

# Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
  
National Monument  
Illinois, Mississippi



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In August and September of 1955, a series of tragic events in rural Mississippi and Chicago’s South Side brought a 14-year-old, African American boy’s lynching to national attention. Emmett Till’s kidnapping, murder, and funeral marked a turning point in America’s understanding of racist violence. Mamie Till-Mobley’s courage in showing the brutality done to her son highlighted racial injustice and helped inspire the modern civil rights movement.

## Mississippi Beginnings

Mamie Till-Mobley (née Carthan) was born in Webb, Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. At the age of two, her family relocated to the Chicago Area, eventually settling in Argo-Summit. Their move was part of the Great Migration, an exodus ignited by violence and widespread economic, social, and political disparities that African Americans were experiencing in the South. After graduating from high school, she married Louis Till. Their only child, Emmett, was born in 1941.

Known as a fun-loving jokester, Emmett spent his childhood in Argo-Summit, then Chicago’s South Side. Though polio left him with a stutter, his illness did not diminish his enthusiasm for life.

Everything changed in 1955, the summer before Emmett was to enter 8th grade. That year, Emmett begged to go south to spend part of his vacation with family in Mississippi.

## A Visit to the Delta

“I emphasized over and over again to him that it was not the same as Argo or Chicago and he had to be extra careful to avoid getting in trouble with white people.”

Mamie Till-Mobley

Emmett arrived by train to Mississippi on Sunday, August 21, and went to stay at the home of his great uncle Moses (Mose) Wright outside of Money. A few days into his visit, Emmett and his cousins drove to Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market to buy snacks after a day spent picking cotton. Emmett bought candy from Carolyn Bryant, the young White woman working behind the counter, who owned the local store with her husband.

Eyewitnesses with Emmett said he whistled at Mrs. Bryant, and the boys quickly left. The subsequent, vicious response to this perceived breach of racial customs shook the country and sparked a movement for social justice.

## Deadly Night

When Carolyn’s husband Roy Bryant heard of Emmett’s apparent interaction with his wife, he and his half-brother J.W. Milam sought to punish him. In the dark of night on August 28, the two men drove to Wright’s home. They demanded Emmett at gunpoint and he was reluctantly turned over to the men. After taking Emmett, the two men beat and shot him, before throwing his body in the Tallahatchie River.

Three days later, Emmett’s mutilated body was found floating in the river and retrieved near Graball Landing in Glendora, a cotton gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire. Earlier, Wright reported Emmett’s abduction to authorities, so Bryant and Milam had already been arrested for the kidnapping (to which they admitted). The discovery of the body meant the two men would now be charged with murder.



All Eyes on Chicago

“Let the world see what I see.”

Mamie Till-Mobley

After learning of the horrific murder of her only child, Mrs. Till-Mobley demanded Emmett’s body be returned to Chicago. Her next request turned private grief into the grief of the nation. Knowing the powerful effect it would have, his mother insisted on an open-casket funeral for Emmett. All eyes turned to Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ for the viewing and funeral in September. Confronted with the image of Emmett’s battered body, the nation could no longer ignore the deadly impacts of hatred and racism.



Over four days, tens of thousands of mourners arrived at the church to view the body and pay respects.

Thousands of mourners visited the church, flooding the surrounding Chicago streets. Local and national news outlets covered the event, including television, enabling the tragedy to reach a worldwide audience. *Jet*, a popular Chicago-based African American magazine, published graphic images of Emmett’s brutalized body. Heartbreak, disbelief, and rage galvanized observers to demand change. However, justice was still far from reach.



Despite her anguish, Mamie Till-Mobley seized the moment of her son’s murder to spur action.

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Seeking Justice

Two weeks after the funeral events, eyes were back on Mississippi. The trial for Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam took place at the Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Sumner. Journalists, photographers, civil rights organizers, politicians, and curious spectators from all over the country descended on the segregated courtroom, where Southern race relations were on full display.

An all-White, all-male jury was selected. Two local Black men, Moses Wright and Willie Reed, offered groundbreaking testimony by taking the stand against White defendants. Mrs. Till-Mobley also testified. Despite what appeared to be overwhelming evidence of the defendants’ guilt, the jury returned a not guilty decision after one hour of deliberation. The verdict caused international outrage.

Bryant and Milam later openly confessed their guilt for a magazine story, but double jeopardy prevented them from being retried.

However, from tragic loss came resistance. Mrs. Till-Mobley and other family members continued to seek justice and fight for equality. Many activists, including Rosa Parks, later identified the Emmett Till injustice as a catalyst for their involvement in the civil rights movement.

Though justice for Emmett’s murder has never been realized, the legacies of Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley remain a source of inspiration. Congress passed a bill in 2022 making lynching a federal hate crime. The landmark legislation bears his name: The Emmett Till Antilynching Act.

Visiting the Park

The national monument consists of sites in two different states. Non-profit organizations run the sites in partnership with the National Park Service.

**Illinois Unit** Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ is an active church. Currently, only the church exterior is open for visitors. Please respect the private property of the church. For more information, visit nearby Pullman National Historical Park or call them at 773-468-9310.

Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ  
4021 South State Street  
Chicago, Illinois

**Mississippi Unit** Tours of the Tallahatchie County Second District Courthouse begin at the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, run by a non-profit partner. Graball Landing is a roughly 10-mile (16 km) drive from Sumner, with the last 2.5 miles (4 km) unpaved. Ask about road and site conditions at the interpretive center before embarking.

Emmett Till Interpretive Center (ETIC)  
158 North Court Street  
Sumner, Mississippi

Graball Landing  
Glendora, Mississippi

Learn More

The new national monument is working with other sites and partners to enhance visitor services and continue sharing the Tills’ tragic, yet empowering story.

Visit the park website for more information and links to partner organizations.

[www.nps.gov/TILL](http://www.nps.gov/TILL)  
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