

# Emmett Till accuser admits she fabricated trial testimony

BY RICH SCHAPIRO

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The white woman at the center of the Emmett Till case has admitted she lied in the case that led to the murder decades ago of the 14-year-old black boy, according to a new book.

"Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him," Carolyn Bryant Donham is quoted as saying in "The Blood of Emmett Till" by Timothy Tyson.

Till was kidnapped, beaten, shot and tossed into the muddy Tallahatchie River in August 1955, four days after he allegedly whistled at Bryant, the then-wife of a white Mississippi shopkeeper.

The woman's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J.W. Miliam, were charged with murdering Till, whose mutilated body was found in the river.

Till's mother insisted on holding an open-casket funeral. Images of the teen's disfigured face rocketed across the country, sparking the Civil Rights movement.

At trial, Carolyn Bryant delivered the most explosive testimony, claiming Till had grabbed and threatened her inside her husband's store. She said Till used an "unprintable" word as he told her he had been intimate "with white women before."

"I was just scared to death," the woman added on the stand in testimony that was never heard by the jury because the judge decided it wasn't relevant to the murder.

Despite mountains of evidence, Roy Bryant and Miliam were acquitted by an all-white jury.

Carolyn Bryant went into hiding in the years after the trial. She divorced, and twice remarried, all the while never giving an interview.

That changed in 2007 when she agreed to speak with Tyson. The then-72-year-old Carolyn Bryant Donham admitted she had fabricated her trial testimony about Till making verbal and physical advances toward her.

"That part's not true," she says in Tyson's book, according to Vanity Fair.

Donham added that she couldn't remember the rest of what happened in the country store the night Till came in.

But she did say she "felt tender sorrow" for Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, who died in 2003.

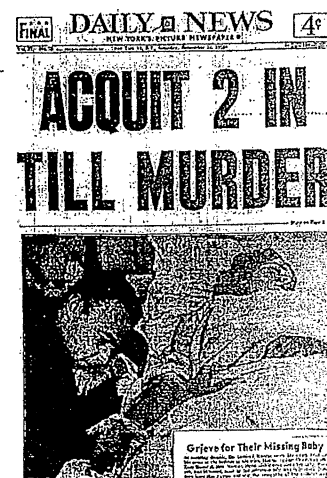
Till's murder investigation was reopened the next year. But a grand jury declined to indict Donham, whose voice was overheard by some witnesses at the scene of the abduction.

Now 82, Donham's whereabouts are reportedly unknown.

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John W. Miliam (l.) and his half-brother Roy Bryant (c.), 24, were acquitted of the murder. Bryant's then-wife was at the



The acquittal made the front page of the Daily News on Sept. 24, 1955. (NEW YORK DAILY NEWS)

# Young Sleuths for OLD CRIMES

Students investigating civil rights-era murders piece together the victims' stories—and help families heal

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Searching the grounds of a small cemetery in Georgia last fall, Ellie Studdard did a double take after spotting a small corner of concrete, mostly hidden by mud, with the letters ISA still visible. As her heart began racing, she cleared away the dirt and branches and unearthed a piece of history long obscured.

Studdard, a junior at Emory University in Atlanta, had found the lost grave of Isaiah Nixon, a 28-year-old black man who was shot to death by a white man in Alton, Georgia, in 1948. She had come to the cemetery in the nearby city of Uvalde with some classmates and a professor as part of a class on civil rights-era cold cases.

"I was in so much shock once I confirmed to myself that it said Isaiah Nixon," Studdard says. "It was totally incredible beyond anything."

The location of Nixon's grave had been lost to his family for decades, and finding it was the most tangible accomplishment in the Emory students' quest to uncover the details of his murder.

The Emory class, called the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Case Project, began in 2011. It's one of a handful of initiatives at various schools, including Syracuse University and Northeastern University, to investigate civil rights-era cases that remain unresolved. The Emory class is the only one for undergraduates.

Watch a video on the Jim Crow South at [upfrontmagazine.com](http://upfrontmagazine.com)



Isaiah Nixon, a 28-year-old father of six, was killed in 1948 after voting in an election; a report on the murder in *The New York Times*.

## SAYS 'GEORGIA NEGRO WAS SLAIN FOR VOTING'

MOUNT VERNON, Ga., Sept. 21 (AP)—A Negro, the father of six children, was shot and killed because he had insisted on voting in Georgia's Democratic primary election, Sheriff R. M. McCrimmon reported today. The victim was identified as Isaiah Nixon, 28 years old, of Alton, Ga. The Sheriff said the man died in a hospital at Dublin as the result of three gunshot wounds suffered the night of the election on Wednesday.

The case of Isaiah Nixon is one of hundreds of racially motivated killings that took place across the South in the Jim Crow era. At the time, many of these crimes were barely noted, much less investigated. Relatives of victims were often afraid to come forward, lacking faith in the judicial system and fearing retaliation from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which waged a campaign of racial terror

across the South and was responsible for many of the murders. When charges were filed, it was common for all-white juries to acquit those charged, as in the Nixon case. Decades later, many of these cases remain unresolved.

In 2006, the F.B.I. began a cold case initiative to investigate racially motivated murders from the civil rights era. That effort became a mandate two years later, when Congress passed the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act. (Till was a 14-year-old black boy who was tortured and killed in Mississippi in 1955 for supposedly flirting with a white woman. His case was heavily covered in the press and brought attention to the civil rights movement.)

From the outset, the government faced formidable challenges: limited federal jurisdiction, the statute of limitations, and, of course, the passage of time. Suspects



The Emory students, including Ellie Studdard (far left), with Dorothy Williams and her family



Williams at her father's grave

and witnesses die. Evidence is lost. Memories fade. Of the 112 cases that have been examined by the F.B.I., only three have resulted in successful prosecutions.

### Remembrance, Not Prosecution

But even when it's no longer possible to prosecute someone for old crimes, that doesn't mean a fuller accounting of what happened isn't meaningful—especially to family members of those killed.

"Sometimes justice is getting information for people," says Paula Johnson, one of the directors of Syracuse's cold case project. "It's not always that something's going to go to trial."

In the case of Isaiah Nixon, what happened and who was responsible was well known. Nixon was shot on Sept. 8, 1948, in his front yard in Alton, as his wife and six children looked on in horror. Nixon had just voted in a Georgia state Democratic

primary, and two white men, Jim and Johnnie Johnson, came to his house to confront him. They ordered Nixon to take a ride with them; when he refused, one of the men shot him three times.

The objective of the Emory class isn't to find evidence for a court of law or to hold anyone legally responsible. The Johnson brothers are now dead.

"This is a project that's really about remembrance rather than prosecution," says Brett Gaddis, a professor of African American studies at Emory who co-teaches the

class. "There are the Emmett Till stories that we all know about. But the cases we're exploring are the ones that were much less publicized. The success of our students' work really does hang on our students' ability to rescue these

### Their success hangs on rescuing the victims from historical oblivion.

blown away by their dedication.

"It's just unbelievable how they persevered in getting the information," says Williams, now 73. Their efforts made a huge difference to her. "I've had quite a bit of anger for a long time, but finally I have found some closure." •