

The Memorial of Emmett Till

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For forty-nine years and eleven months, there was nothing but crickets. Total silence. Emmett Till was killed in August of 1955, and for nearly 50 years no one talked about it. The brutal lynching of the 14-year-old African-American boy inspired Rosa Parks to keep her seat. But in Mississippi, no one talked about it. At least not publicly. And certainly not across racial lines.

And then everything changed. On July 1, 2005, 49 years and eleven months after the murder, the state of Mississippi dropped its first dollar on Till commemoration. And then, as if making up for lost time, Emmett Till monuments began popping up everywhere. Over the next 10 years, the state of Mississippi would invest over five million dollars in Till's story.

And then something even more amazing happened. People started talking about the murder. Openly. Publicly. Across racial lines. Consider the example of life-long Mississippi resident Betty Pearson. When the monuments went up, Pearson wrote to her friend Susan Glisson, "This is the first time in 50+ years that there has been any open dialogue about the Till murder and trial." According to Pearson, Mississippi residents did not speak openly of the Till murder until they began the process of erecting monuments. With all this talk in 2020 of putting up and taking down monuments: it is important to remember the lesson of Betty Pearson: when stories are given the dignity of public space, they can jumpstart community storytelling in ways we may not have dreamed possible.

But stories are fragile things. And Pearson's momentary excitement would not last. As soon as they were erected, Till memorials were vandalized. Emmett Till signs have been stolen, thrown in the river, replaced, shot, replaced again, shot again and defaced with acid. The newest Emmett Till sign, dedicated in October 2019, is the country's only bullet proof historical marker.

I wrote the inscription for this marker. My words are burned onto the armor-grade steel with a laser. Here's what you need to know: the inscription tells the story of Till's murder in 1955, but it also tells the story of the vandalism that has plagued Till commemoration since 2005. As I told the Till family at the dedication of the sign, the bullet holes that pierce the historical markers are part of Till's story too. They remind us that the racism that cost Till his life still cuts through the heart of America.

The story of Till's murder, the long silence, the burst of stories, and the vandalism that followed may be dramatic, but they are not unique. Stories like this are in our backyard. On April 3, 1882, Levi Harrington was lynched from the Bluff Street bridge in Kansas City, MO. 148 years later, 148 years late, in 2018, Kansas City finally erected a memorial. Less than two years later, it was torn from its posts and tossed over a cliff. It has not been replaced.

But stories may not be as fragile as I once feared. In both Mississippi and Kansas City, Pearson's dream lives on. For the first time in a generation people are talking about Emmett Till and Levi Harrington. The monuments—even when vandalized—especially when vandalized—are driving a new generation of storytellers who are driving a new vision of the world. May it come to pass.

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