

Woman whose accusation led to Emmett Till murder dies at 88

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A little boy lifts a sign with a black-and-white photo printed on it, depicting Emmett Till. [File: Brian Snyder/Reuters]

New Orleans, April 28 (RHC)-- The white woman who accused Black teenager Emmett Till of making improper advances before he was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 has died in hospice care in the United States, a coroner's report shows.

Carolyn Bryant Donham, 88 years-old, died in Westlake, Louisiana, according to a death report filed at the Calcasieu Parish Coroner's Office in Louisiana.

Till's kidnapping and killing became a catalyst for the US civil rights movement. After his brutalised body was pulled from a river in Mississippi, his mother insisted on an open-casket funeral in their hometown of Chicago. Jet magazine published photos.

Emmett Till travelled from Chicago to visit relatives in Mississippi in August 1955. Donham — then named Carolyn Bryant — accused him of making improper advances toward her at a grocery store in the small community of Money.

The Reverend Wheeler Parker, Till's cousin who was present at the time, said the 14-year-old whistled at the woman, an act that flew in the face of Mississippi's racist social codes of the era. Evidence indicates a woman identified Till to her then-husband Roy Bryant and his half-brother JW Milam, who killed the teenager. An all-white jury acquitted the two white men in the killing, but the men later confessed in an interview with Look magazine.

In an unpublished memoir obtained by The Associated Press in 2022, Donham said she was unaware of what would happen to the 14-year-old Till. Donham was 21 at the time. The contents of the 99-page manuscript, titled *I am More Than A Wolf Whistle*, were first reported by the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting.

Historian and author Timothy Tyson of Durham, North Carolina – who said he obtained a copy from Donham while interviewing her in 2008 – provided a copy to The Associated Press.

Tyson had placed the manuscript in an archive at the University of North Carolina with the agreement that it not be made public for decades, though he said he gave it to the Federal Bureau of Investigation during an investigation the agency concluded in 2021.

He said he decided to make it public after people doing research at the courthouse in Leflore County, Mississippi, in June 2022 found an arrest warrant on kidnapping charges that was issued for "Mrs. Roy Bryant" in 1955 but never served. Tyson said in a statement Thursday that Donham's precise role in the killing of Till remains murky, but it is clear she was involved.

"What this narrative keeps us from seeing is the monstrous social order that cared nothing for the life of Emmett Till nor thousands more like him. Neither the federal government nor the government of Mississippi did anything to prevent or punish this murder. Condemning what Donham did is easier than confronting what America was — and is."

Weeks after the unserved arrest warrant was found, the office of Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch said there was no new evidence to pursue a criminal case against Donham. In August, a district attorney said a Leflore County grand jury declined to indict Donham.

Till's cousin, Priscilla Sterling, filed a federal lawsuit against current Leflore County Sheriff Ricky Banks, on February 7, seeking to compel him to serve the 1955 warrant on Donham.

In an April 13 response, Banks's lawyer said there was no point serving the warrant on Donham because the grand jury did not indict her last year.

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