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THE SHOCKING STORY OF APPROVED KILLING IN MISSISSIPPI

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Editors Note: In the long history of man's inhumanity to man, racial conflict has produced some of the most horrible examples of brutality. The recent slaying of Emmett Till in Mississippi is a case in point. The editors of *Look* are convinced that they are presenting here, for the first time, the real story of that killing -- the story no jury heard and no newspaper reader saw.

Disclosed here is the true account of the slaying in Mississippi of a Negro youth named Emmett Till.

Last September in Sumner, Miss., a petit jury found the youth's admitted abductors not guilty of murder. In November, in Greenwood, a grand jury declined to indict them for kidnapping.

Of the murder trial, the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* said: "Evidence necessary for convicting on a murder charge was lacking." But with truth absent, hypocrisy and myth have flourished. Now, hypocrisy can be exposed; myth dispelled. Here are the facts.

Carolyn Holloway Bryant is 21, five feet tall, weighs 103 pounds. An Irish girl, with black hair and black eyes, she is a small farmer's daughter who, at 17, quit high school at Indianola, Miss., to marry a soldier, Roy Bryant, then 20, now 24. The couple have two boys, three and two; and they operate a store at a dusty crossroads called Money: post office, filling station and three stores clustered around a school and a gin, and set in the vast, lonely cotton patch that is the Mississippi Delta.

Carolyn and Roy Bryant are poor: no car, no TV. They live in the back of the store which Roy's brothers helped set up when he got out of the 82nd Airborne in 1953. They sell "snuff-and-fatback" to Negro field hands on credit: and they earn little because, for one reason, the government has been giving the Negroes food they formerly bought.

Carolyn and Roy Bryant's social life is visits to their families, to the Baptist church, and, whenever they can borrow a car, to a drive-in, with the kids sleeping in the back seat. They call *Shane* the best picture they ever saw.

For extra money, Carolyn tends store when Roy works outside -- like truck driving for a brother. And he has many brothers. His mother had two husbands, 11 children. The first five -- all boys -- were "Milam children"; the next six -- three boys, three girls -- were "Bryant children."

This is a lusty and devoted clan. They work, fight, vote and play as a family. The "half" in their fraternity is forgotten. For years, they have operated a chain of cottonfield stores, as well as trucks and mechanical cotton pickers. In relation to the Negroes, they are somewhat like white traders in portions of Africa today; and they are determined to resist the revolt of colored men against white rule.

On Wednesday evening, August 24, 1955, Roy was in Texas, on a brother's truck. He had carted shrimp from New Orleans to San Antonio, proceeded to Brownsville. Carolyn was alone in the store. But back in the living quarters was her sister-in-law Juanita Milam, 27, with her two small sons and Carolyn's two. The store was kept open till 9 on week nights, 11 on Saturday.

When her husband was away, Carolyn Bryant never slept in the store, never stayed there alone after dark. Moreover, in the Delta, no white woman ever travels country roads after dark unattended by a man.

This meant that during Roy's absences -- particularly since he had no car -- there was family inconvenience. Each afternoon, a sister-in-law arrived to stay with Carolyn until closing time. Then, the two women, with their children, waited for a brother-in-law to convoy them to his home. Next morning, the sister-in-law drove Carolyn back.

Juanita Milam had driven from her home in Glendora. She had parked in front of the store to the left; and under the front seat of this car was Roy Bryant's pistol, a .38 Colt automatic. Carolyn knew it was there. After 9, Juanita's husband, J. W. Milam, would arrive in his pickup to shepherd them to his home for the night.

About 7:30 pm, eight young Negroes -- seven boys and a girl -- in a '46 Ford had stopped outside. They included sons, grandsons and a nephew of Moses (Preacher) Wright, 64, a 'cropper. They were between 13 and 19 years old. Four were natives of the Delta

and others, including the nephew, Emmett (Bobo) Till, were visiting from the Chicago area.

Bobo Till was 14 years old: born on July 25, 1941. He was stocky, muscular, weighing about 160, five feet four or five. Preacher later testified: "He looked like a man."

Bobo's party joined a dozen other young Negroes, including two other girls, in front of the store. Bryant had built checkerboards there. Some were playing checkers, others were wrestling and "kiddin' about girls."

Bobo bragged about his white girl. He showed the boys a picture of a white girl in his wallet; and to their jeers of disbelief, he boasted of success with her.

"You talkin' mighty big, Bo," one youth said. "There's a pretty little white woman in the store. Since you know how to handle white girls, let's see you go in and get a date with her?"

"You ain't chicken, are yuh, Bo?" another youth taunted him.

Bobo had to fire or fall back. He entered the store, alone, stopped at the candy case. Carolyn was behind the counter; Bobo in front. He asked for two cents' worth of bubble gum. She handed it to him. He squeezed her hand and said: "How about a date, baby?"

She jerked away and started for Juanita Milam. At the break between counters, Bobo jumped in front of her, perhaps caught her at the waist, and said: "You needn't be afraid o' me, Baby. I been with white girls before."

At this point, a cousin ran in, grabbed Bobo and began pulling him out of the store. Carolyn now ran, not for Juanita, but out the front, and got the pistol from the Milam car.

Outside, with Bobo being ushered off by his cousins, and with Carolyn getting the gun, Bobo executed the "wolf whistle" which gave the case its name:

THE WOLF-WHISTLE MURDER: A NEGRO "CHILD" OR "BOY" WHISTLED AT HER AND THEY KILLED HIM.

That was the sum of the facts on which most newspaper readers based an opinion.

The Negroes drove away; and Carolyn, shaken, told Juanita. The two women determined to keep the incident from their "Men-folks." They didn't tell J. W. Milam when he came to escort them home.

By Thursday afternoon, Carolyn Bryant could see the story was getting around. She spent Thursday night at the Milams, where at 4 a.m. (Friday) Roy got back from Texas. Since he had slept little for five nights, he went to bed at the Milams' while Carolyn returned to the store.

During Friday afternoon, Roy reached the store, and shortly thereafter a Negro told him what "the talk" was, and told him that the "Chicago boy" was "visitin' Preacher." Carolyn then told Roy what had happened.

Once Roy Bryant knew, in his environment, in the opinion of most white people around him, for him to have done nothing would have marked him for a coward and a fool.

On Friday night, he couldn't do anything. He and Carolyn were alone, and he had no car. Saturday was collection day, their busy day in the store. About 10:30 Saturday night, J. W. Milam drove by. Roy took him aside.

"I want you to come over early in the morning," he said. "I need a little transportation."

J.W. protested: "Sunday's the only morning I can sleep. Can't we make it around noon?"
Roy then told him.

"I'll be there," he said. "Early."

J. W. drove to another brother's store at Minter City, where he was working. He closed that store about 12:30 a.m., drove home to Glendora. Juanita was away, visiting her folks at Greenville. J. W. had been thinking. He decided not to go to bed. He pumped the pickup -- a half-ton '55 Chevrolet -- full of gas and headed for Money.

J. W. "Big Milam" is 36: six feet two, 235 pounds; an extrovert. Short boots accentuate his height; khaki trousers; red sports shirt; sun helmet. Dark-visaged; his lower lip curls when he chuckles; and though bald, his remaining hair is jet-black.

He is slavery's plantation overseer. Today, he rents Negro-driven mechanical cotton pickers to plantation owners. Those who know him say that he can handle Negroes better than anybody in the country.

Big Milam soldiered in the Patton manner. With a ninth-grade education, he was commissioned in battle by the 75th Division. He was an expert platoon leader, expert street fighter, expert in night patrol, expert with the "grease gun," with every device for close range killing. A German bullet tore clear through his chest; his body bears "multiple shrapnel wounds." Of his medals, he cherishes one: combat infantryman's badge.

Big Milam, like many soldiers, brought home his favorite gun: the .45 Colt automatic pistol.

"Best weapon the Army's got," he says. "Either for shootin' or sluggin'."

Two hours after Big Milam got the word -- the instant minute he could close the store -- he was looking for the Chicago Negro.

Big Milam reached Money a few minutes shy of 2 a.m., Sunday, August 28. The Bryants were asleep; the store was dark but for the all-night light. He rapped at the back door, and when Roy came, he said: "Let's go. Let's make that trip now."

Roy dressed, brought a gun: this one was a .45 Colt. Both men were and remained -- cold sober. Big Milam had drunk a beer at Minter City around 9; Roy had had nothing.

There was no moon as they drove to Preacher's house: 2.8 miles east of Money.

Preacher's house stands 50 feet right of the gravel road, with cedar and persimmon trees in the yard. Big Milam drove the pickup in under the trees. He was bareheaded, carrying a five-cell flashlight in his left hand, the .45 in the right.

Roy Bryant pounded on the door.

Preacher: "Who's that?"

Bryant: "Mr. Bryant from Money, Preacher."

Preacher: "All right, sir. Just a minute."

Preacher came out of the screened-in porch.

Bryant: "Preacher, you got a boy from Chicago here?"

Preacher: "Yessir."

Bryant: "I want to talk to him."

Preacher: "Yessir. I'll get him."

Preacher led them to a back bedroom where four youths were sleeping in two beds. In one was Bobo Till and Simeon Wright, Preacher's youngest son. Bryant had told Preacher to turn on the lights; Preacher had said they were out of order. So only the flashlight was used.

The visit was not a complete surprise. Preacher testified that he had heard of the "trouble," that he "sho' had" talked to his nephew about it. Bobo himself had been afraid; he had wanted to go home the day after the incident. The Negro girl in the party urged that he leave. "They'll kill him," she had warned. But Preacher's wife, Elizabeth Wright, had decided that the danger was being magnified; she had urged Bobo to "finish yo' visit."

"I thought they might say something to him, but I didn't think they'd kill a boy," Preacher said.

Big Milam shined the light in Bobo's face, said: "You the nigger who did the talking?"

"Yeah," Bobo replied.

Milam: "Don't say, 'Yeah' to me: I'll blow your head off. Get your clothes on."

Bobo had been sleeping in his shorts. He pulled on a shirt and trousers, then reached for his socks.

"Just the shoes," Milam hurried him.

"I don't wear shoes without socks," Bobo said: and he kept the gun-bearers waiting while he put on his socks, then a pair of canvas shoes with thick crepe soles.

Preacher and his wife tried two arguments in the boy's behalf.

"He ain't got good sense," Preacher begged. "He didn't know what he was doing. Don't take him."

"I'll pay you gentlemen for the damages," Elizabeth Wright said.

"You niggers go back to sleep," Milam replied.

They marched him into the yard, told him to get in the back of the pickup and lie down. He obeyed. They drove toward Money.

Elizabeth Wright rushed to the home of a white neighbor, who got up, looked around, but decided he could do nothing. Then, she and Preacher drove to the home of her brother, Crosby Smith, at Sumner; and Crosby Smith, on Sunday morning, went to the sheriff's office at Greenwood.

The other young Negroes stayed at Preacher's house until daylight, when Wheeler Parker telephoned his mother in Chicago, who in turn notified Bobo's mother, Mamie Bradley, 33, 6427 S. St. Lawrence.

Had there been any doubt as to the identity of the "Chicago boy who done the talking," Milam and Bryant would have stopped at the store for Carolyn to identify him. But there had been no denial. So they didn't stop at the store. At Money, they crossed the Tallahatchie River and drove west.

Their intention was to "just whip him... and scare some sense into him." And for this chore, Big Milam knew "the scariest place in the Delta." He had come upon it last year hunting wild geese. Over close to Rosedale, the Big River bends around under a bluff. "Brother, she's a 100-foot sheer drop, and she's a 100 feet deep after you hit."

Big Milam's idea was to stand him up there on that bluff, "whip" him with the .45, and then shine the light on down there toward that water and make him think you're gonna knock him in.

"Brother, if that won't scare the Chicago -------, hell won't."

Searching for this bluff, they drove close to 75 miles. Through Shellmound, Schlater, Doddsville, Ruleville, Cleveland to the intersection south of Rosedale. There they turned south on Mississippi No. 1, toward the entrance to Beulah Lake. They tried several dirt and gravel roads, drove along the levee. Finally, they gave up: in the darkness, Big Milam couldn't find his bluff.

They drove back to Milam's house at Glendora, and by now it was 5 a.m.. They had been driving nearly three hours, with Milam and Bryant in the cab and Bobo lying in the back.

At some point when the truck slowed down, why hadn't Bobo jumped and run? He wasn't tied; nobody was holding him. A partial answer is that those Chevrolet pickups have a wraparound rear window the size of a windshield. Bryant could watch him. But the real answer is the remarkable part of the story.

Bobo wasn't afraid of them! He was tough as they were. He didn't think they had the guts to kill him.

Milam: "We were never able to scare him. They had just filled him so full of that poison that he was hopeless."

Back of Milam's home is a tool house, with two rooms each about 12 feet square. They took him in there and began "whipping" him, first Milam then Bryant smashing him across the head with those .45's. Pistol-whipping: a court-martial offense in the Army... but MP's have been known to do it.... And Milam got information out of German prisoners this way.

But under these blows Bobo never hollered -- and he kept making the perfect speeches to insure martyrdom.

Bobo: "You bastards, I'm not afraid of you. I'm as good as you are. I've 'had' white women. My grandmother was a white woman."

Milam: "Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers -- in their place -- I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. 'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam you, I'm going to make an example of you -- just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.'"

So Big Milam decided to act. He needed a weight. He tried to think of where he could get an anvil. Then he remembered a gin which had installed new equipment. He had seen two men lifting a discarded fan, a metal fan three feet high and circular, used in ginning cotton.

Bobo wasn't bleeding much. Pistol-whipping bruises more than it cuts. They ordered him back in the truck and headed west again. They passed through Doddsville, went into the Progressive Ginning Company. This gin is 3.4 miles east of Boyle: Boyle is two miles south of Cleveland. The road to this gin turns left off U.S. 61, after you cross the bayou bridge south of Boyle.

Milam: "When we got to that gin, it was daylight, and I was worried for the first time. Somebody might see us and accuse us of stealing the fan."

Bryant and Big Milam stood aside while Bobo loaded the fan. Weight: 74 pounds. The youth still thought they were bluffing.

They drove back to Glendora, then north toward Swan Lake and crossed the "new bridge" over the Tallahatchie. At the east end of this bridge, they turned right, along a dirt road which parallels the river. After about two miles, they crossed the property of L.W. Boyce, passing near his house.

About 1.5 miles southeast of the Boyce home is a lonely spot where Big Milam has hunted squirrels. The river bank is steep. The truck stopped 30 yards from the water.

Big Milam ordered Bobo to pick up the fan.

He staggered under its weight... carried it to the river bank. They stood silently... just hating one another.

Milam: "Take off your clothes."

Slowly, Bobo pulled off his shoes, his socks. He stood up, unbuttoned his shirt, dropped his pants, his shorts.

He stood there naked.

It was Sunday morning, a little before 7.

Milam: "You still as good as I am?"

Bobo: "Yeah."

Milam: "You still 'had' white women?"

Bobo: "Yeah."

That big .45 jumped in Big Milam's hand. The youth turned to catch that big, expanding bullet at his right ear. He dropped.

They barb-wired the gin fan to his neck, rolled him into 20 feet of water.

For three hours that morning, there was a fire in Big Milam's back yard: Bobo's crepe soled shoes were hard to burn.

Seventy-two hours later -- eight miles downstream -- boys were fishing. They saw feet sticking out of the water. Bobo.

The majority -- by no means all, but the majority -- of the white people in Mississippi 1) either approve Big Milam's action or else 2) they don't disapprove enough to risk giving their "enemies" the satisfaction of a conviction.