



# Two Faces of Emmett Till: When Black Lives Really Didn't Matter. Today White Racism is Alive in America

Par [Dr. Gary G. Kohls](#)

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Duluth reader

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*61 years ago (August 28, 1955), an innocent 14 year old black youth, Emmett Till, was kidnapped, tortured and murdered by an angry vigilante mob of white racists in Money, Mississippi.*

*96 years ago last month (June 15, 1920), three innocent black men were tortured and murdered by an angry vigilante mob of white racists in Duluth, Minnesota.*

*A couple of days ago ex-Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, and Louisiana Republican Party member **David Duke**, announced his candidacy for the US Senate, crediting the political statements and announced agenda of Donald Trump and, presumably, the platform of the Republican Party. Months earlier, after Duke publicly endorsed Trump for President, Trump unconvincingly claimed that he didn't know anything about Duke.*

*Because a multitude of unbiased observers have documented what is obvious to many others (that white racism is alive and well in America), I submit selected excerpts of articles that will give readers a good historical update of what really happened in our not-too-distant racist past.*

*They're selling postcards of the hanging, they're painting the passports brown  
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors, the circus is in town  
Here comes the blind commissioner, they've got him in a trance  
One hand is tied to the tight-rope walker, the other is in his pants  
And the riot squad they're restless, they need somewhere to go  
As Lady and I look out tonight, from Desolation Row*

- **Bob Dylan**, from "Desolation Row"



## The Death Of Emmett Till

by Bob Dylan

'Twas down in Mississippi not so long ago  
When a young boy from Chicago town stepped through a Southern door  
This boy's dreadful tragedy I can still remember well  
The color of his skin was black and his name was Emmett Till

Some men they dragged him to a barn and there they beat him up  
They said they had a reason, but I can't remember what  
They tortured him and did some things too evil to repeat  
There were screaming sounds inside the barn, there was laughing sounds  
out on the street

Then they rolled his body down a gulf amidst a bloody red rain  
And they threw him in the waters wide to cease his screaming pain  
The reason that they killed him there, and I'm sure it ain't no lie  
Was just for the fun of killin' him and to watch him slowly die

And then to stop the United States of yelling for a trial  
Two brothers they confessed that they had killed poor Emmett Till  
But on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this  
awful crime  
And so this trial was a mockery, but nobody seemed to mind

I saw the morning papers but I could not bear to see  
The smiling brothers walkin' down the courthouse stairs  
For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free  
While Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea

If you can't speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that's so unjust  
Your eyes are filled with dead men's dirt, your mind is filled with dust  
Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains, and your blood  
it must refuse to flow  
For you let this human race fall down so God-awful low!

This song is just a reminder to remind your fellow man  
That this kind of thing still lives today in that ghost-robed Ku Klux Klan  
But if all of us folks that thinks alike, if we gave all we could give  
We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live

\* \* \*

"Bush, Cheney, and their subordinates may have given the order to torture detainees, but it was the apathy, fear, and ignorance of millions of Americans

that laid the groundwork for these abuses to take place"...“Today, as we consider the decision of ( President Obama) to block the release of hundreds of photographs showing the torture and abuse of detainees in Afghanistan and Iraq, I hope that those of us who are defending his decision will consider the example of Emmett Till, and of how seeing with open eyes the horrors that he endured ...” - “Big Tex” (pseudonymous author of below 2009 article from Daily Kos) scroll down for full article

## **A Mob Lynches Three Black Men by Chris Julin and Stephanis Hemphill - June 2001**

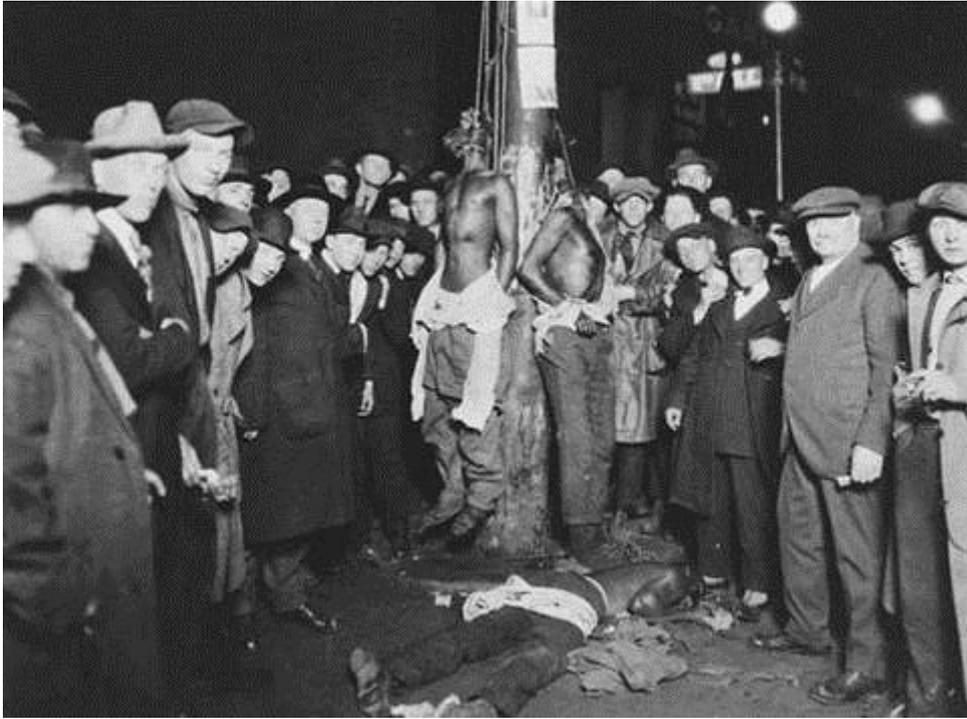
**Posted at:** <http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/2001/06/lynching/page1.shtml>

On a June night in 1920, hundreds of angry men and thousands of curious onlookers surrounded the downtown headquarters of the Duluth police department. The crowd might have reached 10,000. They wanted the handful of police officers inside to turn over their prisoners – a group of young, black circus workers. The police had arrested the men earlier that day. They accused some of the out-of-towners of raping a young, white woman at the circus grounds. Later investigations cast serious doubt on the rape charges, but the howling mob outside the police station had no doubts.

« This is where the mob broke in, » says Michael Fedo, who wrote a book about the 1920 lynchings. « I think this was a Sears store or a hardware store. The mob came into this store – which is now the casino – and the proprietor gave them rope for the hangings and said it was on the house. »

Standing in the heart of downtown Duluth, Fedo points across Superior St. to a handsome, three-story brownstone building full of offices. The word « POLICE » is still carved in the stone over the door.

Fedo says when the mob closed in on the police station, the city’s public safety commissioner ordered the 12 officers inside to holster their guns. He didn’t want anyone in the crowd to get hurt. A few officers came out onto the street, and tried to fight the mob back with their bare hands and a fire hose. But the crowd surged past them into the jail, with a roar that could be heard a mile away.



Post card photo of the lynching of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson and Isaac McGhie - Duluth, MN  
6-15-20

« Most of the cells were on the second floor, so they went in and broke into several of the cells. »

While members of the mob sawed and smashed on the bars, some of the men inside the cells pleaded their innocence. Others prayed.

« The people in the mob believed that six had attacked the girl, so they tried to get six - they only managed to get into three of the cells. There were several people in the cells with the prisoners, asking questions, trying to find out in their minds who the six were among the more than a dozen who were in the cells, » says Fedo.

« The people who were outside were saying, 'Just give us somebody,' and that first somebody was a young man named Isaac McGhie, who was just thrown from the cell to the hands of the mob who took him out front, brought him up the hill here one block, where he was the first one hanged, » Fedo recalls.

Isaac McGhie was beaten and bloody when he got to this corner, right next to the Duluth Shrine Temple, which is still here.

« This is where they were brought to be hanged. I don't know why they would have been brought up the hill instead of down the hill. But it may have been because there was a young man perched on top of this pole, and they just assumed, 'He's already there, we'll take them up there, we'll have this kid tie a knot on the lamppost above the street, and take care of business that way,' » says Fedo.

A priest named William Powers pushed his way to the front of the crowd, and climbed part

way up the lamppost. The priest managed to quiet the crowd for a few moments. He begged them to stop. But members of the mob pulled Rev. Powers down, and hoisted Isaac McGhie up.

Then the mob dragged Elmer Jackson and Elias Clayton out of the jail, and up the hill to the street light. When all three men were hanging, battered and dead, the crowd parted so a photographer could capture the scene.

« This was a significantly posed photo, » says Fedo. « It took a couple of automobiles with lights to illuminate the scene so the photographer could get his picture taken. »

In the center of the crisp, black and white photo, Elmer Jackson and Isaac McGhie hang from the street light, stripped to the waist, their necks impossibly stretched and twisted. Elias Clayton lies beneath their feet, tossed onto the sidewalk, to make it easier to frame the picture. Dozens of men lean into the picture facing the camera.

« What this looks like is the kind of photo you would see at a hunting lodge, where the guys had been out shooting bear, and they came back and they said, 'We got three.' You can see people on tip-toe. They've crowded into this shot. These are not people who are ashamed to be seen here. This is, 'I want to be in this picture.' »

« The one that quite stood out is the fellow who's to the left of the bodies who is beaming. He looks like he's very proud of what has transpired, and that is the face that really stands out to me, » says Fedo.

Someone made postcards out of the photo, and sold them as souvenirs. Postcards of lynchings were fairly common. A recent book, *Without Sanctuary*, is a collection of photos and postcards from nearly 100 lynchings. It includes the picture from Duluth.

A lynching in northern Minnesota was big news. It made headlines across the country. It stayed in the local news for months during the criminal trials that followed. Juries in Duluth convicted three men of rioting. The longest sentence served was two years. No one was convicted of murder. But one of the black men who survived the attack on the jail was convicted of rape, in spite of compelling evidence he was innocent. He served four years in prison.

And then, the story of the lynching disappeared from the news.

## **The Face of Emmett Till (UPDATED) by "Big Tex"**

**- May 14, 2009**

"Two months ago, I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South I said, 'That's their business, not mine.' Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all." — [Mamie Till Bradley](#) (mother of Emmett Till)

On September 6, 1955, a little over a week after he was kidnapped, beaten, and murdered (*August 28, 1955*) for whistling at a white woman, Emmett Till was laid to rest at Burr Oak Cemetery in Alsip, Illinois. By the time his journey to the grave had ended, Till's body had

been seen by as many as 50,000 people who personally came to view his body at a Chicago funeral home. But before long, it would be seen by millions more, as photographs of his badly disfigured corpse circulated around the country, ultimately appearing on the cover of *Jet* magazine. The image of a 14-year-old boy with his eye gouged out and his head caved in was a shock to the senses of all who saw it; but it was also a rallying point for a generation of young African-Americans, and many whites as well, who saw in his mutilated face the suffering of a people, and who were inspired to end that suffering by organizing, by marching, and by voting.

### **A Mob Lynches Three Black Men**

The face of Emmett Till might not have inspired so many if it were not for the grim determination of his mother, Mamie Till Bradley. The funeral home where Till's body was displayed resisted allowing the casket to be opened, but Mrs. Bradley insisted, threatening to open the casket herself if need be. She wanted to see her son one last time before he left this world, but she wanted others to see him too. And so, because of her perseverance, the casket of Emmett Till was opened, his body was photographed for posterity, and the world saw what they did to Mrs. Bradley's baby.



Funeral photo of Emmett Till

For African-Americans in the South, the horrors reflected in the face of Emmett Till were a daily fact of life. But for African-Americans who had moved away from the South and its Jim Crow laws to places like Chicago, the face of Emmett Till was a reminder that the brutality of racism could not be left behind so easily.

As for white Americans, they were forced to take a serious look at the human toll of the injustice that they had participated in, or tolerated, or tried to ignore. Though many whites, particularly in the South, were unmoved by what they saw (or at least pretended to be), many more were deeply affected by it.

Despite the publicity and anger generated by the photographs of Emmett Till, the people who murdered him were never brought to justice. A little over two weeks after Till was laid to rest, an all-white, all-male jury acquitted the only two men ever formally charged with his murder: Roy Bryant, the husband of the woman who Till whistled at, and Bryant's half-brother, J.W. Milam. Both men would later admit to murdering Till, safe from prosecution due to double jeopardy protection. They're dead now, and while as many as 12 other people may have participated in the crime, no one else has been charged in connection with Till's murder.

But though Emmett Till and his family never received justice from the state of Mississippi, the wave of activism spawned by those who were inspired by the sight of his mutilated body brought justice of a different sort. The face of Emmett Till would inspire Rosa Parks not to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama later that year. It would inspire nine African-American schoolchildren to desegregate Little Rock Central High School in 1957. It would inspire sit-ins in Greensboro in 1960, and Freedom Riders in 1961. It would inspire voter registration drives, and a letter from a Birmingham jail cell. It would inspire over 300,000 people to march on Washington, and millions to dream of a day when people would « not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. » It would inspire the Freedom Summer of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

And more than 50 years after the death of Emmett Till, in a country where racism still endures but without the power that it once had, it would inspire millions of voters, black and white, to reject the prejudices and fears of the past, and elect the son of a white woman from Kansas and a black man from Kenya to be the 44th President of the United States.

Today, as we consider the decision of that same President to block the release of hundreds of photographs showing the torture and abuse of detainees in Afghanistan and Iraq, I hope that those of us who are defending his decision will consider the example of Emmett Till, and of how seeing with open eyes the horrors that he endured brought about change in the hearts and minds of so many.

Bush, Cheney, and their subordinates may have given the order to torture detainees, but it was the apathy, fear, and ignorance of millions of Americans that laid the groundwork for these abuses to take place. We as a nation need to be confronted with our failures and to take ownership of them, so we can set a positive example for young Americans to prevent such abuses from happening in the future. And we need to show those outside America that we can and will live up to our democratic values, so that we'll be taken seriously when we attempt to share those values with the rest of the world. This isn't about the next election—it's about the next generation, and about what kind of America they will build on the ashes of what we allowed to be ruined.

**Dr Kohls** is a retired physician from Duluth, MN, USA. He writes a weekly column for the Reader, Duluth's alternative newsweekly magazine. His columns mostly deal with the dangers of American fascism, corporatism, militarism, racism, malnutrition, psychiatric drugging, over-vaccination regimens, Big Pharma and other movements that threaten the environment or America's health, democracy, civility and longevity. Many of his columns are archived at

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Articles Par : **[Dr. Gary G. Kohls](#)**

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