

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

“[I]t was the murder of this fourteen-year-old out-of-state visitor that touched off the world-wide clamor and cast the glare of a world spotlight on Mississippi’s racism. . . . The Till case, in a way, was the story in microcosm of every Negro in Mississippi. For it was the proof that even youth was no defense against the ultimate terror, that lynching was still the final means by which white supremacy would be upheld, that whites could still murder Negroes with impunity, and that the upper- and middle-class white people of the state would uphold such killings through their police and newspapers and courts of law. It was the proof that Mississippi had no intention of changing its ways, that no Negro’s life was really safe, and that the federal government was either powerless, as it claimed, or simply unwilling to step in to erase this blot on the nation’s reputation for decency and justice. It was the proof, if proof were needed, that there would be no real change in Mississippi until the rest of the country decided that change there must be and then forced it.”

On December 1, 1955, less than four months after the trial of Emmett Till’s murderers, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person on a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus, and her arrest for violating city segregated bus laws led to the famous Montgomery bus boycott, the first highly visible civil rights action led by Martin Luther King Jr. Many historians—and most history textbooks—cite Parks’s act of civil disobedience as the beginning of the great civil rights movement, but it was the senseless murder of Emmett Till that galvanized African Americans all over the United States and set the stage for the civil rights movement to begin.

CHAPTER 2

KICKING THE HORNETS’ NEST

Emmett Till never planned to be the catalyst for the civil rights movement. As a fourteen-year-old boy, it’s likely that he was more interested in sports, girls, and having fun than in the struggles of African Americans for equal treatment.

For Emmett and other African Americans living in Chicago, life was markedly better than it was in the South. Segregation still existed, of course, but the nearly five hundred thousand African Americans in Chicago had many more opportunities and much more freedom than their Southern counterparts. Well-paying jobs were in good supply. Many churches, newspapers, and businesses catered exclusively to black customers. Racial violence was relatively rare. In general, the quality of life—housing, education, employment, entertainment, and social opportunities—was significantly better for African Americans *and* whites in Chicago than it was in most Southern cities.

While it’s certain that Emmett knew about segregation—he attended McCosh Elementary School, an all-black school, and lived in a segregated

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER



A young field worker takes a break from her work on a Mississippi Delta plantation

KICKING THE HORNETS' NEST

neighborhood—his life in Chicago was a good one. He had many friends, was known and liked by his neighbors, and lived in a comfortable six-room apartment with his mother, Mamie Till Bradley. He may have heard about some of the racist trouble in Mississippi and other Southern states, and in May 1954 probably also learned about the Supreme Court decision that declared school segregation illegal. But these events had little direct impact on him, and as a young teenager who had just finished seventh grade, he probably didn't pay much attention to national politics.

But racist whites in Mississippi and other Southern states *did* pay attention to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, and their reactions were swift and angry. U.S. Congressman John Bell Williams of Mississippi immediately labeled the day of the announcement "Black Monday." He accused the Supreme Court of attempting to destroy the Southern way of life and vowed to do whatever he could to resist desegregation. James O. Eastland, U.S. senator from Mississippi, said, "On May 17, 1954, the Constitution of the United States was destroyed because of the Supreme Court's decision. You are not obligated to obey the decisions of any court which are plainly fraudulent." In anticipation of the Supreme Court's decision, some Southern states had already voted to suspend their public education requirement laws in order to avoid using state money to educate African Americans.

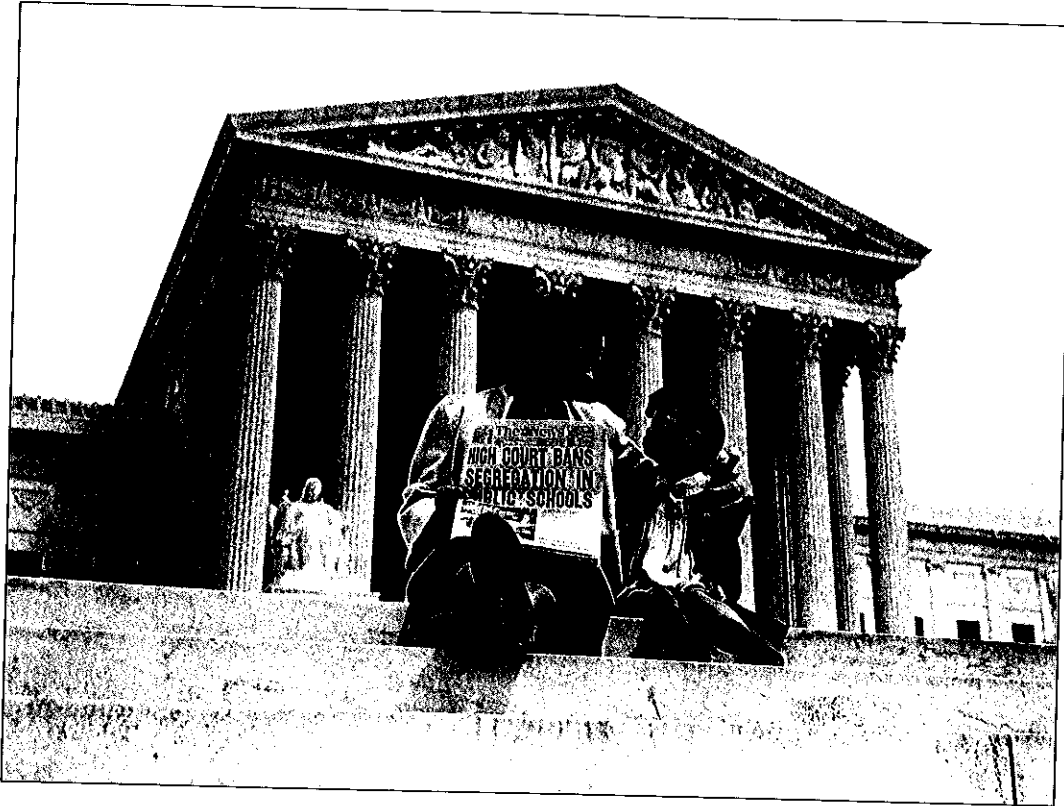
Actions to block integration took place outside the government as well. In Indianola, Mississippi, Robert "Tut" Patterson formed the White Citizens' Council, a white-collar version of the Ku Klux Klan, to use political and economic pressure to combat integration in the South. The Council quickly spread to other Southern states. In Greenwood, Mississippi, Judge Tom P. Brady delivered a passionate speech to white segregationists that decried the Supreme

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

Court's ruling, emphasized the inferiority of the "African race," and predicted the destruction of the South if integration were allowed to happen.

Brady's speech was so popular that in July 1954 he expanded it and published it as a book, *Black Monday: Segregation or Amalgamation . . . America Has Its Choice*. Widely distributed by White Citizens' Councils, Brady's book was read by whites who feared integration, and for them it became an authoritative text they could cite when arguing against the Supreme Court's decision.

Brady's book included a chilling prediction. After a lengthy description of



On the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court, a mother and daughter celebrate the court's decision on school integration

KICKING THE HORNETS' NEST

how integration was a Communist/Socialist plot to destroy America and how the mixing of races would ruin our nation, Brady unknowingly foreshadowed the racist rationale for murdering Emmett Till thirteen months before his death:

"The fulminate which will discharge the blast will be the young negro schoolboy, or veteran, who has no conception of the difference between a mark and a fathom. The supercilious, glib young negro, who has sojourned in Chicago or New York, and who considers the council of his elders archaic, will perform an obscene act, or make an obscene remark, or a vile overture or assault upon some white girl."

This warning from Brady put segregationists in Mississippi on the lookout for smart-talking black boys from Northern cities who would soon come to the South to harass white women and ultimately destroy segregation and the Southern way of life.

Brady also argued that school integration was a Communist-inspired plot that would lead directly to what white supremacists feared most: the end of the separation of the black and white races.

"You cannot place little white and negro children together in classrooms and not have integration. They will sing together, dance together, eat together, and play together. They will grow up together and the sensitivity of the white children will be dulled. . . . This is the way it has worked out in the North. This is the way the NAACP wants it to work out in the South, and that is what Russia wants."

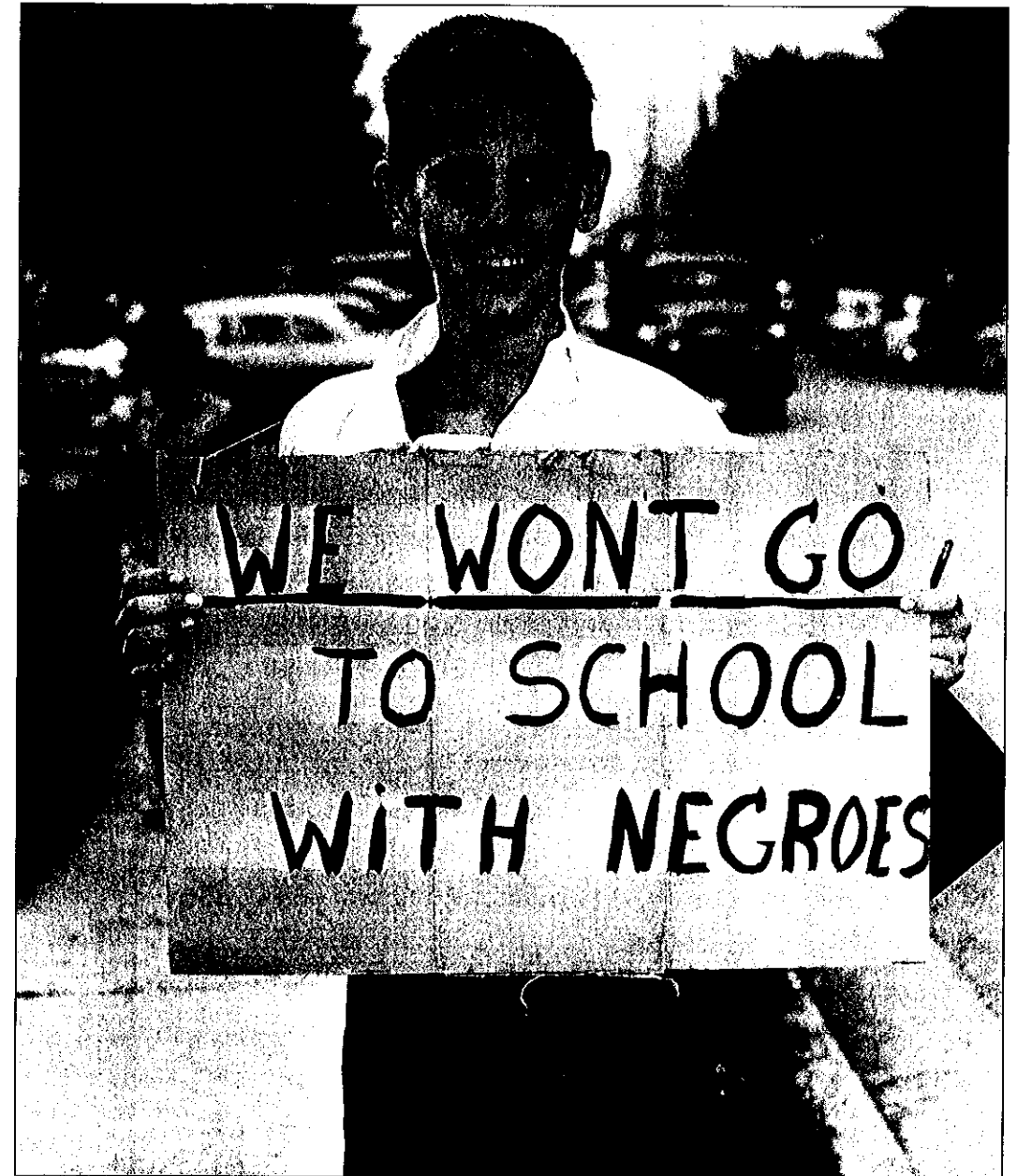
GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

Many readers believed every word of Brady's inflammatory book and became increasingly worried about the negative effects the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision would have on their lives and their society.

Like *Black Monday*, other speeches, newspaper editorials, public meetings, and books condemning desegregation stirred up fear and hatred in many white Southerners. Convinced that the government was going to destroy their way of life, white supremacists in the South pledged to do everything they could to stop the integration of schools before it began. In an article for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Hodding Carter, editor of a well-known Mississippi newspaper, described the stubborn attitude of the people of Mississippi and the futility of the Supreme Court's efforts to hasten integration: "Ours is a besieged state, but one not inclined to surrender. No one should expect that a decision of a Supreme Court can soon or conclusively change a whole people's thinking." Many white Mississippians felt that their state was under attack by the U.S. government and the NAACP, and they were prepared to defend their segregated society.

On May 31, 1955, almost three months before Emmett Till boarded a train for Money, Mississippi, the political and emotional fireworks that were ignited by the 1954 integration ruling erupted into a volcano of racial hatred and anger in Southern states when the Supreme Court mandated that desegregation of the nation's schools should proceed with "all deliberate speed." Alarmed citizens immediately mobilized—politically, economically, and violently—to prevent their white schools from becoming integrated. Anti-integration protests continued with new intensity, encouraged by the White Citizens' Councils and other racist groups. The Jim Crow laws that prevented African Americans from registering to vote intensified all across the South, making it virtually impossible for black citizens to vote. Some counties had black populations of more than 60 percent, without any black registered voters. Businesses owned by politically

KICKING THE HORNETS' NEST



A high school student in Tennessee protests mandatory integration of public schools

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER



City workers in Jackson, Mississippi, paint segregation signs for use in a railroad station

Mississippi. Though the city square and courthouse lawn were crowded with people when Smith was shot, no witnesses came forward to testify against the killer, and no one was ever convicted of the crime. Other acts of violence and intimidation occurred throughout the South, and many whites considered Smith's murder and other racist crimes justifiable action in their war against forced integration. An editorial in *The Jackson Clarion Ledger* defending the South from the Northern condemnation of the increased violence against black people is a good example of the racist attitudes held by many whites in Mississippi at the time:

"But just let a couple of Southerners whip a colored person, or let a Negro get himself killed under unusual circumstances and

active black Southerners were forced to shut down because banks foreclosed mortgages, wholesalers refused to provide goods, or property owners terminated leases.

Unfortunately, violence against African Americans also increased.

On August 13, 1955, two weeks before Emmett Till was kidnapped, Lamar Smith, a black voter registration activist, was shot and killed in broad daylight on the courthouse lawn in Brookhaven,

KICKING THE HORNETS' NEST

every pressure group in the land promptly howls for FBI action, plus rigid laws that would destroy our basic liberties."

Emmett Till knew nothing of the dangerous and tense climate in Mississippi that he and his cousin would enter on August 21, 1955. To make matters worse, as a boy raised in Chicago, he didn't understand anything about the racial attitudes of white Mississippians or the policies and taboos established by Jim Crow laws. Emmett's mother, born and raised in Mississippi, tried her best to prepare him for what he would encounter in her home state.

"Emmett was born and raised in Chicago, so he didn't know how to be humble to white people. I warned him before he came down here; I told him to be very careful how he spoke and to say 'yes sir' and 'no ma'am' and not to hesitate to humble himself if he had to get down on his knees. . . . I was trying to really pound it into him that Mississippi was not Chicago . . . I explained to Emmett that if he met a white woman, he should step off the street, lower his head, and not look up. And he thought that was the silliest thing he'd ever heard."

Sadly, Emmett Till's lack of experience with Southern customs, his unwillingness to follow his mother's advice, and the brashness and sense of invincibility that many fourteen-year-old boys possess led him to violate one of the South's most fiercely protected taboos at a time when racial tensions were primed to explode.

His cocky and naive indiscretion in Money, Mississippi, on the night of August 24, 1955, inflamed the hatred of two local white men, men who believed

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

every word of Tom P. Brady's *Black Monday* and all the other racist rhetoric that had circulated in Mississippi since the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. They'd been waiting for trouble, for a "glib young negro" from Chicago or New York to step out of line. When he did, they made sure to make an example out of him.

An example that no one would ever forget.

CHAPTER 3

THE BOY FROM CHICAGO

Emmett Louis Till lived and died in the middle of the twentieth century, a dynamic period in American history that came after the invention of telephones, industrial assembly lines, and motion pictures but before the development of cellular telephones, DVDs, and personal computers. His brief lifetime spanned a number of large and small events that permanently influenced American life: the Second World War and the first atomic bomb; the Nazi Holocaust and the establishment of Israel as an independent country; the presidential administrations from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Dwight D. Eisenhower; the GI Bill and the baby boom; Elvis Presley and rock and roll; McDonald's and Disneyland; color TV and sitcoms; the polio vaccine and fluoridated toothpaste; integration of Major League Baseball and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. It was a turbulent, progressive era of unprecedented achievements and changes.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, on July 25, 1941, Emmett was the only child of Louis and Mamie Till. Less than five months after his birth, the Japanese attack