

NAACP activist and secretary in the Montgomery, Alabama chapter, boarded a segregated bus and, in defiance of the law, refused to give up her seat to a white man. Parks's quiet protest sparked a citywide boycott of the bus system that lasted twelve-and-a-half months. During that time, the young Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as the movement's most eloquent leader; together with Montgomery's Baptist clergy and the Women's Political Council he led a successful battle that ended segregation on buses in Montgomery.

Although some historians point to the origins of the civil rights movement in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, many others trace the "awakening" of the civil rights movement to the murder of Emmett Till, the arrest of Rosa Parks, and the successful Montgomery bus boycott. These events in Mississippi and Alabama galvanized civil rights activists to begin articulating an alternative vision for America and lay plans to implement it. In the years that followed, the struggle to achieve black freedom would alter the very foundations of the social order in the United States.

## KEY QUESTIONS

1. Segregation, a social system based on a long history of prejudices and discrimination, was deeply entrenched in people's minds as well as in the culture. How did segregation manifest itself in daily life in the South? How did segregation disenfranchise black Americans?\*\*\*
2. Why do you think the lynching of Emmett Till became a catalyst in the national movement for civil rights?
3. What choices did the family of Emmett Till and their supporters make in exposing the brutality of his murder? How did these choices shape public reaction to the murder?
4. In what ways did the media educate the nation about the events in Mississippi and Montgomery?
5. What means were available to disenfranchised blacks in America to fight segregation?
6. How did people summon the courage to confront the intimidation, brutality, and injustice they faced under the Jim Crow system?
7. This series is called "*Eyes on the Prize*." What is the prize being sought in this episode?

## Document 1: BLACK BOYS FROM CHICAGO

In the South, terror and violence were used to enforce segregation and white power. On August 20, 1955, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till boarded a train in Chicago. Till, nicknamed Bo (or Bobo), traveled to Money, Mississippi with his cousin Curtis Jones to visit relatives who stayed in the South when the rest of the family migrated North. When he arrived with Jones on August 21, 1955, racial tensions were reaching a boiling point. Till, who grew up in the North, did not appreciate the strictness of racial mores in the South, nor did he recognize the risks involved in violating them. In an interview with the producers of *Eyes on the Prize*, Jones recalled:

We was going to Money, Mississippi, to have a good time. I'd never picked cotton before and I was looking forward to that. I had told my mother that I could pick two hundred pounds, and she told me I couldn't. Emmett Till was fourteen years old, had just graduated out of the grammar school.

My grandfather in Mississippi was a preacher. He had a church and he had a little raggedy

\*\*\*Disenfranchised persons are deprived of voting rights, and therefore, political power. The term is also used more broadly to describe groups that are denied access to the political process, regardless of their formal voting rights.

'41 Ford, if I'm not mistaken. And he took all of us to church that day, including my grandmother, my three uncles, myself, my cousin Emmett, and my cousin Willa Parker. While he was in the pulpit preaching, we get the car and drive to Money. Anyway, we went into this store to buy some candy. Before Emmett went in, he had shown the boys round his age some picture of some white kids that he had graduated from school with, female and male. He told the boys who had gathered round this store—there must have been maybe ten to twelve youngsters there—that one of the girls was his girlfriend. So one of the local boys said, "Hey, there's a white girl in that store there. I bet you won't go in there and talk to her." So Emmett went in there. When he was leaving out the store, after buying some candy, he told her, "Bye, baby."

I was sitting out there playing checkers with this older man. Next thing I know, one of the boys came up to me and said, "Say, man, you got a crazy cousin. He just went in there and said 'Bye, baby' to that white woman." This man I was playing checkers with jumped straight up and said, "Boy, you better get out of here. That lady'll come out of that store and blow your brains off."

It was kind of funny to us. We hopped in the car and drove back to the church. My grandfather was just about completing his sermon.

The next day, we was telling some youngsters what had happened, but they had heard about it. One girl was telling us that we better get out of there 'cause when that lady's husband come back gonna be big trouble. We didn't tell our grandfather. If we had told our grandfather, I'm sure he would have gotten us out of there. That was Wednesday. So that Thursday passed, nothing happened. Friday passed, nothing happened. Saturday, nothing happened. So we forgot about it.

Saturday night we went to town. The closest town was Greenwood. We must have stayed there till approximately three o'clock that morning. We returned and—my grandfather didn't have but three rooms, the kitchen and two bedrooms—it must have been about three-thirty, I was awakened by a group of men in the house. I didn't wake completely, youngsters, they sleep hard, you know. When they came, my grandfather answered the door and they asked him did he have three boys in there from Chicago? And he stated yes. He said I got my two grandsons and a nephew. So they told him get the one who did the talking. My grandmother was scared to death. She was trying to protect Bo. They told her get back in bed. One of the guys struck her with a shotgun side of the head. When I woke up the next morning, I thought it was a dream.

I went to the porch and my grandfather was sitting on the porch. I asked him, "Poppa, did they bring Bo back?" He said, "No." He said, "I hope they didn't kill that boy." And that's when I got kind of scared.

I asked him, “Ain’t you going to call the police?” He said, “No, I can’t call the police. They told me that if I call the sheriff they was going to kill everybody in this house.” So I told him, I say, “I’ll call.”

That happened Sunday.<sup>1</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

1. What did the reactions to the brief interaction between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant, the white woman in the store, expose about the social system that supported segregation? Why do you think Till’s actions sparked such violence?
2. Curtis Jones was playing checkers with an older man who warned him that Bryant was likely to react violently to Till’s innocent comments. What did he know that the two boys did not? How do people learn the rules and customs of a society? How are these rules and customs enforced?
3. What is the role of intimidation, lynching, and fear in a segregated society?
4. Till’s uncle, Mose Wright, would not go to the police. In a democracy, what institutions are responsible for protecting the vulnerable? What options do individuals and groups have when these institutions cannot be trusted?

### Document 2: MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY GOES PUBLIC

In an interview with CBS News, Mamie Till-Mobley recalled her first response to the sight of her son’s mutilated corpse: “instead of fainting, I realized that here’s a job that I got to do now and I don’t have time to faint; I don’t have time to cry [...] I’ve got to make a decision and my decision was that there is no way I can tell the world what I see. The world is going to have to look at this. They’re going to have to help me tell the story.”<sup>2</sup> In her grief, Till-Mobley made two choices that changed the course of American history: first, she insisted on an open casket funeral for her son, and second, a week later, she had *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender* publish the grisly images of her son’s tortured body. These photographs quickly became a symbol of the violence that simmered just under the surface of segregated communities in the South.

Charles Diggs, one of the first black congressmen after Reconstruction,<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> argued that “the picture in the *Jet* magazine [...] was probably one of the greatest media products in the last forty or fifty years, because that picture stimulated a lot of interest and a lot of anger on the part of blacks all over the country. And the fact that the Till boy was just a child also added to this mat-



December 1955. Mamie Till-Mobley weeping over Emmett Till’s casket. Her courageous decision to publish the images of her son’s tortured body made Emmett Till a powerful symbol of racial violence in the South.

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>In US history, Reconstruction is the period during and after the American Civil War in which attempts were made to solve the political, social, and economic problems arising from the readmission to the Union of the eleven Confederate states that had seceded at or before the outbreak of war. For more information see “Reconstruction” at Britannica.com, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9062908> (accessed on August 1, 2006).