

Writing to save a life: The Louis Till file

John Edgar Wideman's new book explores the injustice delivered to Emmett Till's father

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The tragic story of Emmett Till still shocks the conscience of our nation. It was the summer of 1955. Fourteen years of age, Emmett was a good natured Black adolescent from Chicago. He traveled by train to visit family in rural Mississippi. It was his first time in the Deep South, a far cry from the northern city of his origin. His mother Mamie was nervous about her son's journey. Just before departure Emmett gave her his watch. He doubted he would need it where he was headed. Emmett did keep the ring on his finger. It was his late father Louis Till's ring. That ring enabled authorities to identify the horrifically mutilated body of the murdered boy when retrieved from the Tallahatchie River.

A ramshackle grocery store in Money, Miss., was owned by Roy Bryant and his wife Carolyn. She was tending the counter one sultry afternoon. Emmett Till entered and purchased some candy. Allegedly, he whistled at her. In the midst of Klan country it was a dangerous transgression of the ironclad racial mores of that place and time. A few nights later, Emmett was abducted forcibly from his uncle's home and subsequently tortured and murdered. Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam were accused of the barbaric deed. It is now assumed that others were also present.

Held in a sweltering courtroom, the trial was a travesty. Members of the all white jury subscribed to the doctrines of white superiority and race hatred. Without any question, they possessed a ruthless disregard for the dignity and personhood of black people. Carolyn Bryant gave a lurid account of what she claimed had happened at the store. Roy Bryant and Milam were acquitted. Recently, Carolyn Bryant would confess that her utterances in that corrupt courtroom were a fabrication. She expressed regret about young Emmett's

kidnapping and hideous death. Such contrition came decades too late for the dead teenager and his devastated mother. Mamie Till would insist that her murdered son's monstrously deformed face, head and body be openly displayed prior to burial, so all the world could see what violent racism had done to her child. The nightmarish story of Emmett Till was a major spark in the inchoate Civil Rights Movement.

In "Writing to Save a Life" award-winning author John Edgar Wideman calls attention to Louis Till, Emmett's father, a father the boy never knew. The book was 10 years in the making. A recent portrait of Wideman in The New York Times Magazine states: "It is the late-phase masterwork of a man still trying desperately to figure out how America works at a time when his perennial concerns — freedom and confinement, policing, fatherhood, the inheritance of trauma and ontological stigma — feel as pertinent as ever."

Mamie Till's relationship with husband Louis was not a happy one. He was abusive. With World War II in full swing, Louis stood before a judge and was given the choice of going to prison or joining the U.S. Army. He chose the latter and wound up a soldier in Italy. In June of 1944 in the Italian town of Civitavecchia he would be accused of "assault, rape, murder." Wideman's perusal of the convoluted military court transcript leads to the observation that young Louis Till's trial was a sloppy and tendentious affair. Argues Wideman: "Colored soldiers whom the army considered second-class citizens were suspects who possessed no rights investigators need respect. The logic of Southern lynch law prevailed. All colored males are guilty of desiring to rape white women, so any colored soldier the agents hanged could not be innocent."

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Louis Till

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doubt about the outcome. He was hanged along with another black soldier on July 2, 1945. Says Wideman: "Till's crime is a crime of being, I decided, after spending hours and hours one afternoon, poring through the file, an afternoon not unlike numerous others, asking myself how and why the law shifted gears in its treatment of colored soldiers during World War II. Asking why colored men continue to receive summary or no justice, a grossly disproportionate share of life sentences and death sentences today."

East of Paris is a cemetery containing 96 American soldiers who were executed for serious crimes. Markers have no names, only numbers. Louis Till is Number 73. Of the 96 buried men, 80 are Black. Wideman writes: "War stories. Sea stories. Love stories. Till file full of stories. Of lies and truth. Shake them up. Dump them on the table. Then what. Why. Louis Till not stuck like a bone in the county's throat. America's forgotten Louis Till, no sweat. It's me. I'm the one who can't forget. My wars. My loves. My fear of violent death. I'm afraid Louis Till might be inside me. Afraid that

someone looking for Louis Till is coming to pry me apart."

An incongruous episode in the matter of Louis Till involves the revered and notorious poet Ezra Pound. Pound became enamored of fascism and spent the war in Italy making anti-Semitic pro-Axis radio broadcasts. Once Italy was in Allied hands, Pound was arrested and thrown alone into a fortified cage in the same detention camp where Louis Till was incarcerated. "Old skinny white motherfucker army gon hang, they say. Poet, they say. Dry as a dried up rattlesnake skin." Proximate to the Black prisoners, Pound listened to the cadence and vernacular of their talk and came to know of the prisoner the other Black soldiers dubbed "Saint" Louis.

In his Pisan Canto 74, Pound refers to the death of Louis Till:

*"and Till was hung yesterday,
for murder and rape with trimmings."*

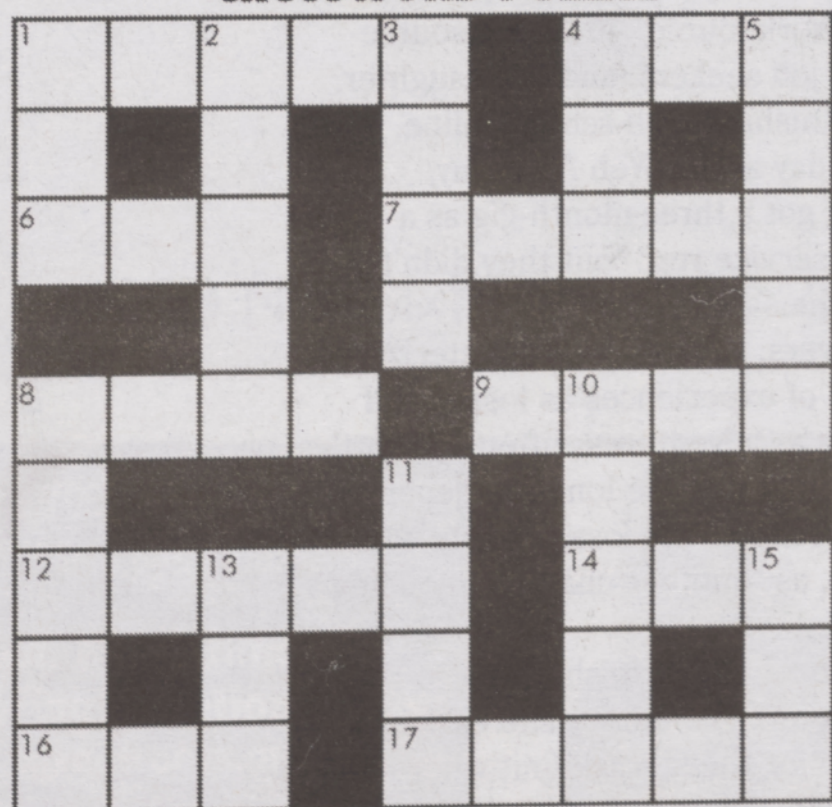
It is an astounding conjunction of two disparate individuals. A young black soldier hanged ignominiously after a confusing trial replete with contradictory testimony and a renowned white American poet who conspired publicly for years with the enemy. In time, Pound was freed.

Months after they had been acquitted of killing Emmett Till, Roy Bryant and Milam would publicly admit in a magazine article that they had committed the murder. A grand jury was considering revisiting the case and charging the two with kidnapping. But James Oliver Eastland, a segregationist senator, revealed Louis Till's court martial and execution. Louis was, "conjured like an evil black rabbit from an evil white hat," Wideman says. That ended further investigation into the death of Emmett Till.

Let us not forget the stories of Emmett Till and his father. Justice, where art thou?

Courtesy of Street Roots sister paper, Real Change News, Seattle.

VOODOO DOUGHNUT CROSSWORD PUZZLE



ACROSS

1. Fermentation agent
4. Have a bite
6. Tree fluid
7. Cake ingredient
8. Three-ply cookie
9. Hook's henchman
12. Ground grain
14. The gift of ___
16. Tease or ridicule
17. Francis or Kevin?

DOWN

1. Affirmative!
2. Type of fritter
3. Analyze or try
4. Cake ingredient
5. Tres
8. Deal
10. Potter's practice
11. Nosh!
13. Late rapper; abbr.
15. ___ appétit

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