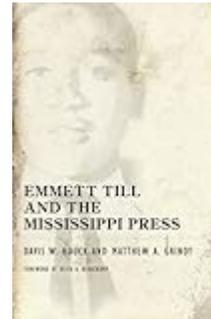




Matthew A. Grindy. *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. xv + 213 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-934110-15-7.



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Till Murder Stirs Fear, Defensiveness in Mississippi Newspapers

In the summer of 1955, the brutal beating and murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till held the interest of a nation, becoming perhaps the first large-scale media event of the civil rights movement. In *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press*, Davis W. Houck and Matthew Grindy argue that local and statewide newspapers helped turn a news event into a powerful symbol, illustrating how a vicious murder became an international symbol for statesâ rights versus civil rights.

The circumstances around the lynching are familiar to many historians. Mamie Till sent her 14-year-old son Emmitt Louis Till to rural Mississippi in the summer of 1955 to get him away from their Chicago neighborhood. Unfortunately, Tillâs Chicago childhood failed to teach him the racial protocol for an African-American teenager in the rural South. After bragging to friends about real or imagined sexual conquests of white women, he accepted a dare from some cousins and friends to ask for a date from a local white woman, Carolyn Bryant, who was working alone in the rural store at Money, Mississippi.

Bryant, the 21-year-old white mother of two young children, lived in the store with her husband, who was out of town driving a truck for his brother. Till, who seemed mature for his age, entered the store alone and purchased something from Bryant, who was behind the counter. Carolyn Bryant said—although she never testified in open court— that she recoiled when he asked for a date, and he touched her hand. As she left the counter area, she said he approached her and possibly put his hand on her waist. Realizing things had gone too far, the other black teenagers outside shouted at Emmett to flee with them. As he left, Emmett gave Mrs. Bryant a two-tone âwolf whistle.â

About 1 a.m. the following Sunday, Carolyn Bryantâs husband, Roy, and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, awoke the family with whom Emmett was staying and asked for âthat boy that did the talk at Money.â While leaving the dark house, Milam said, âIf this isnât the right boy, weâll bring him back and put him to bedâ (pp. 14-15). On the following Wednesday, a 17-year-old boy fishing in the Tallahatchie River saw the feet on Emmettâs

badly beaten and bloated body sticking out of the water. The body was secured under water with a seventy-four-pound blast wheel from a cotton-gin fan.

Emmett's mother insisted that the body be transported to Chicago where, despite the advice of friends and family, she displayed it in an open casket while thousands filed past to see Emmett's barely recognizable face. Wanting the world to see what they did to her boy, Mamie Till and Jet magazine brought the case to the nation's attention by publishing pictures of Emmett's mangled face. On September 1, 1955, Mamie Till and the NAACP's Roy Wilkins condemned Mississippi and Mississippians for racism and injustice. This attack, Houck and Grundy contend, "altered the discursive landscape" (p. 10). For most of the Mississippi newspapers, the Till story quickly became a case of undue outside influence—the NAACP, Mamie Till, Chicago blacks, and the northern press—all trying to tell Mississippi how to run its own affairs, especially in justice and race relations.

Calling the Till case "a high-stakes game of rhetorical criticism" (p. 6), Houck, an associate professor of communication at Florida State University, and Grundy, a doctoral candidate in the same department, studied a sample of nearly seventy Mississippi newspapers from the time of Till's disappearance on August 28 through four months of fall-out from the September 23 acquittal of Bryant and Milam. They start with the assumption that newspapers had a substantial influence on public opinion in white Mississippi. "On the surface," they wrote, "our aim is also rather simple: documenting how that public opinion got formed and re-formed based on a careful reading of Mississippi newspaper articles, editorials, photographs, and letters to the editor" (p. 6). They sampled nearly seventy Mississippi newspapers, mostly small weeklies. They included one African-American newspaper, Percy Greene's *Jackson Advocate*, one of five such newspapers in the state at the time.

Word choice created contrasts. For example, some newspapers contrasted Carolyn Bryant at the trial as "a pretty 21-year-old married mother of two" with Mamie Till, "a somewhat plump 33-year-old divorced mother" (p. 9). Descriptions of young Emmitt ranged from "a 14-year-old Negro from Chicago visiting relatives" to "a wolf-whistling and stuttering rapist" (p. 9). The authors then take readers on an intriguing analysis of how the framing of the Till story changed, often over only a few days. The earliest stories—routine police reports—said that Till was missing and that the sheriff had arrested suspects after the body was found. The suspects openly

admitted that they had kidnapped Till, but they denied killing him.

Houck and Grundy contend that the white Mississippi press already had a shameful record of ignoring injustice, including daytime shootings that year of two older African Americans trying to get other blacks to vote. When George W. Lee was killed by buckshot fired from a passing car in Belzoni, the local newspaper never mentioned the murder. When activist Lamar (Ditney) Smith was shot in broad daylight on the courthouse lawn in Brookhaven, no witnesses came forward to testify before the grand jury that had indicted three men in the murder. The white Mississippi press had little to say about either murder, Houck and Grundy assert. "But with his disappearance and the eventual discovery of Emmett Till's nude, murdered corpse," the authors write, "the white Mississippi press had a potentially important story to report. This was not about civil rights, school desegregation, or the threat of interracial sex—not yet anyway. And, as long as the story was not about such volatile, "racial" topics, Emmett Till had a positive run of news. It would last exactly five days" (pp. 17-18).

Leflore County Sheriff George Smith, a friend of the suspects, outlined the essential facts of the case in the first breaking story of Till's abduction in the *Greenwood Commonwealth*. The sheriff mentioned the involvement of a third white man and a woman without naming them. Neither was ever charged or named publicly. He said Till had been abducted after he "made some ugly remarks" to Bryant's wife (p. 18). What happened to Till, the sheriff said, was "the 64-dollar question" but he feared "foul play" (p. 18). After the body was found on August 31, several papers said he died from "a blow on the head" but the *Greenwood Commonwealth* reported that death may have come from "a bullet hole in his head" (p. 19) and that Emmett's great-uncle had identified the body.

Till's most positive press came, the researchers say, on September 1 when newspapers ran a 1954 Christmas picture of Emmett and his mother. One newspaper, the *Clarksdale Press Register*, even interviewed a cousin who called Till a retarded and crippled polio survivor, but Till's only physical limitation was a slight stutter. The Clarksdale newspaper called emphatically for justice: "If conviction with the maximum penalty of the law cannot be secured in this heinous crime, then Mississippi may as well burn all its law books and close its courts, for we cannot then stand before the nation and the world as a self-governing state capable of making and enforcing its own laws and punishing thus [sic] who most grievously

offend those lawsâ (p. 20).

By the end of September when Milam and Bryant were acquitted by an all-white male jury—the only kind of jury permitted under Mississippi law at the time—in slightly more than an hour, the Clarksdale newspaper seemed to forget its previous editorial. The newspaper admitted “investigatory missteps” by law enforcement but said northern journalists seemed cognizant of the limitations of law enforcement elsewhere. Northern reporting seemed “reliable and fair,” except in the “Negro publications” and the “Communist Daily Worker” (p. 112).

Other newspapers attacked northern news coverage. “That so many Mississippi papers moved with such dispatch to overdetermine [sic] northern news opinion in their favor belied a very real anxiety about the low esteem in which Mississippi and Mississippians were held; perhaps it also belied just a hint of guilt about the not guilty verdict,” Hauck and Grindy conclude (p. 112).

Several newspapers criticized law enforcement for bungling the case, but some also raised the specter of interracial sex. At least one newspaper exaggerated Till’s offense, calling it a rape case instead of a wolf whistle, as though to justify the murder. “Of course, the issue was not evidentiary—Till’s purported physical contact with her hand and waist hardly constituted an attempted rape—but historical and imagined: interracial sex was the animating and constitutive force of black men, or “husky lads” on the verge of manhood, in the 1955 southern worldview” (p. 113).

Although editorial comment paled in comparison to the number of news stories, Houck and Grindy found, newspapers continued to feed the hunger for stories about the celebrities they had created in just four weeks of intensive coverage. Some editors, like the *Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, sought out black leaders who agreed with their anger at outside agitation from the likes of the

NAACP and Chicago blacks. A letter to the editor from a South Carolina black pastor said three-fourths of the nation’s blacks do not want integrated schools, race mixing, or northern interference.

Houck and Grindy perceptively observe the placement of pictures of Carolyn Bryant—at home on pages with pictures of beauty queens and other ornamental white women—along with images of Till, the black youth with a mature appearance. Unfortunately, the book provides no pictures to illustrate this discussion that suggests the fear of race mixing and interracial sex. The book would also be strengthened with a table or chart naming some of the key newspapers and editors with a timeline of their editorial positions. The Clarksdale editorial quoted above, they assert, was in contrast to one from September 30, but they do not quote the subsequent view.

After the verdict, Hodding Carter, publisher of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, “who perhaps more than any other editor could see through the racial phantasmagoria, understood that the kidnapping confession meant nothing to the grand jury. Unfortunately, it is going to mean a great deal to Mississippi and none of it will be good.” Carter tied the failure to indict for kidnapping to Mississippi’s “racially-inspired terror” that, in turn, contributed to the state’s declining population and depressed economy (p. 146).

By such examples, Houck and Grindy establish the changing narratives of the Till coverage, despite the contrasting views of racial justice within the state. This reviewer is left with the feeling that the authors did not demonstrate the influence of newspapers on public opinion as they claimed early in the book. However, they demonstrate conclusively that Mississippi newspapers, like their readers, were deeply defensive and ambivalent when they were attacked for their values at the most personal level of sex and race.

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