

THE SHAME OF EMMITT TILL an article by W. Talmidge  
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I was born in August of 1961, in a small town in Florida. Nearly six years from the day Emmitt Till was murdered in another small town in Mississippi. I never knew that until today, I didn't even know who Emmitt Till was until about a month ago. My ignorance of his murder, and the deplorable miscarriage of justice that followed, stems from a sheltered childhood. A blissfully unaware youth, sequestered away from the less attractive aspects of the world. I've seen, heard, and read about plenty of ugly things since then, but I will never understand how, supposedly the most intelligent species on the planet (we tell ourselves), can perform atrocities so vulgar on others of its kind. Especially to a fourteen year old boy. The saddest thing about the death of Emmitt Till is that it could have been avoided. In the what if world of the hypothetical, a hundred different choices could have changed the outcome of that day. In an account of the story I read on the internet Emmitt was outside the store with some other kids bragging about his white girlfriend back in Chicago. One of the kids bet him he wouldn't talk to a white girl in the store. Right here Emmitt made a choice that ended his young life. In that instant he made a decision based on pride, ego and peer pressure. Things everyone deals with all their life. Things Emmitt had no doubt dealt with in Chicago. Things that teenagers succumb to on a daily basis, sometimes with hideously bad consequences. Naive to the ways of small-town Mississippi, Emmitt had no idea the significance of the bet he accepted, or the consequences. The boy who voiced the bet must have known, yet he didn't stop him. The account says that the boys were worried for a few days but then forgot about the incident. Ironic that the abhorrent echoes of that day cannot and shouldn't be forgotten. Ego, pride, prejudice, fear, hate, emotions that frighten and sicken our souls, drive us to do things we should never think to do. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam thought them and did them. Filled with rage and hatred they didn't forget the incident. They let it fester and poison their minds, spurred on by the first man's wife and the second man's sister Caroline Bryant. It's normal, healthy, and acceptable to feel angry, it is not acceptable to act on it. They made a decision based on rage and prejudice, a heinous decision to end the life of a fourteen year old boy. Not too long ago a black man was dragged behind a pick-up truck in Jasper Texas. Asian children are sold on the black market as sex toys. John Lennon, Martin Luther King and John Kennedy were gunned down in public. The pilgrims didn't sit down with the Native Americans for thanksgiving, they wiped them out with guns and diseases. On this planet if you're different from the local majority, if you subscribe to a different belief system, if you're weak, if you're strong, if you're short, if you're tall, if you're fat, or a nerd, or a geek, if you're anything, someone around you is going to hate you. Racism, fanaticism, lookism, fascism, nazism, Communism, capitalism, Hinduism, pick your 'ism' and win a prize. A target on your back for the rest of your life. At fourteen Emmitt Till lost his life for no better reason than speaking to a white woman in a senseless, brutal way, but it was not pointless. If he had not taken the bet and walked away, if he had never gone to Mississippi, if his uncle lived in Colorado, he would have been just another kid. Maybe he would have done something great with his life. Maybe he would have helped a lot of people. Maybe, but we'll never know for sure. The reality of Emmitt Till's death is that he's more well known in death, than if he had lived. The truth of Emmitt Till's death is that sometimes whatever or whoever we think of as God asks a great price of their children. The point of Emmitt Till's death is that it sparked a firestorm, one of the most turbulent eras of our nation's history, an era of social, cultural, and political upheaval and reform. The shame of Emmitt Till's death is that we live in a world where it could even happen.