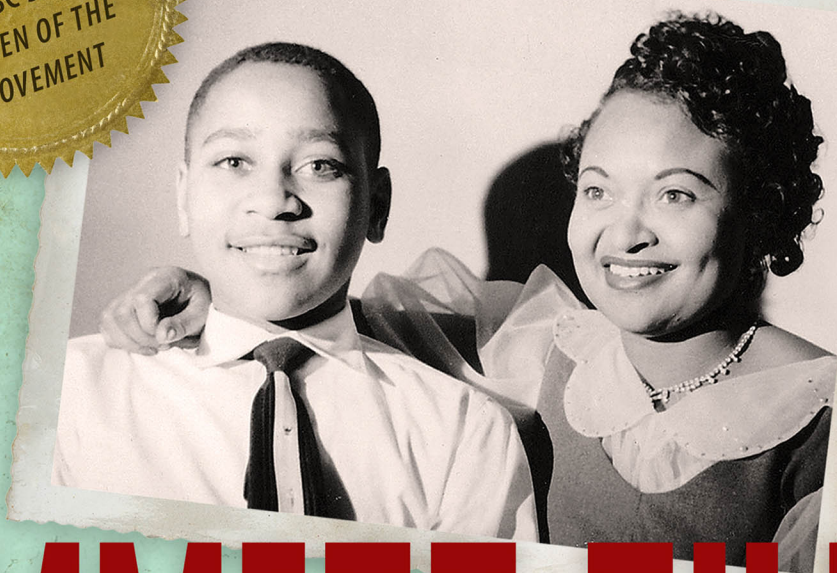


THE BOOK
THAT INSPIRED
THE ABC SERIES
WOMEN OF THE
MOVEMENT



EMMETT TILL

The Murder That Shocked
the World and Propelled the
Civil Rights Movement

DEVERY S. ANDERSON Foreword by Julian Bond

With a new preface by the author

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CONTENTS

ix	Acknowledgments
xiii	Foreword by Julian Bond
xv	Preface to the Paperback Edition
xxi	Preface
xxvii	Prologue: Through a Glass, Darkly

PART ONE: IN BLACK AND WHITE

5	1. Mother and Son
22	2. Mississippi Welcomes Emmett Till
39	3. Murder Heard Round the World
64	4. Countdown
85	5. Tallahatchie Trial, Part 1
123	6. Tallahatchie Trial, Part 2
166	7. Protests, Rumors, and Revelations
198	8. Clamor, Conflict, and Another Jury
220	9. The <i>Look</i> Story and Its Aftermath
252	10. Never the Same

PART TWO: IN LIVING COLOR

287	11. Revival
315	12. Seeking Justice in a New Era
344	13. The Legacy of Emmett Till
357	Epilogue: Seeing Clearly
361	Appendix: Piecing the Puzzle
381	Notes
485	Bibliography
529	Index

Mother and Son

For a few dark and confused hours before the sun rose on August 28, 1955, a fourteen-year-old black teenager visiting Mississippi knew he was hated. Shortly after daylight, as he slipped into unconsciousness, surrounded by white men mercilessly beating him to death, he was more hated than anyone on earth.

That boy, Emmett Till, lost his life tragically in the Mississippi Delta that Sunday morning only because his story began there generations earlier. Although the brash African American youth from Chicago knew little of the region where his life would end, family ties to the South had brought about his fateful visit in the first place. Emmett's mother, Mamie Elizabeth Carthan, had been born near Webb, in Mississippi's Tallahatchie County, on November 23, 1921. Webb is located two miles south of Sumner, one of two seats in the county where Mamie would attend a murder trial nearly thirty-four years later.

Tallahatchie, a Choctaw word meaning "rock of waters," is the name of the river that runs in a southwesterly direction at a length of over 300 miles, rising in Tippah County. It joins the Coldwater, Yalobusha, and Greenwood Rivers and forms the Yazoo in Leflore County. Native American influences notwithstanding, white-black relationships came to characterize the state of Mississippi and laid the foundation for later conflicts. By 1832, one year before the state legislature officially formed Tallahatchie County, white settlers had already come with their slaves.¹ In 1860, over 436,000 African American men, women, and children—or 55 percent of the state's population—were living and working as chattel on plantations and cotton fields throughout Mississippi. The total number of slaves in the South at the start of the Civil War was just under four million.²

Memory of life in the Magnolia State would elude Mamie. The only child of Wiley Nash and Alma Smith Carthan, Mamie was just two years old when her family said good-bye to Mississippi and moved north to Summit, Illinois. Summit, more commonly called Argo, is a small suburb on the south side of Chicago, incorporated in 1890. Only six black families had settled there by 1922.³ The Carthans' arrival two years later was part of what came to be termed

the Great Migration, a movement that had already inspired thousands of black families to leave the South and seek a new beginning in northern cities. The migration had begun shortly before World War I, and between 1915 and 1918, 450,000 to 500,000 blacks left their southern homes. Northern destinations were usually determined by the starting point of the migrants. Blacks from southern coastal states generally settled in their northern counterparts, such as New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and as far inland as Pennsylvania. Mississippians and those from immediately neighboring states most often boarded a train on the Illinois Central Railroad with Chicago as their destination.⁴

Economic difficulties that followed the war continued to produce staggering migratory figures. During the 1920s, when the Carthans left Mississippi, over 700,000 southern blacks did the same, often with little more than a few possessions and a dream of what the North could do for them and their families. Poignantly, the migration was often couched in religious terms familiar to the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which blacks saw themselves as a chosen people. Theirs was a story that mirrored the ancient Israelites, who triumphed over bondage and persecution by escaping Egypt and finding renewal in the land of Canaan. Such comparisons stimulated an abundance of black optimism, despite the fact that for most of the migrating families, uncertainties about starting over economically were inevitable.⁵

Chicago was especially attractive to African Americans seeking refuge from the oppressive conditions of the South. In the North, they found jobs in a variety of industries. In the early 1920s, the largest employers of blacks were the Armour and Morris stockyards, where a combined total of 3,500 labored. In Argo, African Americans working at Corn Products Refining Company numbered 500.⁶

Although Chicago offered much to blacks who were long accustomed to a repressive life in the South, it was not Utopia. For fifty years prior to the migration, neither whites nor blacks living in Chicago cared much for each other, but any difficulties that the black population endured as a result were still a vast improvement over the institutionalized racism that had been a daily fact of life in the South.⁷ As Chicago's black population grew, however, so did white antagonism. This culminated in 1919 in a race riot rooted in job competition in the post-World War I era. The riot began on July 27, when Eugene Williams, a black teenager, swam across an imaginary line on a segregated beach. People on the white side of the beach began throwing rocks, and in the fracas, Williams drowned. Rather than arrest the white man believed responsible for Williams's death, police instead arrested a black man. When blacks protested, whites responded with violence. Fighting erupted on both sides and lasted until August 3. Thirty-eight people died and hundreds more were injured before the uprising was finally quelled.⁸

Five years later, Nash Carthan left Mississippi and sent for his family after a few months. Upon his arrival in Argo, he found work at Corn Products, where most black men in that community aspired to work.⁹ The plant also drew several white men at the time, and by 1930, of the 700 workers in the village, nearly half, including Nash, were employed in the refinery industry.¹⁰ Established in 1907, Corn Products was ideally located because Chicago, with its abundant water supply and transportation capabilities, was positioned at the center of the midwestern states, where the majority of US corn is grown.¹¹

Mamie's childhood was shaped largely by the influence of her mother. Deeply religious, Alma was also excessively strict and monitored her daughter's every move. This continued even as Mamie grew into adulthood. Alma and Nash separated when Mamie was around eleven, and Nash lost contact with his daughter for over fifteen years. He later remarried and moved to Detroit, while Alma, who stayed behind in Argo, married a man named Tom Gaines in March 1933. Through Alma's dominance, Mamie remained well disciplined in her studies, but was sheltered socially.¹² For her naïveté, she would eventually pay a price.

Because Argo's black population remained relatively small, Mamie attended predominantly white schools. Yet her interaction with students and teachers was mostly positive. "It hadn't occurred to me that I was darker than some of the other people that were in the class," she said, reflecting back on her youth. "I was graded strictly according to my ability to perform and I was never looked down on."¹³ She certainly had ample opportunity to develop healthy interracial relationships early on. For instance, Alma played a motherly role to several children in the neighborhood, many of whom were white. After Mamie developed a minor heart condition when she was about twelve years old, she was regularly assisted by a white girl whom Mamie lovingly called her "shadow." This friend accompanied Mamie to school and back, watched over her, and made sure she did not exert herself by climbing steps.¹⁴

Several white European immigrants also lived in the Carthans' neighborhood. One door down from their house on Sixty-Fourth Street lived John and Mary Nyezprook, from Russia. Two doors up was the home of Stanley and Alvina Lapinski; Stanley was from Poland, while Alvina hailed from Germany. The men in these families also worked at Corn Products.¹⁵ It is not known how well the Carthans knew these neighbors, but some level of interaction in such a tight-knit community can be assumed. Although antagonism often existed in Chicago between blacks and European immigrants as each competed for jobs, for the most part, Argo was able to avoid such conflicts. As an adult, Mamie proudly declared that some of her best friends were white.¹⁶

Chicago did see its share of discrimination, but unlike the South, it remained de facto, and in fact, illegal. Following the 1919 race riot, a local

alderman proposed segregating the city, but the Governor's Commission on Race Relations countered "that measures involving or approaching deportation or segregation are illegal, impracticable and would not solve, but would accentuate, the race problem and postpone its just and orderly solution by the process of adjustment."¹⁷ However, as Chicago's black population increased from 44,000 to 492,000 between 1920 and 1950, many worried merchants responded by excluding blacks outright or by resorting to dishonest strategies to keep them away. To discourage blacks from patronizing a restaurant, for example, employees would ignore them, oversalt their food, treat them rudely, or overcharge them. Blacks endured similar treatment in hotels and theaters. Some resisted this breach of the civil rights law with violence, while others sued. Between 1930 and 1940, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) secured judgments of \$7,000 against Chicago restaurants alone.¹⁸

An episode between Mamie and her high school geometry teacher, Miss Moore, apparently *was* race-related. Moore was not fond of her black students and gave Mamie a failing grade on an assignment that Mamie had completed, but which had been stolen by some boys before she could turn it in. Although the school principal ordered Moore to restore the A grade after Mamie objected, Moore took occasion for revenge when Mamie tried to fulfill the requirements for the National Honor Society. Moore, who was on the board of the society, was also the swimming instructor at Argo Community High and informed Mamie that swimming was a requirement in order to qualify. When Mamie hesitated to get into the water, Moore shoved her in. Terrified, Mamie lost consciousness and began to sink, but was rescued in time by her friend Ollie Colbert. "All the while, Miss Moore stood there laughing," said Mamie several years later. "I'll never forget her as long as I live."¹⁹

Although this incident ended Mamie's dreams of the National Honor Society, she made the honor roll and claimed to be the first black student at Argo Community High to graduate at the top of her class. This was an accomplishment in itself, but for a black girl at the time, so was graduating at all. Only a few black students had ever received a diploma at Argo before Mamie; most of the girls dropped out in order to marry. Mamie, who had never even dated, felt like romance had already eluded her because at age eighteen, she was still single.²⁰ Yet her social inexperience created a challenge of its own, and for that, she spent the next decade making mistakes that would teach her valuable lessons for the future. Because dating and dancing had always been denied her, she was left vulnerable by the time she was a young adult and ready for both. When she met Louis Till, a man three months younger and nine inches taller than her own five-foot frame, she was impressed by his sophistication and confidence. Louis, a part-time boxer and skilled gambler, had been born in

Missouri and orphaned as a child. He had recently moved to Argo to work at Corn Products.²¹

For their first date, Mamie and Louis went to Berg's Drug Store, an Argo shop that served, but refused to seat, black customers. They bought banana splits, but instead of taking them out, Louis insisted on eating them there. Mamie nervously went along with Louis on this one, and watched him stand up to store owner Berg, even though Berg threatened to tell Alma what the young couple had done. Mamie admired the Louis Till she saw that night—brave, protective, and standing his ground.²² Yet Mamie's innocence, contrasted against Louis's worldliness and street smarts, created a dysfunctional relationship from the beginning. "He treated me like I was a little girl and took me for granted like a doll you would set on a shelf and find it there when you came back." Alma saw little that she admired in Louis and persuaded Mamie to break up with him. Later, Louis saw Mamie out with another boy and created such a scene in front of her house that Alma came out and scolded them both. Alma's actions may have finally backfired. "I flared up," declared Mamie, "that I was grown up and wasn't a child anymore. It was then, I guess, that I made up my mind I was going to marry Louis Till." The wedding took place in Alma's living room on October 14, 1940.²³

Immediately after the wedding, Louis moved in with Mamie and the Gaineses. Mamie was working at the Coffey School of Aeronautics as a typist, and Louis was still at Corn Products. By Mamie's estimation, she conceived their only child on her wedding night, which was her first sexual encounter. As the pregnancy progressed, a family friend began calling the unborn baby by the nickname "Bobo." It stuck, even though Mamie had been favoring "Mickey."²⁴

After living with the Gaineses for six months, the Tills rented their own apartment. No one was happier than Louis, who had come to resent Mamie's close relationship with her mother. There was little reason to fault Louis for his attitude. While living at Alma's, the newlyweds felt obligated to ask permission even to go to the movies, an indication of just how controlling Alma was and how ingrained Mamie's submissiveness was in return.²⁵ Louis hoped the move would free them from Alma's grasp, but in that, he was disappointed. "I was no more prepared for independence than a new-born lamb strayed from its mother," Mamie explained.²⁶ Consequently, she still turned to Alma for advice and just about everything else, and Louis continued to harbor resentment. Louis, who had been shuffled from home to home while growing up, certainly could not relate to a parent-child bond all that well. He seemed uninterested in the coming baby, but perhaps he just felt out of place. Whatever the reason, he was not present when Mamie gave birth to their child, a boy whom she named after her uncle, Emmett Carthan, and the baby's father. Emmett Louis

Till was born on July 25, 1941, at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. He would forever retain the nickname Bobo, or simply, Bo.²⁷

The delivery was not an easy one, and doctors discovered that the child was in a breech position. Due to the harsh instruments used in the birth, Emmett's right hand was swollen and a knee bruised. Doctors told Alma that Emmett's injuries would be permanent, and recommended he be placed in a facility specializing in the treatment of such physical challenges. Mamie believed, however, that she and Alma could help the child overcome any limitations right at home. Emmett recovered, albeit slowly, and by the time he was about two years old he had completely healed from the injuries related to his birth.²⁸

Louis showed kindness and patience toward Mamie when she first returned from the hospital, and from Mamie's viewpoint, her husband tried his best. Yet he struggled. Despite the fact that he was easygoing by nature, he also harbored a hot temper, which often caused him trouble. Once, when Emmett was only a few weeks old, Louis came home from work to discover that Mamie was at Alma's. When she returned late, Louis was angry and hungry, and the young couple got into a fight. Mamie went back to Alma's, but the couple shortly reconciled.²⁹

Whether any violence occurred that night is unknown, but there were times when Mamie did suffer abuse at the hands of Louis Till. The night she stood her ground essentially marked the end of their marriage. On that occasion, Louis came home drunk and started a fight because Mamie was eating some greens sent over by her mother. She ignored Louis's demands to stop eating, which made him so angry that he jumped on top of her. "I didn't know what to do at that moment, but knew I was no match for Louis Till," she said about the frightening experience. "I found myself on the floor with Louis choking me, squeezing my neck as I coughed up the greens, squeezing harder and harder until I just blacked out."

When Mamie regained consciousness, Louis was gone. Knowing that her enraged husband would return, she took a poker and heated it in the fireplace. She also boiled a pot of water, and waited for Louis in the dark. When he came home, Mamie took the water and threw it at him before he even saw it coming. Screaming, Louis ran to Alma's, where Alma began to peel his shirt—and his skin—from his back. Mamie soon got a restraining order against Louis and moved back in with her mother.³⁰

Louis violated the order repeatedly, which forced Mamie to take him back to court.³¹ Louis never served time in jail, despite his troubles at home and the occasional fistfights he got into with others, but Mamie's problems were about to be solved, at least for the time being. Around this time Louis decided to join the army. Being separated from Mamie, he listed himself as a single man in his papers. Mamie said later in life that the judge hearing their domestic disputes gave Louis a choice of jail or the military, but her earliest recollections do not

indicate that is what happened. "I believed he wanted to go," she explained in 1956. "It meant excitement and travel."³² Louis entered basic training on July 9, 1942. Beginning August 1, he instituted the required Class F allotment to provide support for his family at \$22 per month.³³

In Alma's home, Mamie returned to the familiar surroundings of comfort and safety that she had always known. There, she could again enjoy her role as a daughter as she moved past the turbulent one she had endured as a wife. Yet this may have added confusion to relationships because now it seemed as though Alma had two children; certainly *she* saw it that way. The changed dynamic between Mamie and Emmett proved to be a positive one for them, however. "We were so much like brother and sister, like friends back then," explained Mamie, "and it added a unique dimension to the mother-son bond we would forge over the years ahead."³⁴

In October 1942, young Emmett took his first trip to Mississippi, accompanying Alma to the town of Money in Leflore County. There she tended to her sister, Elizabeth Wright, as Elizabeth gave birth to her ninth child.³⁵ They had already returned to Illinois when, a month later, Louis suddenly showed up on Mamie's doorstep, unannounced, wearing his military uniform. Despite their troubled past, the Tills had been corresponding prior to this and had decided to reconcile. During this time together, Louis finally began to bond with his son.³⁶

The visit came to a halt after the army discovered that Louis had gone AWOL. Military police came to the house, took him away, and sent him to the stockades. Apparently, he never quite learned from this experience. In less than a year after beginning his stint serving overseas on January 14, 1943, he received two more AWOL convictions. In August 1943, he went missing for five-and-a-half hours, and the following December he went absent from his base "without a pass." The brief reunion of the Till family in Argo marked the last attempt of Mamie and Louis to start anew.³⁷

In 1943, Mamie began working for the federal government, and for the next few years Louis sent money home regularly. In addition to his family support, he forwarded funds from his boxing and gambling winnings. Mamie turned it all over to Alma for safekeeping, and over time, it grew into a sizable savings account. Mamie's stepfather, Tom Gaines, died in August 1944, and for a time, Mamie had Alma all to herself.³⁸

During the summer of 1945, however, Mamie learned that the money she had been receiving from Louis had come to an end. On July 13, she received a telegram from the Department of Defense informing her that her husband had been executed in Italy eleven days earlier for "willful misconduct." Mamie, so overcome with shock when reading this news, fainted. There was no other explanation in the telegram, and none in the letter she received a few days later from a chaplain in Italy.³⁹

Louis's untimely death meant that Emmett would never know his father, nor would he ever learn why Louis had been executed. For a time, Mamie knew few of the details either, and just when she learned them is unclear. In 1948, she hired lawyer and family friend Joseph Tobias to write the Department of the Army and inquire about her rights as a widow. The army told Tobias that in cases of willful misconduct, next of kin are not entitled to benefits. She did receive a Social Security stipend of \$11 per month for herself, while Emmett received \$16. Mamie said that she received this amount until she married again in 1950, at which time Emmett's benefit increased to \$38.40.⁴⁰ Alma continued the mothering role she had played toward Emmett since his birth, and with Louis's death, promised Mamie that she would help her support her grandson until he turned eighteen.⁴¹ Not long after Louis died, Alma's sister, Elizabeth, came to visit from Mississippi, and when she returned to the South, Alma accompanied her, taking Emmett along. This was the boy's second trip to the South.⁴² Perhaps Mamie needed time alone to contemplate her future as a widow.

Mamie maintained that she never received a "satisfactory answer" pertaining to the charges against Louis until the story later went public in 1955. However, army records indicate that in 1948, officials did furnish Tobias with a copy of the court-martial record of trial.⁴³ These documents would have told Tobias that Louis had been charged with raping two women and killing a third in June 1944 while stationed in Italy.⁴⁴ Although it is possible that Tobias did not share the details with Mamie, that is highly unlikely. Therefore, she would have known the reasons for Louis's execution directly from the army by 1948.

It is almost certain that she knew even sooner than that, however. On August 19, 1946, just over a year after Louis's death, Mamie, then twenty-four, married one of Louis's army buddies, twenty-eight-year-old Lemorse Mallory.⁴⁵ Very little is known about this marriage, which ended in divorce sometime between 1948 and 1951; Mamie never mentioned it publicly, nor has anyone else for that matter. It would have been odd that her Social Security benefits did not end until she married again in 1950 (this would have been her third marriage) because they should have ceased just after she married Mallory.⁴⁶

Mallory, like Mamie, was from Argo. He entered the army on the same day as Louis Till in 1942, and both men served in the 177th Port Company and were stationed in North Africa and Italy together. The company was made up primarily of Chicago blacks. Mallory was discharged on April 4, 1945, just two months after Louis's trial.⁴⁷ Mallory and others in the company may not have learned about the charges officially, but they did hear rumors. In fact, Mallory talked freely to Till family members about Louis's case and told them

that he believed there was another side to the story.⁴⁸ Because Mallory knew of the allegations against Louis, it is inconceivable that he would not have told Mamie. Mamie's silence is understandable, as nothing regarding Louis's conduct was relevant after Mamie was later thrust into the public eye. However, her silence would only help make Louis's story an embarrassing national headline once it finally leaked out. But that was still a decade away.

Soon after Louis was executed, his personal belongings arrived at Mamie's home in Argo. Among them was a ring, purchased in Casablanca, engraved with his initials, "LT," and the date "MAY 1943." It was the one item of Louis's that Mamie could set aside and one day give to Emmett.

In the fall of 1946, shortly after Mamie and Lemorse married, Emmett started kindergarten at Argo School (later renamed Wharton School), located just across the street from the Mallory home. Although he made friends there, it was the arrival of the Parker family from Money, Mississippi, in early 1947 that brought Emmett his greatest joy. Hallie Mae Parker (Alma's niece); her husband, Wheeler; and their three children moved into the home next door. Alma's brother, Crosby Smith, had vacated the house a few years earlier when he moved back to Mississippi after separating from his wife.⁴⁹ Wheeler Jr. soon became Emmett's best friend. Young Wheeler, who was two years older than Emmett, had attended a one-room schoolhouse in Money and now had to adjust to life in the big city. Part of that adjustment meant catching up scholastically. To do so, his mother required that he repeat the first grade.⁵⁰

The boys were inseparable and often at play with Wheeler's two brothers or other children in the neighborhood. Alma sometimes walked with them two miles down the railroad tracks and took them fishing in the Des Plaines River. On one of those outings after Emmett caught a fish, he dipped it back into the water to clean it, only to have it wiggle out of his hands and swim away. Despite losing his hard-earned catch, Emmett simply laughed.⁵¹

Shortly before Emmett began the first grade in 1947, he started exhibiting lethargic behavior, especially at night. Within a few days, after Mamie and Alma noticed his temperature rising, they began using home remedies in an attempt to nurse him out of the mysterious ailment. When that failed to work, they called a doctor, who made a house call and diagnosed Emmett with polio. Mamie felt sick inside after hearing the news, and Alma very nearly fainted. "Polio was the worst thing that could happen to you back then," said Mamie. "It didn't kill you, but it could take your life away from you just the same."⁵²

The doctor advised Mamie to take Emmett to the hospital immediately. This proved nearly impossible because no one would lend her their car for fear of contracting the disease themselves. She was even turned down by an ambulance, but eventually got a ride to the Contagious Disease Center in a police car.⁵³ Emmett spent the next two weeks there, and once released, was

quarantined at home. No one else was allowed in the house, and Alma sat with him constantly while Mamie went to work. Lemorse was probably helpful during this trying time also. Alma was quite fond of her son-in-law, and referred to him proudly as "Sergeant Mallory." He also won the affection of several of Emmett's cousins, who still refer to him as their "favorite husband."⁵⁴

Thankfully, Emmett showed no signs of brain damage or any major problems with his limbs. Finally, on one of his visits, the doctor released Emmett from quarantine and declared him well. The whole ordeal lasted about thirty days. "He had beaten it," said Mamie, who, with Alma, had spent the month praying for Emmett's recovery. "He was up and running again and practically tore a hole in the screen to get out."⁵⁵

Although Emmett's bout with polio could have been worse, it did have a lasting effect upon him in the form of a speech impediment. "When he got excited or nervous, it was particularly bad. Nobody could understand him but Mama and me," explained Mamie.⁵⁶ Emmett would later take speech therapy classes, which helped some, and the doctors said he would eventually outgrow the defect. His ankles remained weakened as well, and he began wearing a special shoe for support. The episode brought about a determination within Alma never to have to beg for a ride or face humiliation again should another emergency arise. She was so determined, in fact, that she bought a 1941 Oldsmobile.⁵⁷

Other childhood illnesses followed over the next several years. "He was sick a lot of the time," Mamie recalled, "and he was always catching everything that came around. Measles, mumps, everything, keeping him out of school for days at a time."⁵⁸ Yet during his childhood in Argo, Emmett developed the personality for which family and friends would always remember him. Wheeler Parker described his cousin as "outgoing," a "prankster," and always "in the middle of everything" from the time they became neighbors when Emmett was only five years old. People still living in Argo refer to Emmett lovingly as the "bad boy."⁵⁹

Around the time Emmett contracted polio, or shortly thereafter, Mamie began working at the Army Signal Corps but soon took a job with the Veteran's Administration. She became focused on saving money for Emmett's college education, but her work was interrupted for several weeks after she underwent surgery for appendicitis. In 1948, she started a new job as a typist for the Social Security Administration.⁶⁰ Things changed for Mamie also in June 1949, when Alma married her third husband, Henry Spearman, and moved twelve miles away to his home in Chicago. Mamie, who may still have been married to Lemorse at this point, stayed behind at the house in Argo. There were other relatives nearby, but life would be different for the Mallorys, this being the first time Mamie had lived any distance from her mother.⁶¹

Around 1950, Emmett took his third trip to Money, Mississippi, this time with a great aunt, Mamie Hall. At nine, Emmett had no idea that black boys in the South lived by a different set of rules than did those who lived in Chicago, as his actions on this trip demonstrated. When a white man on the plantation asked Emmett for the hammer he was using, Emmett simply told him to get a different one from a nearby shelf.⁶² Emmett also got into a fight on this trip, which happened after another boy held his head under water while they were playing in a river. Emmett developed an ear infection as a result, saw a doctor, and was prescribed medicine. Even today, his cousin Simeon Wright remembers vividly the pain Emmett endured.⁶³

Mamie and Lemorse separated sometime between 1948 and 1951, putting Emmett in need of a father figure once again. Mamie wanted romance as well, but she found no prospects in Argo. A cousin convinced her that Detroit would be her answer for love and that there she could probably find a man with a good job in the automobile industry. Mamie's father, Nash Carthan—who now went by the name of John—also lived in Detroit, and the move became an opportunity to rebuild their relationship. Although they had recently established some contact, they had not seen each other in years, and John had never met his grandson. John was happy to have them come, and Mamie enthusiastically made arrangements to leave Argo.⁶⁴ In 1957, several years after his divorce from Mamie, Lemorse married the woman who had occupied the flat downstairs in the house on Sixty-Fourth Street.⁶⁵

Mamie and Emmett moved in temporarily with John and his wife, Annie, or "A.D." as she was known, and Mamie started working as a typist at the Ft. Wayne Induction Center. The job kept her working long hours, sometimes seven days a week, but John bonded with Emmett and became a caring father to Mamie, something Mamie had longed for. A.D. soon began to resent the inconveniences of having a full house, however, and to appease his wife, John arranged for his daughter and grandson to move in with a family he knew by the name of Harris. The Harrises welcomed them both and doted over Emmett, making the stay in Detroit more tolerable.⁶⁶

Mamie did not forget her mission of finding a man, and soon a cousin introduced her to a friend named Pink Bradley, a twenty-seven-year-old World War II veteran who hailed from Arkansas. He worked for Chrysler, was doing well, and he and Mamie soon began dating. He got along well with Emmett, but Emmett became increasingly unhappy in Detroit and began to miss his friends and family back home. Reluctantly, Mamie allowed him to move back to Argo, where he stayed with his uncle Kid and aunt Marie, next door to the old house on Sixty-Fourth Street. Mamie saw Emmett's move as temporary, and planned to bring him back to Detroit as soon as she found a place of her own.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, her relationship with Pink became serious, and that longing for romance got the best of her. Indeed, she was so flattered by the attention that she easily overlooked all of the warning signs that should have been clear. They were married on May 5, 1951, after dating only a few months. Alma took Emmett to Detroit for the wedding, and he stayed behind briefly. It was not long, however, before he decided to return to Argo once again.⁶⁸

The honeymoon ended quickly with Mamie's third marriage. Pink lost his job soon after the wedding and was in no hurry to find a new one. Mamie took a train back to Chicago to visit Emmett once a month, where she discovered that her son was getting used to a life without her. In November, Alma bought a two-flat home on South St. Lawrence Street in Chicago, and she offered the upstairs apartment to Mamie. She accepted, and the Bradleys left Detroit and moved to Chicago that same month. Mamie had just purchased her first car, a 1947 Plymouth, which the family drove to their new home 300 miles away. Once settled, Mamie found work at the Social Security Administration, and Pink was hired at Corn Products.⁶⁹ Emmett, now in fifth grade, began attending James McCosh Elementary. The school, named after a nineteenth-century Princeton University president, had once been equally divided racially, but by 1951 consisted exclusively of 1,600 black pupils and a racially mixed faculty.⁷⁰ Although Emmett was no longer in his old Argo neighborhood, the new house in Chicago was in closer proximity to Alma, something that both Mamie and Emmett were happy about.

Pink's relationship with Emmett was good, but they did not become close in the way Mamie had hoped. Although Pink settled in well in Chicago with his wife and stepson, he could barely wait for the weekends, when he would take Mamie's car to visit his friends and family in Detroit. The Bradleys managed to stay together for about a year and a half after the move. Whatever problems they had, they escalated after Mamie overheard Pink making a date with another woman. When he left the house that night, Mamie threw his belongings on the front lawn and changed the locks.⁷¹ They separated permanently in August 1953. For Mamie, this quest to provide Emmett with a new father ended only in heartbreak. "After that it was Bo and me," she said. "Disappointed in my marriage, I intently set myself to make Bo the kind of man every mother wants her son to be."⁷²

Over the next few years, Emmett increasingly demonstrated his loyalty to his mother in return. One night that he did so was both dramatic and disturbing. Pink came by the house soon after separating from Mamie, and Emmett, sick with the flu, heard Pink's voice as he approached his room. Emmett, holding a butcher knife, met Pink at the doorway and threatened to stab him unless he left. Mamie stepped in, escorted Pink out of the house, and scolded Emmett for the dangerous thing he had just done. She saw some significance

to the episode, however, as she and Emmett grew closer as a result. They even developed a partnership in running the household.⁷³ Despite this, they had their moments of conflict. When they fought, one of them would usually call Alma to intervene, and she would scold whomever she thought was to blame. “Mama kept us both in check,” admitted Mamie.⁷⁴

Mamie eventually left the Social Security Administration and took a better job with the US Air Force, where she had charge of confidential files.⁷⁵ Also, love entered her life again, and this time she found what she had always longed for. In 1953, while getting a manicure in a South Side salon, she met a barber named Gene Mobley. Mamie returned to the shop each month for a nail appointment, and after a year or so, Gene finally asked her to dinner. She accepted, only because Emmett was away visiting family, and she did not feel like cooking. After this first date, they saw each other more frequently, and the relationship blossomed.⁷⁶ Emmett, then twelve, also developed a close bond with Gene. If Gene asked him to do something or to run an errand, Emmett always came through and left a note for Gene to verify that the project had been completed. Gene had two daughters of his own, and, like Mamie, was separated from his spouse.⁷⁷

On July 25, 1954, Emmett turned thirteen. Five months later, Christmas proved to be the most memorable one the family had ever celebrated. Emmett received a new suit from Mamie and a hat, tie, and coat from Gene, and Mamie hosted a large Christmas dinner for her extended family.⁷⁸ She did not own a camera, but a coworker came over to Mamie’s house two days later to take some family photos. Most of the images of Emmett Till that the public has seen were taken on that occasion: Emmett in his new suit, a close-up of him in his new wide-brimmed hat, one of him leaning against the family television, and a portrait of him seated with Mamie.⁷⁹ Added to all the festivities was the fact that Gene Mobley was now a serious love in Mamie’s life.

Not long after the new year got under way, the Christmas bills started coming in. Mamie, whose job rarely provided her with the time or energy to run errands, reluctantly allowed Emmett to take the streetcar into the city, go to the stores, and pay the creditors himself. She returned home that night to see a stack of bills, each stamped “paid,” and the leftover change placed next to them. Emmett also left a note explaining that he had taken care of everything.⁸⁰ Perhaps it was this side of Emmett that allowed Mamie to sum him up succinctly four decades later. No doubt speaking with a mother’s bias, but also after years of interaction with hundreds of children, she said that “to me, Emmett was very ordinary. But as I look at today’s youth, I realize that Emmett was very extraordinary.”⁸¹

It would be natural for Mamie to promote and even exaggerate her son’s most admirable qualities as she later tried to memorialize him. Shortly after

Emmett turned fourteen in July 1955, others who knew him described him in a variety of ways. He stood between five feet three inches and five feet four inches tall, and, at 150 pounds, was overweight.⁸² He had just finished eighth grade at McCosh School, and his friends saw him as a prankster—independent, mischievous, and always the center of attention. To his elders, he was helpful and well mannered. At school, Emmett showed talent in art, science, and spelling, but he enjoyed school mainly for social reasons.⁸³ His principal, Curtis Melnick, one of several white faculty members at McCosh, said that Emmett was never in trouble and that academically he was “average.”⁸⁴

Emmett also loved baseball, and although he was a little too slow for his teammates’ liking, he could not resist the temptation to play, even when he knew better. On one occasion Mamie sent him to the store to buy bread, but when he passed a sandlot game on the way home, he set down the bread and started to play. When he failed to return home, Mamie went out looking for him. When she found him, “I whipped him all the way home, and he never said a word.”⁸⁵ Eva Johnson, a neighbor, witnessed Emmett facing a similar temptation to play when he was supposed to be painting the garage. “He’d paint a while and then run over to [the playground] and play ball a while and then run back to painting. He surely wanted to be painting when his Mama showed up from work.”⁸⁶

Emmett was helpful around the house, and even did the laundry and cooking in exchange for Mamie being their provider. He sometimes forgot to do his morning chores, however, and left for school expecting Mamie to do them. She always refused, except when Emmett forgot to feed his dog, Mike. When that happened, Emmett would leave a note where Mamie would be sure to see it. “Mama feed Mike. He’s hungry. Poor dog.”⁸⁷

Like most kids, Emmett thought about his future, and he talked about becoming a motorcycle cop or a professional baseball player. He had dreams of building his grandmother a new church and even talked of joining the air force after he heard that a boy could sign up at sixteen with a parent’s permission.⁸⁸

Religion played a major role in his life, as it did with Alma and Mamie. After the move to Chicago in 1951, Mamie and Emmett resumed their affiliation with the Argo Church of God in Christ, a church Alma had helped found in 1926. Mamie could not always attend because she worked Sundays, but Emmett would go each week, making the hour-long ride on the Sixty-Third Street bus by himself. One Sunday while Emmett was on his way home from his Sunday meetings, he became engaged in conversation and prayer with Bennie Goodwin, son of the church’s pastor. It was on this occasion that Emmett found Christ.⁸⁹ Even so, he did not appear particularly religious to his friends. As children, “you *had* to go to Church,” insisted Wheeler Parker. “That was *every* Sunday.”⁹⁰

Religious or not, Emmett was still a teenage boy, and sometimes he could be *all* boy. He loved attention but would get upset when he did not get his own way. “He was kind of a tough guy,” said childhood friend Lindsey Hill. “We played marbles together. If he lost, he took all the marbles. I guess you could call him the neighborhood bully. He was bigger than most of us.” To others, such as Parker, that description is inaccurate. “No, I would never call him a bully, just a prankster, [who] loved to have fun.” Simeon Wright said that Emmett took his pranks so far as to pull the fire alarm at school.⁹¹ He also loved jokes, and would pay playmate Donny Lee Taylor to tell them. Emmett gave Taylor the nickname “T. Jones” after a character in one of Taylor’s stories. It is a name Taylor has retained ever since. Parker said that Emmett’s outgoing personality made him a “natural-born leader.”⁹²

Emmett never had a girlfriend, but at age eleven, he went on his first date. He confidently rode the streetcar, picked up the girl, and took her to a movie, although he made her buy her own ticket.⁹³ Yet in general Emmett showed a shy, less-confident side of himself around girls. “When it came to talking to me, I don’t remember him being as forward as some of the other boys,” said Phyllis Hambrick, another friend. “He used to come around, not to sit on the porch but more to stand at the end of the sidewalk and talk.” Emmett was ridiculed for both his stutter and his weight. “He was a quiet person. I think his stuttering was one of the things that made him shy.”⁹⁴

In late August 1955, Mamie’s uncle Moses, or “Mose,” Wright visited Chicago from his home in Money, Mississippi, to attend the funeral of his daughter Willie Mae’s father-in-law. While staying with Willie Mae, Wright, a preacher and sharecropper, talked about country life in Mississippi, fishing, and all of the things young boys like to do outdoors. He invited his grandsons Wheeler Parker and Curtis Jones to go back with him. Mose and Wheeler planned to take the train together, and Curtis would go down the following week. Emmett had already been pressuring Mamie to let him visit the South that summer after he learned that some other friends were heading there. But now that Wheeler was going, a trip to the South was all he could think about.⁹⁵

Mamie granted her son a two-week visit to Mississippi. “I just knew that he was a normal well-adjusted child and that’s why I thought that I could let him go,” she explained. Yet she still needed peace of mind and admonished Wright to use caution. “When you let the boys go to town, please go with them. Take the car keys. If you get six teenagers together, anything can happen.”⁹⁶ After Wright accepted responsibility for the boys, Mamie felt at ease. “It was perfectly all right with me to let Bo go in his care because I felt he would be in good hands.” Once plans were finalized, Emmett had one week to prepare for his vacation.⁹⁷

Preparation for the trip included lecturing the boys about southern customs. They had to learn about segregation and the laws that kept blacks as second-class citizens. Wheeler received his talk from his parents, and Mamie schooled her own son.⁹⁸ Emmett, with his independent and fun-loving ways, had to understand that his personality would not be appreciated or even tolerated by whites in Mississippi. Mamie did not pull any punches and told him that should anything happen down there, “Even though you think you’re perfectly within your right, for goodness sake take low. If necessary, get on your knees and beg apologies. Don’t cross anybody down there because Mississippi is not like Chicago.” For just two weeks, Emmett would need to see the world differently from the way he always had. “No matter how much it seems that you have the right, just forget your rights while you’re in Mississippi.”⁹⁹

With the trip now a reality, Emmett and Mamie went shopping. Emmett bought new clothes, shoes, and a wallet. While searching through his jewelry box for some cufflinks, he noticed the signet ring that had once belonged to his father. Emmett had not worn it much except when he was younger, and back then, he had to use scotch tape or string to make it snug. As he tried it on now, he discovered that it fit perfectly. “Gee, you are getting to be quite a grown man,” Mamie proudly acknowledged. Emmett decided to wear it to Mississippi.¹⁰⁰ Before he left, probably because she too was going on vacation, Mamie gave Emmett’s dog, Mike, to the pound.¹⁰¹

Mose Wright and Wheeler Parker planned to leave together from the Central Street Station on Saturday morning, August 20. Mamie and a friend, Mary Lee, who was visiting from St. Louis, were going to drop off Emmett there in time to meet up with Parker, Wright, and a female cousin who was heading back to Mississippi on the same train. That morning, however, Mamie and Emmett were running behind schedule. Because they lived closer to the Englewood Station at Sixty-Third and Woodlawn, Mamie decided to board Emmett there instead. Still, they were running late, and once they arrived, Mamie delayed things further by having to stop to buy Emmett’s ticket.¹⁰² Wright and Parker, who had boarded at the previous stop, were getting nervous, but were soon relieved when Emmett finally came aboard. “If he’d been five minutes later,” noted Wright, “he’d have missed it.”¹⁰³

Years later, Mamie spoke of what she said were her final moments with Emmett at the station, and one might suspect that her recollections may well have been shaped by the significance of the events that followed. With no time to spare, Emmett ran up the steps to board the train, with seemingly little thought about his mother, who was still standing at the platform.

“Bo. You didn’t kiss me good-bye,” she yelled. “How do I know I’ll ever see you again?”

Slightly embarrassed, Emmett turned around, went back, and gave her a kiss. As an afterthought, he took off his watch and left it with her, but kept the ring. With that, he was off, barely in time to catch the train. Mamie watched until the train left the station, and once it was out of sight, Mamie and Mary Lee left too.¹⁰⁴ Later that day, Mamie changed her mind about Mike, went to the dog pound, and picked him up. She wanted to surprise Emmett later.¹⁰⁵

Nobody paid any attention when Emmett boarded the train that day, other than Mamie and Mary Lee. Nobody within the hustle and bustle at the platform had any idea that in addition to the countless trains that had carried blacks north to a new level of freedom since World War I, this one train, heading south, would help play a similar yet more dramatic role in that continued process. Mamie Bradley left the station quietly, unnoticed that day; however, when she went to the Central Street station two weeks later to pick up her son, she was met by a crowd and the media. Americans from around the country, including leaders from the president of the United States on down, knew her name and that of Emmett Louis Till. Yet Emmett would be oblivious to it all. He was returning as a mutilated corpse, the victim of a hate crime. His grief-stricken mother was there to retrieve what was left of him. His murder had become national news, and it would soon make headlines internationally.

That is getting ahead in the story, however. The events that turned this tale into one of the South's most infamous tragedies began shortly after Emmett Till, Wheeler Parker, and Mose Wright arrived at what was called the most southern place on earth—the Mississippi Delta.