

# After 63 years, US reopens Emmett Till murder case

Trévon Austin  
16 July 2018

Last Thursday, the Associated Press reported that the US Department of Justice (DOJ) had reopened its investigation into the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American from Chicago who was murdered while visiting relatives in Mississippi.

A federal official familiar with the case told the AP that the inquiry had been revived “after receiving new information.”

The Justice Department declined to comment on the “new information,” but it seems likely that the government renewed the case because Carolyn Bryant Donham, the central witness, admitted that parts of her testimony were false in an interview included in the book *The Blood of Emmett Till*. The book, published in 2017, was authored by Timothy Tyson, historian and senior research scholar at Duke University.

Till was murdered in August of 1955 after Carolyn Bryant accused him of whistling at her and making sexual advances while he was shopping at her small grocery store. Several days after the alleged incident, Till was kidnapped by Carolyn Bryant’s husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J.W. Milam. The pair beat and tortured Till and ultimately shot him in the head. After killing Till, Bryant and Milam tied a cotton gin fan weighing 72 pounds around his neck with barbed wire and threw his body in the Tallahatchie River.

Till’s body was found three days later, swollen, disfigured and unrecognizable due to trauma and having been submerged in water. In September 1955, Bryant and Milam were acquitted by an all-white jury of Till’s kidnapping and murder. Protected by double jeopardy, Bryant and Milam admitted to killing Till in a 1956 interview for *Look* magazine.

Till’s body was returned to his mother in Chicago, where she insisted on holding a public open-casket funeral. Mamie Till-Mobley bravely exposed to the

world her son’s mutilated body, bringing international attention to the savage treatment of blacks in the Jim Crow South and the mockery of American democracy. Till’s death brought to the attention of the country and the entire world the continuing atrocity of lynchings of blacks in the US South, and played a significant role in the growth of the civil rights movement.

Over six decades later, it has been revealed that Emmett Till’s accuser lied to the jury. Bryant (now Donham) told the jury that Till grabbed her by the waist and made lascivious remarks, but she admitted that this was false in a 2008 interview with Timothy Tyson.

“That part’s not true,” Donham told Tyson. “Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him.”

Donham, who is now 84 and lives in North Carolina, could not be reached for further comment. The Associated Press reported that a man who answered the door at her home told a reporter, “We don’t want to talk to you.”

Under the Emmett Till Act, passed in 2007, the DOJ is charged with investigating long-ago racially motivated murders. Since 2006, according to the Justice Department, its efforts have led to five successful prosecutions, including that of Edgar Ray Killen, who was involved in the killing of three civil rights workers in Mississippi and died in prison this year.

J. W. Milam died in 1980, and Roy Bryant in 1994, leaving Donham as the only individual who could possibly face charges. However, the Justice Department looked into the case in 2004 but determined that due to the statute of limitations, there were no charges it could pursue in federal court.

Tyson, author of the work that rekindled the investigation, told reporters that he was contacted by the FBI a few months after the publication of his book.

Tyson said his research material was subpoenaed and he gave the FBI all the information they wanted. He added, however, that he did not believe any criminal charges would come from an investigation.

“Because the only thing that she disclosed to me is perjury, that she testified falsely in court,” said Tyson. “The statute of limitations on that ran out in 1958.”

Tyson added that he believed the government’s renewed investigation was a political ploy aimed at distracting Americans from the Trump administration’s civil rights abuses. “I think this is utterly hypocritical...to make a public gesture as though Jeff Beauregard Sessions and Donald Trump cared about civil rights,” he said.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**