

15. Justice delayed, justice denied?¹

The murder of Emmett Till is one of the most notorious hate crimes in American history. At 14 years old, Till was killed in 1955, while visiting his family in Mississippi. This case has long symbolized both the racist violence that was perpetrated against African-Americans throughout the Jim Crow era, and the way in which perpetrators of this violence were rarely held accountable.

While socializing outside of a store, Till's cousins allegedly dared him to ask the white woman in the store, 21-year-old Carolyn Bryant, on a date. The 14-year old Till allegedly accepted the dare and made comments to her in the store. Bryant initially claimed that Till also made physical advances on her. When Bryant's husband Roy, heard of this, he and his half-brother J.W. Milam went to the residence where Till was staying and forced him into their car. Three days later, the boy's mutilated body was found by the Tallahatchie River, only identifiable by an engraved ring he was wearing. His body was flown back to Chicago where his mother insisted on an open casket funeral. The news media soon picked up the story after seeing the state of his body, and Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were tried for murder in a segregated courthouse in Mississippi. At this trial, Carolyn Bryant repeated her allegations against Till. After deliberating for less than an hour, the all-white jury found the defendants to be not guilty. Carolyn Bryant later recanted her claims about Till, revealing the truth to author Timothy Tyson: Till never touched or harassed her.²

In July of 2022, an unserved arrest warrant for Carolyn Bryant (now Carolyn Donham of Raleigh, NC) from 1955 was found in a courthouse basement in Mississippi. Weeks later, a grand jury was empaneled to decide whether to indict her, as the only living accomplice of the Till kidnapping and lynching nearly 70 years ago. Ultimately, the grand jury decided not to issue an indictment over concerns about whether there was sufficient evidence to convict her.³

Critics of the grand jury's decision emphasize the importance of accountability. Those who would like to see Donham arrested and convicted argue that, just as Nazis have been prosecuted years after they committed their crimes, those who engage in horrible acts deserve to be punished regardless of how much time has passed. Moreover, given the symbolic importance of this case, it is important to have a formal acknowledgement and condemnation of her role in Till's lynching. Yet others question whether prosecuting an 88-year-old woman as an accomplice to a murder committed seven decades earlier would really constitute justice. Moreover, defenders of the grand jury's decision point out, given her age and serious health issues, she would not be likely to face punishment for this crime even if she were convicted—instead, she would likely have been sent home on compassionate release.

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² <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Blood-of-Emmett-Till/Timothy-B-Tyson/9781476714851>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/29/1108806145/emmett-till-family-seeks-arrest-after-1955-warrant-is-found>