an important change in perception. His murder was not referred to as a “lynching,” but a “political assassination,” a recognition that violence against blacks had become something that had to be taken much more seriously and that it had deep political implications.

Had Emmett Till and Medgar Evers met their deaths 50 years earlier, their names would probably have been forgotten. But times were changing in America, and their murders ignited a spirit of protest that would not die.

## The Impact of the Events

- Throughout the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s a growing restlessness became evident among African Americans frustrated by the slow pace of social reform. The Brown v. Board of Education decision was hailed as a breakthrough, but it soon became clear that the changes it mandated were going to come very slowly and would be resisted in many places, often with violence. The murder of Emmett Till was a key event in demonstrating to reformers how far they still had to go, and thus it inspired a new militancy. Civil rights leaders now saw that they had to confront the system directly with demonstrations, marches, boycotts, and sit-ins.
- One of the main tasks that Evers hoped to accomplish was registering of African Americans to vote. His death gave this cause a martyr who could not be ignored, and the pressure on the federal government to do something became intense. As President Kennedy put it, the Evers murder “has become everything,” by which he meant that the rest of his legislative

**July 25, 1941** – Emmett Louis Till is born in Chicago.

**May 17, 1954** – In Brown v. Board of Education, the U.S. Supreme Court rules unanimously that school segregation is unconstitutional. The decision provokes intense hostility among many in the South, creating a poisonous racial atmosphere.

**August 1955** – Emmett Till, 14, travels from Chicago to Money, Mississippi, to spend the summer with his cousins.

**August 24, 1955** – While visiting Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market in Money, Emmett Till allegedly insults Carolyn Bryant, a white woman.

**August 28, 1955** – Till is abducted by two white men and murdered.

**August 31, 1955** – Till's mutilated body is found in the Tallahatchie River.

**September 19, 1955** – The trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam begins in Sumner, Mississippi.

**September 23, 1955** – Bryant and Milam are acquitted.

**December 1955** – African Americans begin a boycott of the segregated city bus system in Montgomery, Alabama.

**May 1956** – A rally is held in New York City's Madison Square Garden by a newly founded group called In Friendship. The group is founded largely in response to the Till murder and raises money to support the victims of racial violence.

**August 1957** – Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which includes a provision for federal investigations of civil rights violations, a provision that many observers credit to the impact of the Emmett Till case. On the same day, Martin Luther King, Jr., decides on the name of the new organization he and other ministers had founded – the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

**May 28, 1963** – The NAACP begins to hold sit-ins at Woolworth lunch counters. That night, a Molotov cocktail is thrown at Medgar Evers's house.

**June 7, 1963** – At an NAACP meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, Evers says, “I love my children and I love my wife. And I would die, and die gladly, if that would make a better life for them.”

**June 12, 1963** – President John F. Kennedy gives a stirring civil rights speech on television. As Medgar Evers returns home after hearing it, he is killed by a rifle shot.

**June 19, 1963** – Shortly after Byron de la Beckwith is arrested, Evers is buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery. For two days previously, his body had been carried across the land by a funeral train.

**June 22, 1963** – Kennedy meets at the White House first with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and then with Martin Luther King, Jr.

**August 28, 1963** – During the civil rights march on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his “I have a dream” speech.

**February 7, 1964** – The Beckwith trial ends in a mistrial. A second trial also failed to convict.

**July 2, 1964** – The Civil Rights Bill of 1964 is signed by President Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy's successor. It abolishes discrimination in public accommodations and employment.

**July 1965** – President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act, which ensure voting rights to African Americans, thus fulfilling one of Medgar Evers's missions.

**1989** – The Byron de la Beckwith case is reopened.

**July 25, 1991** – On Emmett Till's 50th birthday, Mayor Richard M. Daley proclaims “Emmett Till Day” in Chicago. Part of 71st Street is honorarily named “Emmett Till Road.”

**1994** – Beckwith is found guilty and sentenced to life in prison.

plans were becoming forgotten in the uproar. The weeks after the Evers murder saw new protest events occurring almost every day. Finally, in March 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr., led a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, that demanded federal protection for voting rights, and four months later President Lyndon Johnson signed the federal law guaranteeing just that.

## Important People

**Beckwith, Byron de la** – The killer of Medgar Evers, he is not convicted until 31 years after the crime.

**Bryant, Carolyn** – The white woman allegedly insulted by Emmett Till.

**Bryant, Roy** – One of the two men tried and acquitted of the murder of Emmett Till. The husband of Carolyn Bryant and owner of the store in which the incident took place.

**DeLaughter, Bobby** – District attorney who successfully prosecuted the Beckwith case.

**Evers-Williams, Myrlie** – The wife of Medgar Evers; she wrote a book about the events and campaigned for many years to bring Beckwith to justice.

**Kennedy, John F.** – President of the United States (1961-1963) and supporter of civil rights legislation.

**Milam, J.W.** – The second of the two men tried and acquitted of the murder Emmett Till. Roy Bryant's brother-in-law.

**Mitchell, Jerry** – Reporter for the Clarion Ledger. His discovery of secret documents makes possible the reopening of the Beckwith case in 1989.

**Peters, Ed** – District Attorney in Jackson, Mississippi, who reopens the Beckwith case.

**Till, Mamie** – Emmett Till's mother. Her insistence that people needed to see what had happened to her son kept the case alive.

**Whitten, John C.** – Bryant and Milam's defense attorney. He told the jury, “I'm sure that every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men.”

**Wright, Mose** – Emmett Till's uncle, in whose house Till stayed in Mississippi. He bravely identified the abductors during the trial and, for his own safety, had to leave the state after his testimony.

## Vocabulary

**“Jim Crow” laws** – A series of statutes that legally mandated a system of racial segregation in the South. Not only were African Americans given separate and inferior status in such things as schools and public transportation, but the laws also extended to the minutest details of life, such as laws prohibiting blacks from playing checkers with whites.

**Lynching** – Lynching is an event in which unauthorized people kill a person accused of some crime. In the United States, the practice goes back at least to the American Revolution, when the term “lynch law” was coined, but it reached its height during and after the Reconstruction period in the South. African Americans made up by far the greatest number of victims – the lynchings of 3,446 black men and women were recorded between 1882 and 1968, but there were probably many more.

**Miscegenation** – The mixing of races, especially the marriage of people belonging to different races. The fear of “race mixing” reached fantastic heights in the Jim Crow