

Emmett Till murder case reopened more than 60 years later

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This undated portrait shows Emmett Till. The government is still investigating the brutal slaying of the black teenager that helped spur the civil rights movement more than 60 years ago. Till, who was from Chicago, was abducted and beaten to death hours after he whistled at a white woman while visiting Mississippi. His body was found in a river days later. Photo by: AP Photo

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama — The government has reopened its investigation into the death of Emmett Till. The black teenager was killed after whistling at a white woman in 1955. His death outraged the country and built widespread support for the civil rights movement.

A Justice Department report to Congress now lists Till's killing as an active case.

Till, who was from Chicago, Illinois, was 14 years old at the time of his death. He was abducted and beaten to death after he whistled at a white woman while he was visiting Mississippi. His body was found in a river days later.

The original investigation was closed in 2007. It was reopened after a book was published two years ago, which said that the woman had lied about what happened.

Government Had Not Done Enough

The Reverend Wheeler Parker is Till's cousin and was with Till the day he was killed. Parker said he felt encouraged that the government is looking into the case. He felt the government had not done enough to bring someone to justice.

"We want them to go ahead and do something," said Parker, who is 80 years old. "What is the holdup?"

The Justice Department refused to say anything about the case.

In the same report, the department said it ended investigations into the deaths of six men whose deaths were racially motivated. Authorities have been unable to make any progress in solving them. In each case, suspects or witnesses died or people had already been tried and acquitted. If someone is acquitted they are found not guilty of a crime. The law prevents people from being tried again on the same charge.

2008 Law Named For Till

In 2008, Congress passed a law named for Till, which reopens old murder cases involving racism. The Justice Department report is required under the law.

Till was abducted a few hours after whistling at Carolyn Bryant Donham at a store in Money, Mississippi. At the time, she told her husband and others that Till grabbed her and whistled at her.

Her husband, Roy Bryant, and his half brother, J.W. Milam, were charged with murder, but both men — who were white — were acquitted by an all-white jury. The two men later confessed to kidnapping and killing Till in a magazine interview, but both are now dead.

In 2017, historian Timothy B. Tyson published "The Blood of Emmett Till" about the murder. The book revealed that Donham told Tyson that she had lied about Till.

After the book was published, Tyson said FBI agents called him, and he gave them interview recordings and other materials. Parker said he also has spoken with investigators since it reopened the investigation.

Another cousin of Till, Deborah Watts, said the family hasn't had any contact with Donham.

Watts said she would like to talk with Donham, because "the truth needs to be told. I think Carolyn holds the key to that."

The report doesn't provide any update on the Till investigation or say when it might end. Since the case is open, new charges could be brought but Parker said he doesn't expect much.

Values Have Changed

"At least they are touching it, and values have changed," he said. "At least America has reached the point where they will investigate and you can't go out and just kill people."

The report said investigators were closing the cases of six men who were killed due to racism. They are Elbert Williams in Brownsville, Tennessee, in 1940; Dan Carter Sanders in Johnston Township, North Carolina, in 1946; Peter Francis in Perry, Maine, in 1965; Lee Culbreath in Portland, Arkansas, in 1965; John Thomas Jr. in West Point, Mississippi, in 1970; and Milton Lee Scott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1973. All the victims were black except Francis, who was a member of the Passamaquoddy Native American tribe.

The report said federal agents shot Scott during an arrest, but no new evidence had come to light.