

**The Foot Soldier Project for Civil Rights Studies**  
The Life and Death of Emmett Till  
Grades 6-12

The Foot Soldier Curriculum is inspired by the scholarship and research of the Foot Soldier Project for Civil Rights Studies at the University of Georgia. While the lessons in the Foot Soldier Curriculum are not based on Georgia's QCC standards, they adhere closely to them. The purpose of the Foot Soldier Curriculum lessons is to provide teachers in any school system with a framework for teaching issues and events of the Civil Rights Movement.

Letters and numbers in parenthesis indicate suggested course and grade level, for example: (SS2H1) = SS-Social Studies, 2-Grade Two, H-History, 1-Skill Number. Georgia teachers can go to <http://www.glc.k12.ga.us/qcc/homepg.asp> for current standards.

**NOTE:** It is important to review the current standards applicable to your state and grade level and adapt the lessons accordingly.

### **Introduction to the FSP Curriculum**

The motivation behind [The Foot Soldier Project](#) is to discover and document the many "foot soldiers" of the civil rights movement who may not have been widely recognized or acclaimed. Although their efforts have not been well documented or widely publicized, their courage and contributions have nevertheless transformed our nation. The Foot Soldier Project has collected and compiled research that includes books, historical papers, artifacts, intellectual and social histories, and documentaries.

### **Events in the Life of Emmett Till**

Students will learn who Emmett Till was and the significance of his role in Black History, and will place events of his life in chronological order and within the context of other Civil Rights Movement events.

**Primary Learning Objectives:** Students will learn who Emmett Till was and the significance of his role in Black History.

### **Primary Learning Outcomes (Teachers' Questions for Students)**

Who was Emmett Till? What are some facts about Emmett Till's life? In what ways did his death affect the Civil Rights Movement?

### **Additional Learning Outcomes (Teachers' Questions for Students)**

Can you actively and properly participate in class discussions and activities? What historical events lead up to Emmett Till's death? How do the events of

his life fit in with the Civil Rights Movement? What was *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896)? What was *Brown vs. the Board of Education, Topeka, KS* (1954)? What was the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955)?

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## Assessed GPS Standards

### Grade 6-12

#### Geographic Understandings

(SS6G12) The student will describe the cultural characteristics of the Jim Crow era in the southern United States.

- a. Explain Jim Crow Laws and how they impacted southern culture. Explain the following aspects of the culture: segregation, "lynch law," and the view of white women.

#### Historical Understandings

(SS7H9) The student will describe the major events that occurred around the life and death of Emmett Till.

(SSH811) The student will evaluate the role of Emmett Till in the Civil Rights Movement.

- a. Describe important civil rights events that preceded Emmett Till (slavery, Reconstruction, segregation, Jim Crow laws, Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, KS)
- b. Discuss the murder of Emmett Till and the subsequent trials. Identify reasons for the murder and the acquittal of Milam and Bryant.
- c. Discuss the impact of Mose Wright's identification of Milam and Bryant in the first trial.

(SSUSH22) The student will identify dimensions of the Civil Rights Movement, 1946-1970 and specifically the role of Emmett Till in the movement.

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## Lesson Narrative

Before introducing content on Emmett Till, review events related to slavery, emancipation and the early Civil Rights Movement in America.

### The Precedent

By the 1950s, the slavery of black people by whites had technically been abolished in the United States for over 70 years. Despite this fact, white people in the South struggled to protect the "Southern way of life" through segregation. They enacted a series of "Jim Crow" laws to prevent freed slaves from acquiring equality and power. Segregation set clear boundaries between the races and also established a type of caste system which elevated white people while devaluing and oppressing blacks. Along with actual laws, Jim Crow adherents used complex yet unspoken rules that carried explicit consequences ranging from intimidation to extreme violence.

The most horrible consequence was lynching, a violent and terrifying form of social control used against black people in the post-Reconstruction South. Lynching was murder, often by hanging, but also included other forms of violence. A lethal combination of racism and fear fueled "lynch law." Segregationist whites despised the thought of integrating schools, transportation, and restaurants, but their deepest fear was of intermarriage or sex between the races\*.

White men in this society revered and idealized white women as pure yet helpless. Conversely, black men were depicted as inferior yet a powerful threat to the "honor" of white women. In 1892, Mississippi law included a statute punishing intermarriage with a \$500 fine or ten years in prison. Later in 1921, legislation prohibited even suggesting social equality or marriage between the races. It was against this cultural backdrop that the Emmett Till story occurred.

### Emmett Till

Mamie Carthan was two years old when she moved with her mother from Webb, Mississippi to Argo, Illinois outside of Chicago. Like Mississippi, Chicago and other northern cities offered a relative degree of freedom and progress to black migrants from the south between the 1920s and 1950s. Eleven dollars bought a one-way ticket from stations in Mississippi and other southern states to Chicago. Argo, Illinois was one of many popular destinations resulting in its nickname of "Little Mississippi."

At age eighteen, Mamie married Louis Till, a man who enjoyed boxing and gambling. Later he joined the army and the couple divorced when their

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\* In 1941, the same year in which Emmett Till was born, Gunnar Myrdal sociologist released a study called *An American Dilemma* which surveyed white Southerners on their perceptions of what blacks wanted from integration. The number one item on their list--"intermarriage and sexual intercourse with whites" ranked last for blacks.

son Emmett was four years old. Mamie and Emmett moved in with her mother in Argo.

Emmett "Bobo" Till was born on July 25, 1941. His was a difficult birth and due to complications doctors warned his mother that he would be institutionalized. She refused to believe them and was right. He later suffered from polio at age six and made another miraculous recovery. The only remnant of the illness was a stutter that became noticeable when he was excited or under stress.

### **Train to Mississippi**

The summer of 1955, Mamie Till Bradley sent Emmett with his cousin Wheeler to visit her uncle Moses Wright in Mississippi. Although she grew up in the north, she heard enough stories about how blacks were treated in the south to warrant a lecture to Bobo. She coached him on how to interact with white people—to say "yes, sir" and "no, sir" and avoid even looking at white women. He was skeptical that it was "that bad" there.

Mrs. Bradley also gave Bobo his father's silver signet ring which was engraved with the initial "L.T." and the date "May 25, 1934." On Saturday, August 20, they rushed to the train station. As Emmett boarded the train she asked him how she knew if she would ever see him again. He reassured her and handed over his watch to keep until he returned.

### **The Murder**

Once in Mississippi, Emmett enjoyed the celebrity of being from up north. He showed off his ring and some accounts depict him bragging about having a white girlfriend back in Chicago. Playful and mischievous, Emmett was often the center of attention.

He spent time with his cousins absorbing country life, including learning to pick cotton, which was in season at the time. They swam in the lake, fished, and helped with household chores at the Wright home. On August 24, Emmett joined a group of teenagers the town of Money in Leflore County. Bryant's Grocery was there, a store that catered to black sharecropping clientele. Ray Bryant was in Texas at the time, leaving his wife Carolyn to tend the store.

Accounts diverge about what happened next. In one version, Emmett bragged again of his Chicago girlfriend. Other kids began teasing him, daring him to go ask Carolyn Bryant on a date. He entered the store alone and requested two cents' worth of bubble gum. When paying for it, he squeezed her hand and asked her out. She pulled away and retreated toward the back of the store. Mrs. Bryant later testified that Emmett had leapt between the counters, grabbed her waist and further propositioned her. His cousins ran in to pull him out of the store as Carolyn fled to her car to retrieve a pistol. Still operating on the dare, Emmett "wolf whistled" at her as they drove away. Some witnesses claim he did not whistle, but said "Bye, baby."

Regardless of what exactly took place, a code of behavior sacred to white southerners had been breached. Carolyn told Juanita Milam, the wife of her husband's stepbrother J.W. Milam, what had happened. Initially they did not tell anyone about the incident. Supposedly one of the older Wright cousins told Ray Bryant an embellished version of the story. His sense of honor violated, he recruited Milam to bring his truck so they could go punish the "Chicago boy."

That Saturday night they drove to Moses' cabin and asked for the boy that "did the talking." Wright pleaded on the boy's behalf and offered to pay for the damages, resulting in a threat to his life if he interfered. Taking Emmett, they drove across the Tallahatchie then back to the Milam home where they beat and pistol whipped him. They drove to a cotton gin near Boyle where they ordered him to load a heavy gin fan into the truck because they needed something to weigh his body down in the river. At the Tallahatchie River, according to their own account, they shot Till in the head, tied him to the fan and dumped him in the river.

### **The Body**

The Wrights and other family friends began searching along riverbanks and under bridges which was customary "when something like that happened" (Whitfield, p. 21). Mrs. Bradley was notified and began a flurry of phone calls between Chicago and Mississippi law enforcement urging them to search for her son. Less than three days later, a young man discovered a horribly decomposed body in the river near Pecan Point. The body was so badly mutilated and decomposed that it could only be identified by Moses Wright because of the initialed ring.

*"Have you ever sent a loved son on vacation and had him returned to you in a pine box, so horribly battered and water-logged that someone needs to tell you this sickening sight is your son—lynched?" (Whitfield, p. 23) —Mamie Till-Mobley*

Tallahatchie County sheriff, Harold Clarence Strider, wanted to bury the body immediately, but Mrs. Bradley demanded that the corpse be sent back to Chicago. It arrived at Illinois Central on September 2, 1955. Despite a mortician's order that the casket remain closed, Mrs. Bradley had to verify that it was indeed her son in the box. When the casket was opened, she collapsed with grief then recovered enough to closely examine the body. One eye was dislodged, the nose was shattered, the head was cleaved by an axe, and a small bullet hole perforated the skull.

Mrs. Bradley recognized Emmett by his hairline, ankles, and other features. Because of the horror of the crime, she decided to have an open casket funeral to show the world what happened. An estimated 50,000 people came to view Emmett's corpse and millions more saw photographs of the body, primarily in *Jet* magazine. Outrage poured in from international

and national media about the tragedy. The southern “way of life” suddenly bore a new and horrific image.

### **The Trial: Justice Denied**

At first, Mississippi press reported the Till murder as a savage and senseless act. Sympathies turned, however, as criticism was heaped on the state by northern states, the NAACP, and the international community. In turn, the former entities were labeled as meddling “agitators” by Mississippians eager to protect the institution of Jim Crow. All five lawyers practicing in Sumner at the time offered to represent Milam and Bryant free of charge.

Sheriff Strider acted consistently with his support of the suspects through attempting to cast doubt that the body even belonged to Till. He claimed the boy was living in Detroit and the body was part of a propaganda stunt by the NAACP and northern sympathizers. Members of the northern press were aghast at the racist attitudes they encountered at the trial. “The racism was as casual as it was pervasive,” reported Dan Wakefield of *The Nation* (Whitfield, p. 36). Sheriff Strider once greeted black reporters with a cheery racial slur without a qualm or hesitation.

Crowds packed the courthouse during the trial, even in the sweltering heat. Milam and Bryant seemed untroubled in the presence of the all-white, all-male jury. Perhaps they felt secure that no black witnesses would come forward to testify against them. Then Moses Wright took the stand. When asked by District Attorney Gerald Chatham to identify Emmett’s kidnappers, he pointed first to Milam and then to Bryant. Wright later said that he could feel “the blood boil in hundreds of white people” in the courtroom. His identification of the two men struck a violent blow to the previously untouchable Jim Crow system.

When time came for the jury to deliberate on September 23, it took an hour and seven minutes to decide. One juror said that they would have finished earlier if they had not stopped to drink a soda. Bryant and Milam were acquitted of murdering Emmett Till and lit cigars to celebrate. Mrs. Bradley heard the verdict from nearby town, as she did not want to be in the courtroom when it was announced.

Moses Wright and another witness from Mississippi left the state in concern for their safety. They would return to testify in Leflore County in a grand jury trial regarding the kidnapping. Once more, Milam and Bryant went free. In January of the following year, *Look* magazine published an article in which Milam Bryant details how he and Ray killed Emmett Till. Because of “double indemnity,” they were exempt from being tried again based on that account.

## Aftermath

Once again, the international media registered shock at the verdict. A German newspaper published a story under the headline "The Life of a Negro Isn't Worth a Whistle." Cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Baltimore and New York City hosted protests decrying the lack of justice in the Till case. Six witnesses mentioned the Till murder in testimony before the Senate that eventually led to the Civil Rights Act of 1957. One hundred days after Emmett Till's death, Rosa Parks kept her bus seat and launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Many other individuals and civil rights groups were empowered to act because of Emmett's death. Film producer Harry Hampton was the same age as Till and the *Jet* article was seared into his consciousness. He later produced the six-part documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, which featured a segment on Emmett Till. Medgar Evers (the first field secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi) led an undercover effort to find more clues regarding the murder.

A park in Denver displayed a sculpture connecting the outrage of the Till murder with the larger Civil Rights Movement. It depicted Emmett dressed in overalls striding confidently while behind him stood the figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. with a hand on his shoulder.

## Epilogue: A New Search for Justice

Almost fifty years later, the Emmett Till story continues to shock and galvanize people. Documentary filmmaker Keith Beauchamp was ten years old when he saw the photo of Emmett in *Jet* magazine. The image and story resulted in Beauchamp's dedication to uncover the truth. Through extensive research of documents and new interviews, he identified at least 14 people, black and white, who may have been involved in Till's kidnapping and murder, five of whom were still living at the time of Beauchamp's endeavors. Some writers speculate that as unthinkable as the thought of blacks being involved in the case may be, they most likely acted out of terror and self-preservation. Perhaps the choice was to assist or be treated the same as Till. That black men could be coerced into such a hateful crime against their own race is a testament to the brutal hold of racism and injustice.

Beauchamp took his findings to federal and state investigators. On May 10, 2004 the U.S. Department of Justice announced that it would partner with Mississippi state officials to open a new investigation of the Emmett Till case. "We owe it to Emmett Till, and we owe it to ourselves to see whether after all these years, some additional measure of justice remains possible," said Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division.

On March 16, 2006 federal investigators stated that the five year statute of limitations on civil rights violations had expired. This announcement followed a ten-month investigation that included the

exhumation of Emmett Till's body. The case was passed, along with boxes containing the FBI's report, to Mississippi District Attorney Joyce Chiles, where it remains an ongoing local criminal investigation. In Mississippi, there is no statute of limitations on murder. Chiles said, "It's going to take time for our reviewers to look at it."

Emmett's case was not the only civil rights case reopened in the 2000s. In 2003, Ernest Henry Avants was prosecuted and convicted for the 1966 murder of Ben Chester White, a black farm worker in Mississippi. Thomas Blanton and Bobby Frank Cherry, were finally indicted in 2000 for the bombing in 1963 at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Both men were sentenced to life in prison. Though justice was denied Emmett Till in Mississippi courtrooms 50 years ago, it is still possible that justice could be served in our lifetime.

*"I made a commitment to rip the covers off Mississippi, USA—revealing to the world the horrible face of race hatred...I took the privacy of my own grief and turned it into a public issue, a political issue, one which set in motion the dynamic force that led ultimately to a generation of social and legal progress for this country." –Mamie Till-Mobley*

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## Procedures/Activities

Step 1: Duration – 40 minutes

Introduce students to the life of Emmett Till. Adapt the Lesson Narrative to best fit your grade level and either present the information in lecture form or have the students read the Narrative in class.

Step 2: Duration –20 minutes

*Web activity:* Have students search for information on the Emmett Till case. Break the class into groups and have each group research one of the following subjects. Tell each group to compile 3-5 new facts about Emmett Till.

- Legal aspects—Research each trial and its outcome. Identify key people involved in the case. Look up the term "double jeopardy" and define its role in the case. What role did "statutes of limitation" play in the trials?
- Media—What was the role of the media in the Emmett Till case? Research Jet and Look magazines' reportage. Compare and contrast local, national, and international reports and commentary on the murder and trial.
- Socio-cultural—Research "Jim Crow Laws" and provide examples of them. What was lynching? Describe its effects and meanings for both

white and black citizens. Describe the differences between northern and southern states during Emmett Till's lifetime.

Step 3: Duration – 30-40 minutes

Discussion: Have the groups from the last step create a poster/display containing the facts they gathered with the class, using web research, illustrations, and quotes. If time allows, ask the following questions.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are some reasons many whites so adamantly enforced and defended segregation?
2. Discuss Mamie Till-Mobley's decision to have Emmett's body displayed for the public. What would have been different had she not made that choice?
3. What was so extraordinary about Mose Wright's identification of Milam and Bryant?
4. If lynching was already a common phenomenon in the south, what made Emmett Till's case so shocking for so many people? How would events have unfolded had he been a few years older, or if he had been from Mississippi instead of Chicago?
5. Identify key figures in the Emmett Till case and describe the role of each.
6. It is not clear what happened between Mrs. Bryant and Emmett Till, but if he did whistle at her and say "Bye, baby" why did Bryant and Milam react so viciously?
7. Besides Emmett's murder, what are other examples of racism in his story?
8. List examples of how Emmett's death galvanized the Civil Rights Movement.
9. **Essay question:** Many people depict heroes as willfully doing some action or behavior that benefits others. There are many examples of civil rights activists, filmmakers, and writers who cite Emmett Till as a hero and catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement. Write a persuasive essay defending the concept of Emmett Till as a civil rights hero.

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**Materials and Equipment**

1. Lesson Narrative
2. Access to media lab/internet for the class
3. Poster board
4. Markers

**Total Duration**

90-100 minutes

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**Assessment:**

Assess for student's ability to recognize historical precedent for segregation and the relationships between the life and death of Emmett Till and the Civil Rights Movement.

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## Sources

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- Whitfield, S.J., (1988). *A death in the Delta: the story of Emmett Till*. New York: The Free Press.

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<sup>†</sup> This is a beautifully illustrated poem cycle that would be an excellent source of quotations for the poster project.

## Websites

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/>

<http://www.emmettillstory.com/>

<http://www.emmettillmurder.com/>

<http://www.archipelago.org/vol6-1/hicks.htm>