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U.S. History & Government 11R Mr. Gallucci

FEDS UNEARTH EMMETT TILL'S CASKET

Probe seeks clues in racial killing that shocked nation in '50s

ALSIP, Illinois (AP) -- Federal investigators unearthed a concrete vault containing Emmett Till's casket at a suburban Chicago cemetery Wednesday, hoping to find clues into his 1955 slaying in Mississippi that became a key event in the civil rights movement.

The muddy cement vault was loaded onto a flatbed truck and headed to the Cook County Medical Examiner's office, where an autopsy was planned. No autopsy was performed when the 14-year-old black Chicagoan was killed.

"One purpose of this is to positively identify the remains and dispel any rumors as to whether it is truly Emmett Till or not," FBI spokesman Frank Bochte said. A second reason, he said, is to "see if any further evidence can be looked at to help Mississippi officials bring additional charges if warranted."

Officials from the Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, prosecutor's office, Mississippi Bureau of Investigation and the FBI bureau in Jackson, Mississippi, were on hand for the exhumation.

The work began after a brief, private graveside service for three members of Till's family. They later declined to comment.

Investigators with shovels and a backhoe began digging under a white tent erected over Till's grave. The family was allowed onto the cemetery grounds, but onlookers were corralled outside the entrance.

Arthur Everett, an assistant special agent in charge of the FBI's Chicago field office, said the vault came out of the ground easily. He described the moment it left the ground as a relief for agents and "sublime" for Till's family.

Everett, who is black, grew up in the South and was born the year Till was slain. "For me, personally, the event signifies that even though the system of justice sometimes turns very slowly, it still turns," he said.

The Justice Department announced last year it would reopen an investigation into Till's slaying, saying it was triggered by several pieces of information including a documentary by New York filmmaker Keith Beauchamp.

Till, who was raised in Chicago, was abducted from his uncle's home in the tiny Mississippi Delta community of Money on August 28, 1955, reportedly for whistling at a white woman. His mutilated body was found by fishermen three days later in the Tallahatchie River.

Till's mother insisted that her son's body be displayed in an open casket at his funeral, forcing the nation to see the brutality directed at blacks in the South at the time. The slaying helped galvanize the civil rights movement.

Two white men charged with Till's murder -- store owner Roy Bryant and his half brother J.W. Milam -- were acquitted by an all-white jury but later confessed to Look magazine. They have since died.

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