

# Mom Who Started A Revolution

**M**AMIE Till Mobley, who died Monday at age 81, never dreamed that she would become the catalyst for a social revolution. Like Don Corleone in "The Godfather," she just wanted to say to the world, "Look how they massacred my boy."

"I wanted the world to see what I had seen," she later recalled. "I wanted the world to see what had happened in Mississippi. I wanted the world to see what had happened in America."

Down South, blacks had been murdered with impunity for generations. But the so-called "wolf whistle" lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 was the first such killing that made even white America sit up and take notice.

Perhaps it was because the murder was so senseless: Young Till, a Chicago resident visiting relatives in rural Mississippi, was said to have whistled and talked fresh — saying "Bye, baby" — to a 21-year-old white woman.

That was the ultimate violation of accepted taboos that required blacks to avoid even looking at white women. Indeed, Mamie Till had instructed her son "not to hesitate to humble yourself, even if you have to get down on your knees."

Perhaps it was because the murder was so brutal: Kidnapped in the middle of the night by the woman's husband and brother-in-law, Till was beaten, mutilated and shot before his naked, bloated corpse was pulled days later from the Tallahatchie River.

Or perhaps it was because the murder was an uncomfortable reminder that the Supreme Court's decision just a year earlier outlawing segregated schools had not, as some Northern whites hoped, put an end to racial hatred and prejudice.

When Emmett's body arrived home in Chicago, undertakers begged his mother not to even look at the horrible sight. But she did — and then insisted on an open casket, so that everyone else could see, too.

"I saw that his tongue was choked out," she said. "I noticed that the right eye was lying midway on his cheek. I noticed that his nose had been broken like somebody took a meat cleaver and chopped his nose in several places."

When 50,000 people lined up at the church over three days to view the body, Emmett Till's murder became a national news story. Long before protest rallies became an American norm, fully 20,000



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people gathered in New York's Garment District to denounce the murder and demand justice.

Surprisingly, Mississippi indicted the two killers —

who freely admitted kidnapping Till "to teach him a lesson," but denied killing him — for murder. And prosecutors, by all accounts, made a sincere effort to secure a conviction.

When she was called to the stand, though, even the district attorney had to call her "Mamie" — blacks down South were never called "Mr." or "Mrs." by white people. Just as her 64-year-old uncle, Moze Wright, was called "Uncle Moze" by lawyers when he testified.

Moze Wright defied the expectations of the whites in that courtroom. He did something no black man had ever done down South: Asked to identify the man who came to his house and kidnapped Emmett, he stood up and pointed to one of the defendants, saying "Dar he!"

Today's generation — of whites as well as African-Americans — likely won't appreciate the immense courage it took to level that accusation.

The verdict in the Till case was swift — and entirely predictable: The two defendants were acquitted by an all-white jury in less than an hour.

A few months later, the two men enthusiastically confessed the murder to journalist William Bradford Huie in return for \$4,000. And they revealed that young Emmett refused to plead for his life: "We were never able to scare him," said one.

Mamie Till spent the rest of her life talking about her only son's death. She also wrote a book, which is to be published later this year. Several new documentaries about Emmett Till have been filmed; one airs on PBS a week from Tuesday.

Though no one realized it at the time, Emmett Till's death — and his mother's defiant insistence on baring its savagery for all the world to see — helped set into motion the civil-rights movement.

Just 10 weeks after the trial ended, a woman named Rosa Parks refused an order to surrender her seat on a public bus to a white man. That, in turn, triggered the legendary bus boycott headed by a young Martin Luther King Jr. — the first case of successful resistance to segregation.

At the moment she decided to remain seated, Mrs. Parks said later, she was thinking of Emmett Till.



**Emmett Till: How they  
massacred her boy.**

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