Introduction

I was born near Chicago, Illinois, in 1954, just one year before fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was murdered in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. Though his death and the trial of his murderers received national press coverage and especially intense attention in his hometown of Chicago, my parents recall nothing at all of the case or the news coverage of the trial.

But parents can't know everything, so school should have introduced me to this landmark civil rights event; but it didn't. Through elementary school, junior high, high school, college, and graduate school I never once read nor heard anything about Emmett Till. It wasn't until I was writing a book about the life and works of Newbery-winning author Mildred D. Taylor that I first encountered Emmett. In one of her essays, Taylor made a reference to a fourteen-year-old African American boy who had been murdered in her home state of Mississippi in 1955. I followed up on the reference to Emmett just to make sure it wasn't something I should include in my book about Taylor.

What I found stunned me: a gruesome photograph of this boy from Chicago, lying in a casket, his face and head horribly disfigured. The article that accompanied the photo grabbed my interest, not because it had anything to do with Mildred D. Taylor, but because it detailed a critical moment in American civil rights history that I, with all of my years of schooling and reading, had never learned. This article piqued my interest, and I dug some more, eventually finding two very helpful books about the case, Clenora Hudson-Weems's *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* and Stephen J. Whitfield's *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*. Plater Robinson and

his *Soundprint* radio documentary "The Murder of Emmett Till" also provided invaluable background information about the case.

So, who was Emmett Till and why hadn't I learned about him?

My initial research into the case showed that most white Americans had never heard of him, and a review of history textbooks suggested why. In a survey of twenty-one high school U.S. history books published between 1990 and 2002, I found that every book included information about two famous civil rights events: the U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education,* and the Montgomery bus boycott started by Rosa Parks. Sadly, only two books mentioned Emmett Till, and those books used a combined total of fewer than fifty words to describe his place in American history. Neither book suggested that Emmett's murder had been a catalyst for the civil rights movement. A more recent survey of twenty-seven textbooks published between 2005 and 2016 showed that little has changed: three of the books devoted a sentence or two to the Till case, and one featured an entire page. The other twenty-three books made no mention of Emmett Till or of the significance of his murder.

But most African Americans know well his story and its place in history.

In addition to the thousands of people who attended Emmett's three-day viewing and the funeral that followed, hundreds of thousands more, including Mildred D. Taylor, read about his murder and the trial in the African American media of the time. The most sensational coverage of the murder, which included the photo of Emmett's battered body resting in his casket, appeared in *Jet* magazine, and today, many African Americans who were alive at the time mark the moment by recollecting, "I remember when I saw the photo of Emmett Till in *Jet* magazine. . ." similar to the way many mark the moment they heard that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated.

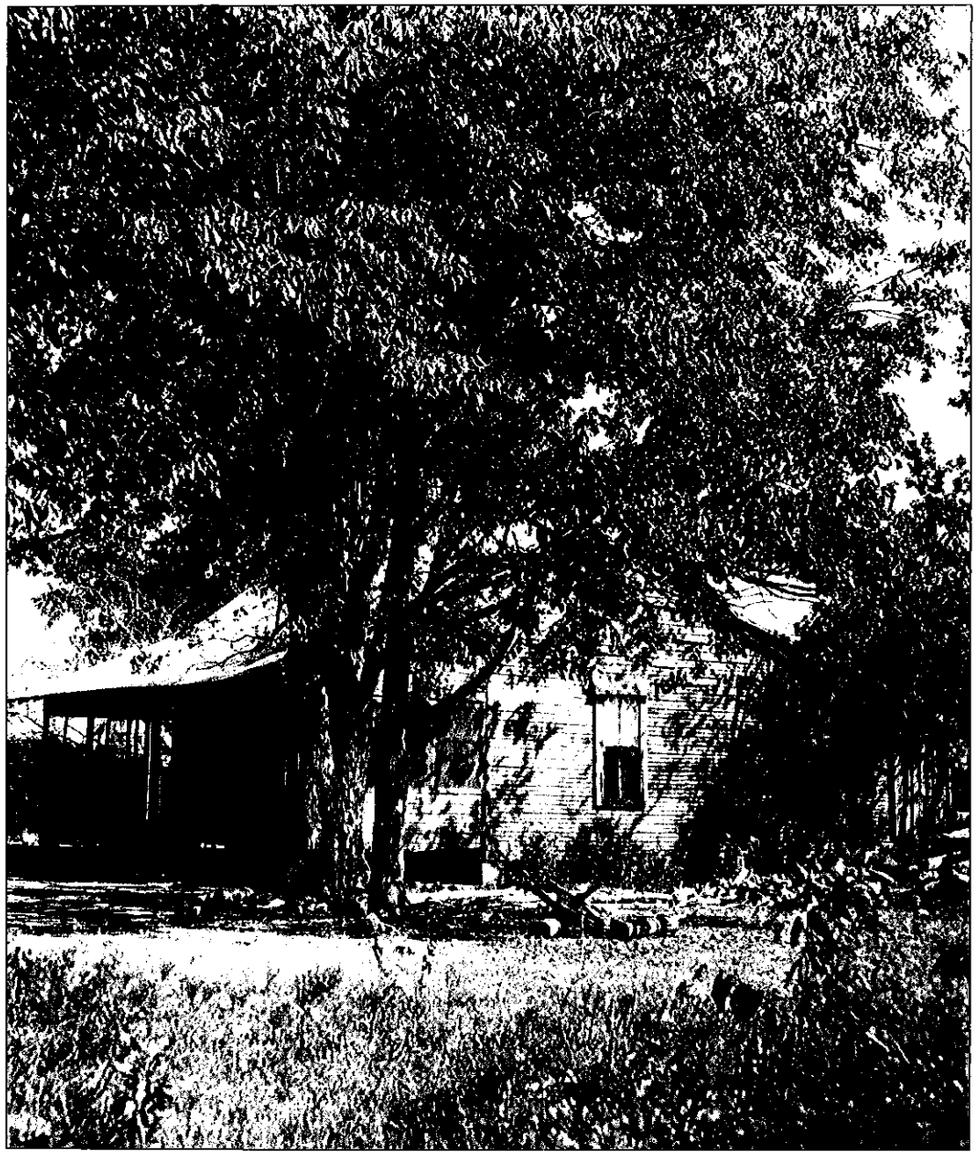
Emmett's murder in August 1955 and the sham trial that followed it infuriated

African Americans everywhere. For many, the brazen murder of a boy by two white men was the last straw in centuries of racial oppression and abuse. Even before Emmett's death, African American activists had been working to formalize a civil rights movement, but the outrage that followed his death and the acquittal of his murderers finally launched the movement to combat racism in the United States.

To understand and appreciate the modern history of the fight for equal rights for African Americans, American teenagers of all races should know the story of Emmett Till and its impact on American society. This book will, I hope, keep alive the memory of the Emmett Till case and provide a broader understanding of the beginning of the civil rights movement.

In Memoriam
Emmett Louis Till, 1941–1955
"A little nobody who shook up the world."
—Mamie Till Bradley

The first edition of this book appeared in 2003, right at the beginning of renewed interest and attention in the Emmett Till case. In the same year, two other important projects about Emmett Till were also released: Christopher Metress' book *The Murder of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* and Stanley Nelson's PBS documentary *The Murder of Emmett Till.* These marked the beginning of an unprecedented interest in and examination of the Emmett Till case and its place in American history. Using the incredible wealth of information that was not available in 2003, this new edition updates—and corrects—what we know about the Emmett Till case and its impact on civil rights history.



Scene of the kidnapping: the home of Mose Wright, Emmett Till's great-uncle

CHAPTER 1

THE BOY WHO TRIGGERED THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In August 1955, a group of white men murdered a fourteen-year-old black boy in the Mississippi Delta. News of the murder and the trial that followed it outraged black and sympathetic white Americans across the nation, and reaction to the famous murder case played an important role as a catalyst for the civil rights movement.

This is a true account of the people and events connected to the murder of Emmett Till.

Sunday, August 28, 1955, a few miles outside Money, Mississippi

It was after 2:00 A.M. when the killers' car, its headlights off, coasted to a stop on the gravel road about fifty feet from the darkened sharecropper's house. When the car engine shut down, the steady thrum of locusts resumed, filling the humid night air with a pulsing buzz.

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

Shadows from the persimmon and cedar trees in the yard cloaked two white men as they emerged from the sedan and spoke to a man and a woman in the backseat. When they finished their brief conversation, Roy Bryant and his half brother, J. W. Milam, walked boldly toward the house with vengeance on their minds. Milam, the bigger of the two, carried a long flashlight in one hand and an Army-issue .45 pistol in the other.

The brothers walked through the screened front porch of the cotton field house and stopped at the door, ready for action.

Bryant pounded on the door.

The house remained silent.

He pounded again and shouted, "Preacher! Preacher, get up and open this door!"

Someone moved inside the darkened house, and soon a voice called out, "Who's that?"

"This is Mr. Bryant, Preacher. From Money."

"All right, sir." The door slowly swung open, and a thin African American man, sixty-four-year-old Mose "Preacher" Wright, stepped out onto the porch.

Milam shined the flashlight into Wright's face and pointed his gun at the old man. "You got two boys from Chicago here?"

"Yessir." He nodded back into the house. "They're sleeping."

Milam stepped closer. "I want the one who done the talkin' in Money. Is he here?"

"Yessir." The old man's voice trembled.

Bryant nodded. "Well, then, we need to talk to him."

With the flashlight casting eerie shadows through the dark house, Wright led the two white men to a back bedroom where fourteen-year-old Emmett "Bobo" Till slept with three of his cousins.

Bryant shook Emmett Till awake while Milam shined the flashlight in the boy's face. When he awoke, Milam asked, "Are you the boy who did the talking?"

"Yeah," replied Emmett.

"Don't say 'yeah' to me," snarled Milam. "I'll blow your head off. Now get up and get your clothes on."

Emmett sat up on the bed and began dressing while his great-uncle, Mose, pleaded for him. "He doesn't have good sense because he was raised up in Chicago. The boy didn't know what he was doing. Don't take him."

By now the commotion had brought Emmett's great-aunt, Elizabeth Wright, into the room, and she begged the white men to leave Emmett alone. "Listen, we'll pay you whatever you want to charge; we'll pay you if you'll release him."

"You'd best get yourself back in that bed of yours, girl," snapped Milam. "Do it now—I want to hear those springs."

With tears in her eyes, Elizabeth Wright left the room.

Emmett continued to dress, oblivious to the danger that was unfolding around him. He reached for his socks and Milam stopped him.

"Just the shoes, boy. We got to hurry."

"I don't wear shoes without socks," said Emmett. His kidnappers cursed him for making them wait while he pulled on his socks and then a pair of canvas shoes with thick crepe soles.

When the boy was dressed, Milam and Bryant pushed him through the house and out to the porch. Mose Wright tried one more time to save his nephew. "Just take him out in the yard and whip him, and I'll be satisfied." But the two men ignored his plea.

Before they stepped into the yard, Milam turned and asked Wright if he recognized them.

"No sir, I don't know you."

"Good, Preacher. How old are you?"

"Sixty-four."

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

"Well, if you decide later that you do know any of us here tonight, you'll never live to be sixty-five."

"But where are you taking him?" asked Wright.

"Nowhere if he's not the right one," said Milam.

Mose Wright and his wife watched from the porch while the two men walked Emmett to their car. Bryant forced Emmett close to the back window and asked, "Is this the boy?"

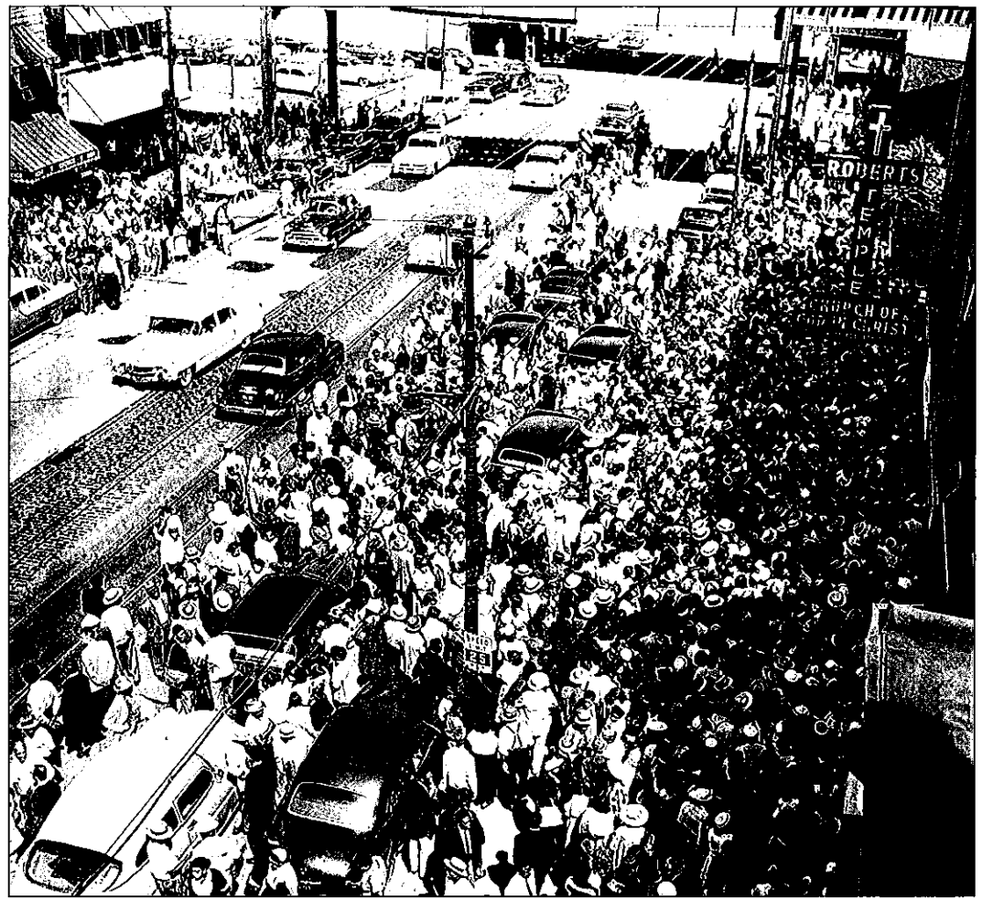
"Yes," said the woman from the backseat.

Bryant shoved Emmett into the front seat, sat next to him, and pulled the door closed. Milam got behind the wheel, and the car, its lights still off, moved into the dark, taking the boy from Chicago with them.

*His naked and mutilated body would be found by a fisherman three days later in the Tallahatchie River.**

The kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till and the trial of his killers became one of the biggest news items of 1955. The viewing of his disfigured corpse at Rayner Funeral Home and his funeral at the Roberts Temple of the Church of God in Christ in Chicago attracted more than ten thousand mourners. The grisly open-casket photo of Emmett that appeared in *Jet* magazine horrified and angered hundreds of thousands more. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), other civil rights organizations, and political leaders expressed outrage at the cold-blooded murder of this boy from Chicago. In an interview, Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, labeled the crime a racist act, saying, "It would appear that the state of Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children." Newspapers across the country, especially those in the Northern states, condemned the killing and the racist attitudes that led to it.

* This re-creation of actual events is based on statements made by those present and documents related to the case: *Look* magazine reporter William Bradford Huie's "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Eyes*



A huge crowd gathers in front of Roberts Temple of the Church of God in Christ, the site of Emmett Till's funeral

The protests and condemnations from civil rights leaders and Northerners poked an already raw nerve in the South. The white leaders in Southern states like Mississippi that enforced Jim Crow laws, regulations that segregated African Americans from whites, were still stinging from the 1954 Supreme Court

decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka,* which declared that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional. In May of 1955, the Supreme Court pushed the issue even further when it ordered that integration of schools must proceed "with all deliberate speed." The two rulings alarmed Southern leaders who feared that the federal government and Northern agitators planned to destroy the Southern way of life. Comments from a speech given by the police commissioner of Montgomery, Alabama, typify the attitude of many white Southerners regarding forced desegregation of public schools:

> "Since the infamous Supreme Court decision rendered in 1954, we in Montgomery and the South have been put to a severe test by those who seek to destroy our time-honored customs.
>
> "Not since Reconstruction have our customs been in such jeopardy. . . . We can, will and must resist outside forces hell-bent on our destruction. . . ."

Despite the Supreme Court's intentions, citizens in the South knew that efforts to change the South would be resisted. A prediction by an editor of the *Jackson Daily News* foreshadowed the violence that would stir up Mississippi, setting the stage for Emmett Till's murder: "Mississippi will not obey the decision. If an effort is made to send Negroes to school with white children, there will be bloodshed. The stains of that bloodshed will be on the Supreme Court steps."

The defensiveness triggered by the desegregation mandate prompted many white Southerners to take offense at the widespread criticism in the media regarding Emmett's murder. Angry editorials like the one published in the September 2, 1955, issue of *The Greenwood Commonwealth* appeared in

newspapers in Mississippi and across the South complaining that Southerners were being unfairly criticized for the isolated actions of two men. Even the governor of Mississippi, Hugh White, reacted in the press: "Mississippi deplores such conduct on the part of its citizens and certainly cannot condone it. This is not a lynching. It is straight out murder." By claiming that Emmett's death was not a lynching, the governor hoped to defend his state from the Northern and liberal press that considered the murder a racially motivated crime.

The intense media coverage in the weeks between Emmett's death and the trial of his killers focused worldwide attention on the legal proceedings that would be held in a sleepy little town in the Mississippi Delta, exposing to the world the cruel racial intolerance that existed in the South. Enormous changes in the Southern way of life would soon follow. Thirty years after the case, a former NAACP official said, "I think sometimes that the hand of God was in the whole thing. White men had been killing Black boys down here for years without anybody making much of a fuss. The Emmett Till case became a cog in the wheel of change. Perhaps we have television to thank for that. Television and the printed media turned the spotlight on Mississippi."

The weeklong trial of Milam and Bryant, held in the county courthouse in the small farming community of Sumner, Mississippi, drew a standing room only audience every day, with more than three hundred spectators, most of them white, packed into the courtroom. Newspapers and magazines from all over the United States sent correspondents to cover the trial. In the early days of television, long before satellite broadcasts, the three major television networks even assigned camera crews to report the events of the sensational case; film had to be flown to New York daily. The national and international publicity surprised and angered many local Mississippians, convincing them that they had to defend their Southern way of life against attacks from outsiders. One

reporter covering the trial explained the reaction of local citizens to the invasion by the news media this way: "The feeling that [the media spotlight] all was a plot against the South was the most accepted explanation, and when Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam ambled into the court in September 1955, they were armed not only with their wives, baby boys, and cigars, but with the challenge of the Delta whites to the interference to the outside world."

The trial captured the outside world's interest for several reasons. The *Jet* magazine photo of Emmett publicized the gruesome details of the murder, making it more than just another Southern lynching. The nature of the crime itself, a fourteen-year-old boy brutally murdered by two men, made it news, but the reason for the kidnapping and killing—a white woman claimed Emmett had whistled at her and made "ugly remarks"—turned it into big news. The racial context of the case also contributed to its notoriety; at the time, Medgar Evers and the NAACP were fighting hard to gain equal rights for African Americans in the South, and Emmett's senseless murder seemed to symbolize the plight of African Americans in the region. Finally, the murder indictment against Milam and Bryant was a landmark event in Mississippi, a state where more than five hundred lynchings had occurred since 1880, because, as far as many people knew, it was the first time white men had been indicted for killing a black person. The trial gave many African Americans hope that, finally, equal rights for all citizens, regardless of race, might be on the way. For entrenched Southern segregationists, the trial confirmed the fears that had begun with the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling: The white-dominated Southern way of life was in jeopardy.

Though everyone involved in the trial already knew the guilt of the defendants, the prosecution, led by District Attorney Gerald Chatham, worked diligently to present a strong case. A number of eyewitnesses testified against the killers,

including Emmett's great-uncle. In a spectacularly intense moment, Mose Wright stood at the witness stand, pointed at Milam and Bryant, and stated that they were the ones who had come into his home to kidnap Emmett. Wright's act of courage marked one of the first times an African American accused a white of a crime in a Mississippi court of law. Fearing for his life, he had to leave the state immediately after the trial.

Despite the many testimonies, the clear evidence (including Milam and

A courtroom artist's depiction of Mose Wright testifying against Emmett Till's killers

Bryant's confession to kidnapping), and Chatham's eloquent closing argument, after deliberating for barely an hour, the all-white jury declared the defendants not guilty.

The verdict set off a storm of reactions equal to those before the trial. Segregationists and racists claimed victory for the South. Civil rights activists and Northerners lamented the miscarriage of justice and condemned the acquittal. Both sides agreed on one thing, however: The jury's decision seemed to signal that in the South, Jim Crow laws and racial segregation were not going to go away.

Congressman Charles C. Diggs Jr., center, was among those who attended the trial

But Charles C. Diggs Jr., a black congressman from Michigan who had attended the trial, saw things differently. The landmark trial, he suggested, could be used as a starting point for further change. "The Emmett Till trial is over, but we, as Negroes, should never forget its meaning. The fact that Milam and Bryant were acquitted shows us how tremendous a job we face to bring complete democracy to our entire nation. Negroes and other clear-thinking Americans must combine their efforts to press for freedom and equality through both political and legal challenges."

The aftershocks of the Emmett Till case continued long after the Tallahatchie County jury set Milam and Bryant free. For many people involved in the civil rights movement, the murder of Emmett Till and the acquittal of his murderers was the last straw. If black boys could be killed by white men with no fear of criminal prosecution, something had to be done, and there was no better time than 1955 for the movement to begin.

"The murder of Emmett Till and the trial of the two men accused of murdering him," wrote journalist and historian David Halberstam, "became the first great media event of the civil rights movement." It was the kind of attention that the struggling civil rights movement desperately needed to generate support. With the emotional outrage from the murder and trial, the national and international media attention, and the increased efforts by Americans who were working for equality, the civil rights movement gained the momentum necessary to break free from the social bondage that had enslaved black Americans since before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Myrlie Evers-Williams, whose husband, NAACP field director in Mississippi, Medgar Evers, was killed by an assassin in 1963, recognized the essential role the Emmett Till case played in future events in the South. In her 1967 biography of her husband, she placed the case in its proper historical context:

> "[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