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# **Trial in the Delta: The Murder of Emmett Till**

Adapted from the court transcripts by  
G. RILEY MILLS and PRINCE ROC

Conceived and created by  
ANTHONY MOSELEY, G. RILEY MILLS  
and PRINCE ROC

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Conceived and produced by ANTHONY MOSELEY

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*Trial in the Delta: The Murder of Emmett Till* was first presented by Collaboraction Theatre Company at the DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center (Chicago) on Feb. 9, 2023.

CAST:

PETER HACKUS..... John Henry Roberts  
J.J. BRELAND..... Steve Silver  
GERALD CHATHAM..... Andy Luther  
ROY BRYANT..... Tyler Burke  
J.W. MILAM..... Matt Miles  
JUDGE CURTIS SWANGO..... Richard Alan Baiker  
CHARLIE COX..... Ron David Lipski  
MOSE WRIGHT..... Darren Jones  
CHESTER MILLER..... Lyle Miller  
GEORGE SMITH..... Matt Rosin  
ROBERT HODGES..... Colin Callahan  
JOHN EDWARD COTHRAN..... John Henry Roberts  
MAMIE BRADLEY..... Kayla Franklin  
WILLIE REED..... Mysun Aja Wade  
MRS. ROY BRYANT..... Maddy Brown  
H.C. STRIDER..... Jamie Vann

PRODUCTION:

Directors..... Dana N. Anderson & Anthony Moseley  
Producer..... Carla Stillwell  
Scenic and Video Designer..... Emmy Weldon  
Costume Designer..... Alexandria Richardson  
Lighting Designer..... Phoenix Ballentine  
Sound Designer..... Warren Levon  
Original Music..... Shawn Wallace  
Props Designer..... Mariah Bennett

Production Management ..... Dre Robinson  
Technical Direction ..... Isabella Noe  
Stage Management ..... Teniyah Hall  
Musician/Vocalist ..... Coco Elysses  
Assistant Prod. Manager ..... Razor Wintercastle  
Casting Director ..... Claire Simon, Simon Casting  
Casting Associate ..... Cassidy Price  
Casting Associate ..... Joe Agase

## FOREWORD

In 1955, Emmett Till, a young Black boy from Chicago, traveled to Mississippi to visit relatives. There, he was kidnapped and brutally murdered in one of the most horrific crimes in American history. The trial that followed captivated the world and became a catalyst for the modern civil rights movement. For nearly 50 years, the transcripts from that explosive trial were hidden from public view, until they mysteriously resurfaced and were released by the FBI.

In 2021, award-winning NBC Chicago reporter Marion Brooks obtained a copy of the court transcripts and approached us with a unique opportunity—to transform the five days of witness testimony into a theatrical adaptation of the trial, which would be staged and filmed by NBC and Collaboration Theatre. Knowing the importance of this incident and how the murder of Emmett Till had impacted American history, we immediately said yes.

We approached the creation of this work with profound reverence and respect, not only for Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, but also for every witness who risked their life to tell the truth about what happened in Mississippi during the summer of 1955. Reading the transcripts for the first time, it became clear why they had been concealed for so long; we were stunned by how badly the justice system had failed Emmett and his family. As we began the adaptation process, we used these transcripts as the foundational material, sculpting them into the play you are about to experience.

Every word of testimony in *Trial in the Delta* is faithfully drawn from the original court transcripts. The only dialogue we created was for procedural purposes, ensuring a smooth

narrative flow. Notably, the transcripts did not include the infamous closing arguments from the prosecution and defense. To authentically recreate these, we relied on alternative sources, including newspaper articles and books—particularly *Getting Away With Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* by Chris Crowe, *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* by Devery S. Anderson and *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* by Elliott J. Gorn. For the opening scene outside the courtroom, as well as Mamie Till Bradley’s monologues at the play’s end, we used archival news footage.

In creating *Trial in the Delta*, our goal was to bring the truth of that 1955 trial to light, allowing audiences to witness firsthand how systemic racism and white supremacy were prioritized over the life of a young Black boy. As you will see in the play, Emmett and Mamie Till Bradley, along with witnesses like Mose Wright and Willie Reed, demonstrated a level of bravery and courage that most of us can only imagine. For that, we dedicate this play to them.

—Anthony Moseley,  
G. Riley Mills and Prince Roc





# **Trial in the Delta: The Murder of Emmett Till**

## **CHARACTERS**

PETER HACKUS (m): A reporter, white, 42.

J.J. BRELAND (m): The defense attorney, white, 67.

GERALD CHATHAM (m): The district attorney, white, 49.

ROY BRYANT (m): The defendant, white, 24.

J.W. MILAM (m): The defendant, white, 36.

JUDGE CURTIS SWANGO (m): White, 47.

CHARLIE COX (m): Court clerk, white, 20s.

### Witnesses for the Prosecution:

MOSE WRIGHT (m): Uncle of Emmett Till, Black, 64.

CHESTER MILLER (m): An undertaker, Black, 52.

GEORGE SMITH (m): Sheriff, LeFlore County, white, 52.

ROBERT HODGES (m): A fisherman, white, 17.

JOHN EDWARD COTHRAN (m): Deputy sheriff, white, 40.

MAMIE BRADLEY (w): Mother of Emmett Till, Black, 33.

WILLIE REED (m): Neighbor of Milam, Black, 18.

### Witnesses for the Defense:

MRS. ROY BRYANT (w): White, 21.

H.C. STRIDER (m): Sheriff, Tallahatchie County, white, 51.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

**SETTING:** The main action of the play takes place inside a courtroom in Sumner, Mississippi, with one scene set outside the courthouse. The year is 1955.

**CASTING:** In the original production of the play, filmed for NBC, casting 12 white men as jurors created a powerful visual impact. In the subsequent stage production, however, we used 12 empty chairs to represent the jury, a symbolic choice that was equally effective and evocative. Whether to depict the jury with actors in the jury box or with empty chairs should be left to the discretion of individual directors of future productions.

## **Trial in the Delta: The Murder of Emmett Till**

*(Lights rise on the exterior of the courthouse building in Sumner, Mississippi. September 19, 1955. It is a hot day and a crowd has gathered outside. PETER HACKUS speaks directly to the audience, as if speaking into a camera.)*

HACKUS. This is Peter Hackus at the courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi. Not since the Tallahatchie River flooded some thirty years ago have the townspeople here had more to talk about than this trial about to go on inside that courtroom. Every available seat is occupied, including a few areas where seats weren't provided.

*(J.J. BRELAND enters with ROY BRYANT and J.W. MILAM.)*

HACKUS *(cont'd)*. On the tip of everyone's tongue, the two defendants, Mr. Bryant and Mr. Milam, who are generally known throughout the community. Mr. Breland, what will be the basis of your defense, sir?

BRELAND. Our main defense is that the dead body taken from the Tallahatchie River is not that of Emmett Till. The witnesses best qualified to testify as to the identity of the body taken from the river all are positive that this body could not be identified positively as any particular person.

*(BRELAND, BRYANT and MILAM exit into the courthouse.)*

HACKUS *(to the audience)*. It's hot here in Mississippi, both inside and outside the courtroom. Ninety degrees and above

is what we registered this morning. Never has this quiet little cotton-growing community in Mississippi seen so much publicity and so much excitement.

*(MAMIE BRADLEY enters with GERALD CHATHAM.)*

HACKUS *(cont'd)*. Mr. Chatham, as the district attorney prosecuting this case, what do you expect to hear from the defense today?

CHATHAM. As far as the defense is concerned, we have no idea what they'll introduce or how long it will take to put on their case.

HACKUS. Do you have anything new or startling up your sleeve?

CHATHAM. If we did, I don't think this would be the proper place to tell it.

HACKUS. Mrs. Bradley, what do you intend to do here today?

MAMIE BRADLEY. To answer any questions that my, that the attorneys might ask me to answer.

HACKUS. How do you think you could possibly be of help to them?

MAMIE BRADLEY. I don't know, just by answering whatever questions they ask me.

HACKUS. Do you have any evidence bearing on this case?

MAMIE BRADLEY. I do know that this is my son.

*(MAMIE BRADLEY and CHATHAM exit into the courthouse.)*

HACKUS *(to the audience)*. Let's make our way into the courtroom now as the proceedings get underway.

*(HACKUS exits as the scene shifts to the interior of the courtroom. CHATHAM sits at a table on one side, while BRELAND, MILAM and BRYANT sit at a separate table.)*

*MAMIE BRADLEY is seated at a table on the other side of the courtroom. Two different Bibles sit on the bench, one for the swearing-in of the white witnesses and a second for the Black witnesses. CHARLIE COX [CLERK] is also present. H.C. STRIDER enters and approaches MAMIE BRADLEY.)*

STRIDER. Mamie Bradley?

MAMIE BRADLEY. Yes.

STRIDER. Mamie Bradley, on behalf of Tallahatchie County, you are hereby commanded to appear as a witness in this trial. *(He hands her a subpoena.)* You are now in the state of Mississippi and you will come under all rules of the state of Mississippi.

*(JUDGE CURTIS SWANGO enters.)*

CLERK. All rise. The honorable Judge Curtis M. Swango Jr. presiding.

JUDGE. You may be seated. We're here today in the case of The State of Mississippi vs. J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. We have our jury empaneled and the defendants are each represented by counsel and have announced they are ready to proceed. Mr. Chatham, do you desire any preliminary statement?

CHATHAM. No, sir.

JUDGE. Then please call your first witness.

CHATHAM. We'd like to call Mose Wright to the stand.

*(MOSE WRIGHT takes the stand. CLERK approaches with a Bible.)*

CLERK. Please raise your right hand. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

MOSE. I do.

CHATHAM. Will you please state your name to the jury?

MOSE. Mose Wright.

CHATHAM. Uncle Mose, where do you live?

MOSE. Money.

CHATHAM. Is that Money, Mississippi?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

CHATHAM. Uncle Mose, are you a married man?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

CHATHAM. How much family do you have?

MOSE. Oh, I have twelve.

CHATHAM. What kind of house do you live in, Uncle Mose?

MOSE. We live in a six-room house.

CHATHAM. Now specifically, on the night of August twenty-seventh, who was there at your home at bedtime?

MOSE. There was my two grandsons and Emmett Till, my nephew. I am his uncle. Also, my wife and two sons.

CHATHAM. Uncle Mose, tell the jury about what time that Saturday night your family went to bed.

MOSE. My wife was already in bed. Myself and the boys, we went to bed about one o'clock.

CHATHAM. Now, I want you to tell the jury in which room of your house did Emmett Till go to bed?

MOSE. The east room.

CHATHAM. And who went to bed with Emmett Till that night?

MOSE. Simeon, my baby.

CHATHAM. Now, Uncle Mose, after you and your family had gone to bed, I want you to tell the jury if any person or persons called at your home that night and if they did, what time was it?

MOSE. About two o'clock.

CHATHAM. What was the first thing that attracted your attention to the fact that there was someone about your premises?

MOSE. Well, someone was at the front door, and he was saying, "Preacher—Preacher." And then I said, "Who is it?" And then he said, "This is Mr. Bryant. I want to talk to you and that boy."

CHATHAM. Do you know Mr. Bryant?

MOSE. I just know him since he came up here. I couldn't see him that night so well, only with that flashlight there, and I could see that it was the other man, Mr. Milam. But I know Mr. Milam.

CHATHAM. You know Mr. Milam, do you?

MOSE. I sure do.

CHATHAM. And then what did you do?

MOSE. I got up and I opened the door.

CHATHAM. And what did you see when you opened the door?

MOSE. Well, Mr. Milam was standing there at the door with a pistol in his right hand and a flashlight in his left hand.

CHATHAM. Now stop there a minute, Uncle Mose. I want you to point out Mr. Milam if you see him here.

MOSE (*stands, pointing*). There he is.

CHATHAM. And do you see Mr. Bryant in here?

(*MOSE points at BRYANT, then sits.*)

CHATHAM (*cont'd*). Now tell the jury, Uncle Mose, when you opened the door and looked out at the time, and you saw Mr. Bryant and Mr. Milam there, where were they standing?

BRELAND. We object to that, your honor. He said he didn't recognize them. He said he just saw a flashlight.



JUDGE. The objection will be sustained.

CHATHAM. When did you see those two men that night?

MOSE. That was about two o'clock in the morning.

CHATHAM. When the first man called out to you that night, Uncle Mose, did he tell you who it was?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

CHATHAM. And who did he tell you it was?

MOSE. He said he was Mr. Bryant.

CHATHAM. And do you see the man here in this courtroom now who was standing on your porch that night that said he was Mr. Bryant?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

BRELAND. We object to that, your honor. He said that he didn't recognize him.

JUDGE. Sustained.

CHATHAM. Now, Uncle Mose, what did you say J. W. Milam had in his hand that night when you saw him there on your porch?

MOSE. He had a pistol in his right hand. And he had a flashlight in his left hand.

CHATHAM. And what did he say to you?

MOSE. He asked me if I had two boys there from Chicago.

CHATHAM. And what did you say?

MOSE. I said, "Yes, sir."

CHATHAM. And will you tell the jury who those boys were?

MOSE. Wheeler Parker, my grandson, and Emmett Till.

CHATHAM. How long had they been visiting in your home?

MOSE. They was there a week.

CHATHAM. After you told Mr. Milam that you did have two boys from Chicago, and that they were there in your house, what did he say and do then?

MOSE. Mr. Milam said, “I want that boy that done the talking down at Money.”

CHATHAM. After Mr. Milam and Mr. Bryant got in your home that night, tell the jury what you did.

MOSE. We went to the first room, and Emmett wasn’t in there. And then I passed another door, and in this second room, we found him and Simeon in bed.

CHATHAM. What, if anything, was said by Mr. Milam or Mr. Bryant to Emmett Till?

MOSE. Mr. Milam said for him to get up.

CHATHAM. And what did Emmett Till do?

MOSE. He got up and got dressed.

CHATHAM. And what happened after that, Uncle Mose?

MOSE. They started out. Then he asked me if I know anybody there and I told him, “No, sir. I don’t know you.” And then he said to me, “How old are you?” And then I said, “Sixty-four.” And he said, “Well, if you know any of us here tonight, you will never live to be sixty-five.”

CHATHAM. And then did they leave out of your house with Emmett Till?

MOSE. That’s right.

CHATHAM. And when they went, did either Mr. Bryant or Mr. Milam have anything to say to your wife?

MOSE. Yes, sir, they did.

CHATHAM. And what did they say?

MOSE. Well, she had just gotten out of bed, and then he said to her, “You get back in that bed, and I mean, I want to hear the springs.”

CHATHAM. He said he wanted to hear the springs?

MOSE. That’s right.

CHATHAM. And what did she do then?

MOSE. Well, she got back in bed.

*(Laughter. JUDGE pounds gavel, restoring order.)*

CHATHAM. And did Mr. Milam still have the pistol in his hand then?

MOSE. He kept it in his hand all the time.

CHATHAM. Before Mr. Milam and Mr. Bryant got out of the house with Emmett Till, I want you to tell the jury if either you or your wife tried to induce them not to carry the boy out?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

CHATHAM. Go ahead and tell us what was said.

MOSE. My wife, she said we'll pay you whatever you want if you'll just release him, let him go.

CHATHAM. And what did they say?

MOSE. They didn't say a word.

CHATHAM. What, if anything, did you see out there when Mr. Milam and Mr. Bryant took Emmett Till out in front of your house?

MOSE. I saw a car.

CHATHAM. Before Mr. Milam and Mr. Bryant got to the car with Emmett Till, did you hear them make any statement or ask anybody out there any question in that car?

MOSE. I sure did.

CHATHAM. Will you tell the jury what that was?

MOSE. They asked if this was the boy, and someone said, "Yes."

CHATHAM. Was that a man's voice or a lady's voice you heard?

MOSE. It seemed like it was lighter than a man's.

CHATHAM. And what did they do with Emmett Till after they received that response from the person who was in the car?

MOSE. They drove off towards Money.

CHATHAM. Did you watch the car as it drove off towards Money?

MOSE. Well, I stood on the porch for maybe twenty more minutes.

CHATHAM. Have you, since that night, ever seen Emmett Till alive?

MOSE. No, sir.

CHATHAM. Did Mr. Bryant or Mr. Milam bring him back to your house that night?

MOSE. No, sir.

CHATHAM. Now tell the court and jury when the next time was that you saw Emmett Till?

MOSE. I saw him when he was taken out of the river.

CHATHAM. And when you saw Emmett Till, was he living or dead?

MOSE. He was dead. They had him in a boat.

CHATHAM. I want you to tell the jury whether or not you could tell whose body it was?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

CHATHAM. And who was it?

MOSE. Emmett Till.

CHATHAM. When you first saw the body, Uncle Mose, did you notice whether or not they had taken a ring off of Emmett's finger?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

CHATHAM. And was the ring taken off his finger in your presence?

MOSE. That's right. The undertaker man took it back to Greenwood.

CHATHAM. Is that Chester Miller?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

CHATHAM. And what did Mr. Miller do with the ring? Did he give it to you?

MOSE. That's right.

CHATHAM (*holding up a ring*). Now I hand you a ring, Uncle Mose, and I ask you to tell the court and jury if that is the ring that Chester Miller took off of Emmett's finger and gave to you that morning?

MOSE. Yes, sir, it is.

CHATHAM (*to BRELAND*). Take the witness.

BRELAND. Mose, when they came to your house that night, as you say, where was Mr. Milam?

MOSE. He was standing right at the door.

BRELAND. And he had a flashlight in his left hand, is that right?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

BRELAND. And where was the flashlight pointed?

MOSE. It was out like this.

BRELAND. Did he ever turn it in his own face?

MOSE. Well, he had it something like that when he was going through the house.

BRELAND. And when you started through the house, you looked at them, did you?

MOSE. That's right.

BRELAND. Well, how did you know what boy they were looking for?

MOSE. I heard someone say that this boy had done something, or done some talking down at Money.

BRELAND. You already knew about it, did you?

MOSE. That's right.

BRELAND. Had you talked to Emmett about it?

MOSE. I sure did. CHATHAM. We object to that.

JUDGE. Sustained.

BRELAND. Did you punish Emmett for that?

CHATHAM. We object, your honor.

JUDGE. The objection is sustained.

BRELAND. You say that one of the men asked you to turn the lights on that night?

MOSE. Yes, sir.

BRELAND. But you didn't turn the lights on.

MOSE. I sure didn't.

BRELAND. Did you ever see this man that you pointed out as Mr. Bryant, did you ever see the light shining on his face that night?

MOSE. I did not.

BRELAND. And the first time you ever saw him was in the courtroom, wasn't it?

MOSE. The first time I saw his face, that's right.

BRELAND. Now, let's go back to Mr. Milam. Had you ever seen Mr. Milam before that night?

MOSE. I never had.

BRELAND. Isn't it a fact, Mose, that the only reason you thought this was Mr. Milam in your house that night was that he was a big man with a bald head? Isn't that true?

MOSE. That's right.

BRELAND. And the first time you ever saw him was in this courtroom, isn't that right?

MOSE (*confused*). I don't believe I understand.

BRELAND. The reason you say you know him is because the man had a bald head, isn't that right?

MOSE. No, sir.

BRELAND. Then you've changed your story, haven't you?

MOSE. They was at my house!

BRELAND. And the only thing you saw at your house, the only man you saw, was a bald-headed man, right?

MOSE. That's right.

BRELAND. Mose, you didn't see Emmett get into the car, did you?

MOSE. I did not.

BRELAND. And you didn't see anybody put him in the car, did you?

MOSE. I did not.

BRELAND. And you didn't see one of these men who were at your house get into the car, did you?

MOSE. I did not.

BRELAND. And you didn't see anybody in that car when it drove off, did you?

MOSE. I did not.

BRELAND. And the only reason you thought Mr. Bryant was there that night was because somebody came up there and said he was Mr. Bryant, right?

MOSE. That's right.

BRELAND (*pauses, shifting gears*). Now, let's go up there to the morning on the river, Mose. When they parked the car there, could you see the body in the river?

MOSE. I couldn't good. It was in the boat.

BRELAND. Was it laying face down or on its back?

MOSE. On its face. They turned him over, and then I saw all of it.

BRELAND. And you were sure that was Emmett Till?

MOSE. That's right.