

UN(RE)SOLVED

Episode 1 - The List

6427 South St. Lawrence Avenue.

I grew up less than four miles from this address on the South Side of Chicago. It's a typical home you'd find in many parts of the city: a red-brick, two-story building, or as us locals call it, a two-flat. There was once a boy, a Black boy, who spent his childhood here.

I went past it not long ago when I still lived in Chicago. Some colleagues and I were interviewing a policeman about what it was like to be a Black officer in the city¹. We were in his car, and the house was one of our last stops that day.

ARCHIVE [OFFICER]: Before we head back, I wanted to go to this house, because this house was the start of the Civil Rights movement.

ARCHIVE [COLLEAGUE]: Right here?

ARCHIVE [OFFICER]: That's Emmett Till's House.

ARCHIVE [COLLEAGUE]: Really?

ARCHIVE [OFFICER]: Mmhmm.

ARCHIVE [COLLEAGUE]: Wow. Who lives there now?

ARCHIVE [OFFICER]: I don't know, I think it's abandoned. And I think it's a travesty that that particular house is abandoned. See usually when you live there, that management sign is gone, the door's open. The door is always open. So he walked down those stairs, he walked northbound to the bus, took the train to the train station and he never came back...

EDWARDS: Emmett Till's house. As a Black kid in Chicago, I'd long known the story of Emmett Till.

¹ Fact check with James (Is there an article associated with this interview to link here? The archive?)
<https://www.wbez.org/stories/englewood/31d4b4a4-2c43-44f7-9824-1cafaf63204c>

For many, including me, that story begins one day in August 1955 — when Emmett walks down those same steps I'd stared at. Emmett's leaving home to head to the train station. He's about to take a special trip that he's been looking forward to.

His destination? Mississippi.

He's on his way there to spend part of his summer break with relatives. Going to Mississippi from Chicago is a familiar trip for many Black families in the city who left the South during the Great Migration.

My family, though, *did not* make those trips, even though both of my mom's parents come from Mississippi. My grandfather, along with most of his siblings, migrated to Chicago from Greenville. Once he got North though, he never returned.

"There's nothing good back there," he would tell my mom when she was young. What specifically was *back there*, he never shared with her.

But Emmett, he couldn't wait to get there, and his family in Mississippi was just as excited. They couldn't wait to hear his stories about Chicago...to show him how they liked to have fun in Mississippi. To do some of the things kids like to do in the summer, like go swimming.

And once Emmett reached Mississippi, he was calling and writing back home to his mother Mamie.

MAMIE TILL MOBLEY: He was having a ball. He was enjoying himself. And he was concerned about everyone back home. Tell them that he was having a good time and tell them hello for him.

One hot evening, about a week after he arrived, Emmett, some of his cousins, and their friends, paid a visit to a store in a nearby town, called Money². They were looking for fireworks³. It was summer, after all.

And it's here — when this car full of Black boys pulls up to the white-owned Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market — that the story of Emmett Till begins in most civil rights history lessons.

² August 28, 2020: "On August 24, while standing with his cousins and some friends outside a country store in Money" ([History.com](#))

³ Sept. 13, 2018: "Bryant attended the first town meeting of the administration of Shirley Edwards, the town's first black mayor, and complained of burglaries at **his fireworks store** and poor performance by police in stopping it." ([Clarion Ledger](#)) AND

"Emmett sampled the Mississippi life of his cousins during the first three days of his visit: picking cotton, shooting off fireworks, stealing watermelons, and swimming in a snake-infested pond." ([UMKC](#))

Teachers present it almost like a fable — a story that helps illustrate just how bad life could be *back then...* in the segregated South. A marker of how far we like to believe we've progressed... even when the truth of that progress is more complicated.

Bystanders and witnesses have told different stories about what happened outside that store in Money. Emmett's cousin — Simeon Wright — was with him that day. In an interview with the Library of Congress, he said the wife of the store's owner was walking to her car.

And that's when Emmett whistled at her.⁴

SIMEON WRIGHT: It scared us half to death. And we couldn't get out of town fast enough. We ran to the car. And Emmett saw our reaction, and it scared him.

EDWARDS: Days later⁵, the store owner and another man showed up at the home of Emmett's family around two o'clock in the morning⁶.

WRIGHT: Said, "We're looking for the fat boy from Chicago," and they marched around to my bedroom. And I heard the noise, you know, the loud talking, and I woke up and saw these two white men standing at the foot of my bed. One had a gun, flashlight...He ordered me to lay back down and go back to sleep. And he made Emmett get up and dress and marched him out to the truck.

EDWARDS: It was the last time Emmett's family saw him alive.

Only a month after his 14th birthday⁷.

His kidnapers beat and shot him. Mutilated his body. Wrapped a fan blade around his neck with barbed wire...to weigh him down⁸.

Someone later found his body in the Tallahatchie River. Swollen. Disfigured. Unrecognizable.

⁴ May 23, 2011: Interview with [LOC](#)

⁵ [PBS](#) has a timeline: Aug. 24 Till visits the store. Aug. 28, he is abducted.

⁶ "About 2:30 a.m., Roy Bryant, Carolyn's husband, and his half brother J. W. Milam, kidnap Emmett Till from Moses Wright's home." ([PBS](#))

⁷ Emmett was born on July 25, 1941 and kidnapped on Aug. 28, 1955 ([PBS](#))

⁸ "They will later describe brutally beating him, taking him to the edge of the Tallahatchie River, shooting him in the head, fastening a large metal fan used for ginning cotton to his neck with barbed wire, and pushing the body into the river." ([PBS](#))

JET, the Black-owned publication that back then called itself “The Weekly Negro News Magazine,” published gruesome images of Emmett’s body...with the permission of his mother.

TILL MOBLEY: The pictures were ten times better than Emmett looked when I looked at his body unretouched.

That’s Emmett’s mother, Mamie Till Mobley, in a TV interview.⁹

When Emmett’s remains returned home to Chicago, she insisted on an open casket funeral¹⁰. “Let the people see what I’ve seen¹¹,” she told the funeral director.

TILL MOBLEY: Well I knew that I could not tell people what I had seen. Number one: they wouldn't believe me. But if I had two or three hundred witnesses, then all of us could testify to what they had done to Emmett. And I thought the world needed to know what was going on in Mississippi.

I don’t remember the first time I saw those pictures of Emmett. I started consuming history fairly early in my life, so stories like Emmett’s have always felt part of me and where I come from. But whenever I do see those photos, it’s usually next to a picture of Emmett when he was alive...smiling. And, all I can ever think...looking at those images side by side...is...*this* is what evil looks like.

The pictures of Emmett in his open casket are burned into the minds of many, including a cousin of his, Deborah Watts.

WATTS: You know, there's a picture of his face, of, after he was, after he was murdered. That's what scared me and startled me and... yeah.

Deborah was a toddler when Emmett died.¹² When we talked, she told me about *her* first time seeing those pictures of him. She was a young girl, growing up in Omaha, Nebraska, and one day, at home, she came across some booklets about Emmett that a photojournalist had put together. Deborah says she didn’t know it was Emmett when she first saw those pictures of his body. Still, she told me she became angry, and tore up some of the booklets.

⁹ https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_8D43D41573E54D0692413250CF6FD6B7

¹⁰ July 12, 218: “Emmett Till’s mother opened his casket and sparked the civil rights movement” ([WaPo](#))

¹¹ “Let the people see what I’ve seen” ([TIME](#))

¹² Confirmed that she was only a toddler at the time in the interview with James

DEBORAH WATTS: I was too young to really understand why. But in later years, you know I asked questions about what happened, because I would hear comments about you know, Emmett, hear warnings. You know, “don't let that happen to you what happened to Emmett.”

EDWARDS: And just growing up, um, you know, how would your family talk about Emmett? You know, just those who knew him, how would they describe him?

WATTS: Well, you know what I've learned over the years, um, I know that, you know, he was the love of his mom's life. You know, they were like partners and friends, if you will, as he grew up. He was her only child and, um, spoiled, if you will, but more, you know, of, you know, there was this mutual respect and a sense of responsibility that he had for his mom and that they had for each other.

EDWARDS: Deborah told me Mamie Till Mobley was heartbroken — not just over Emmett's murder, but over the utter lack of any consequence for his killers.

Two weeks after Emmett was buried, an all-white, all-male jury acquitted his killers...after deliberating for just 67 minutes.

As core to America's history as it is, Emmett Till's is only one story... that's part of many more stories — past and present — like stars on a flag.

Countless families deprived of justice. Numerous attempts to do right *this time*, and to correct the wrongs of the past.

About 15 years ago, the federal government began a formal effort to try to do right in cases like Emmett's — racist killings that happened during the civil rights era that went either unsolved or without punishment.

At the center of this quest is a list. Put together by the Department of Justice and FBI, now totalling 151 names. And along with this list was a law, named for Emmett Till, that required the government to do something — reopen, reinvestigate, find “justice” where they could.

Emmett's name is arguably the best-known on this list. But as I read through each name, there are others I recognize... whose stories and outcomes shaped me and how I see this country. The majority of these names, though, I don't know, but famous or not, I can't shake this thought: they were all someone to somebody... They were loved.

For a year, I've been trying to understand how this list came to be, and whether it would achieve what these agencies claimed it was meant to do for the families — and memories — of those killed.

COREY HINTON: I don't think that there'll ever be justice for our family. I think that the men that did this will probably go to their graves thinking they got away with murder.

FLORA SHANKLIN: Got abducted and beat to death, and was thrown away like she was a bag of trash. And nobody has ever been tried for it.

CORDERO DUCKSWORTH: I'm sure a lot of the other families probably feel the same way I do. 'Cause I'm sure that the FBI gave up on them as well as they did my family.

EMMA JEAN JACKSON: They'll call it one kind of success, and I'm calling it not a success for the family.

As I've looked into this list, and the government agencies and politicians and people involved with it, I've tried to figure out: what kind of progress has been made — if any?¹³

And what, after more than 50 years, would justice even look like for the victims and families?

TOM PEREZ: These cases were decades old. Witnesses had died, memories had faded, statutes of limitation came in place.

JOHN JACKSON: There were questions; I had questions as to whether or not this was about the people or the politics.

RICHARD COHEN: I felt as if the initiative was important, but I also felt as if, you know, justice in a few cases was going to have to serve as, basically, a proxy for justice in a number of them.

CYNTHIA DEITLE: I will always think that we could have done more, that there was just that one last interview that we should have gotten; that there was one more door we should have knocked on.

¹³ There have been no federal prosecutions since the Till Act became law. See page 27 and on this DOJ [document](#).

This is the story of what happened when the federal government tried to go back and right the wrongs of the past... Of how those wrongs have affected generations of families still seeking justice... And of what it means for how — for *whether* — we move forward in America.

From FRONTLINE, I'm James Edwards, and this is Un(re)solved.

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So many racist killings end the way Emmett Till's did. They don't really end at all. Many go cold and fade away, along with witnesses and often suspects.

Sometimes there was an investigation. Sometimes hardly any.

With each year that goes by, the chance of ever finding the truth fades.

For the rest of her life Mamie Till Mobley fought to have her son's case reopened.¹⁴

If local and state law enforcement couldn't hold anyone accountable, maybe someone in the federal government could.

So after Emmett's killers were acquitted, Mamie took his case to then-President Dwight Eisenhower, but to no avail. Then she tried reaching out to other parts of the federal government, including the FBI.

TILL MOBLEY: I also appealed to J. Edgar Hoover and he finally responded by saying they had researched the case in its entirety and no federal rules had been violated. And therefore the federal government had no — there was no way they could enter the case.

That changed almost 50 years later, when she met a man named Alvin Sykes.

He helped figure out a way for the feds to take on Emmett's case and others like it. Alvin didn't come from the federal government — or anywhere near Washington D.C. His path started at his local public library in Kansas City, Missouri.

He didn't know that a visit there in the 1980s would sow seeds for what was to come decades later.

¹⁴March 8, 2006: "Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, aided by scores of civil rights leaders, politicians, and artists, devoted the rest of her life to preserving her child's legacy through public education and lobbying to reopen the case." ([Santa Clara Magazine](#))

Alvin was looking for a way to get justice, after someone close to him was murdered.

ALVIN SYKES: They said that the last words that, uh, Steve was saying was, 'You can't do this to me. I'm a musician.'

I came across these videos of talks he gave in front of an audience at the Kansas City Public Library. In one, Alvin lays out what happened to his friend, jazz artist Steve Harvey, and how he became involved in the case.

SYKES: See, Steve was a great musician. He was going to go far. I cherish music and musicians and I couldn't stand to think that somebody would kill some musician and then think that they could get away with it.

Many admirers believed that Steve Harvey was on his way to achieving the fame of another Black saxophone legend from Kansas City, Charlie Parker. But in 1980, Steve was murdered by a white man in a public restroom.

An all-white jury in Kansas City acquitted the killer, Raymond Bledsoe, the following year. That didn't sit well with Alvin.

SYKES: And I remember looking at the uh, TV that night when the reporter was, uh, on there saying, 'Well, uh, there's, nothing can be done about this.' And I remember looking at the TV and saying, 'Well that's what you think.'

So Alvin called the Justice Department, and asked if anyone there could bring federal charges. They more or less told him the same thing the FBI had told Mamie Till Mobley, when she called about her son Emmett's killing.

Technically, the murder broke no federal laws, so there was nothing they could do.

SYKES: Then me and Steve Harvey's widow came down to the library and spent all day. I knew the statute was here, but just didn't know where, where it was. We went through looking through the books and finally got to the point, about 10 minutes before closing time where it said under certain laws, whether it's a government official or not, if you deprive someone of the use of a public facility because of their race, and that's a federal offense.

And the memorial park where Steve was murdered, was federal property.

SYKES: Once I seen the statute, I then went back and called the Justice Department and told, uh, the woman who turned out to be the same one that, 'Hey, the law says it don't have to be a government official. Now show me justice.' And she said, 'This too heavy for me. You got to talk to my supervisor.'

They did talk. And in Alvin's words, the rest was history.

Steve's killer was retried, and this time convicted, sentenced to life in prison.

NEWS ARCHIVE: When his friend Steve Harvey was murdered in 1980, Sykes scoured the federal codes of the library, developing the theory of charging his attackers with violating Harvey's civil rights.

The more I dug into Alvin's life, the more he fascinated me. A kindred spirit almost. Like me, he developed his passion for history, for justice, as a kid.

He tells this story about the time right after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, how violence and unrest had broken out in his neighborhood. Alvin was just 11 then. And he says he and a friend responded to what they saw by forming what they called a "community police force," and going out to patrol the neighborhood on their bikes.

DAVID HALEY: The longer you spoke with him, you realized that this was not some run of the mill advocate.

David Haley is a state senator in Kansas, and a close friend of Alvin's for more than 30 years.

HALEY: That not only did he have a passion for that, which he believed in, uh, but he also had the intellect and the research to back it up.

Haley describes Alvin Sykes as an ordinary guy who did extraordinary things by never giving up. And when he talks about the drive and persistence and patience Alvin possessed, the first thing he points out to me is Alvin's voice...and the fact that he rarely heard Alvin raise it.

HALEY: And he had kind of a drawl when he talked. People say I mimic him well, you know, when I talk to them. I say well he's my buddy. But he would just get excited and go, "No, no, no, we need to find out what happened."

SYKES: ...We need to look at all these other cases, and help all these other people.

After his friend's murderer was put away, Alvin went on to advocate for re-investigations of other unsolved racist killings. That's where his story intersects with Mamie Till Mobley's.

Through his work on that first case he learned that his friend's widow was a relative of Emmett Till's. Alvin of course knew the Till story — and wanted to help get the case reopened. So, along with a contact at the Justice Department, he finds himself in the living room of Mamie Till Mobley.¹⁵

ALVIN SYKES: On December 30th of 2002, Don Berger and myself met with Mamie Till Mobley in her home and discussed with her both the possibility of a federal state investigation as well as an opportunity to turn the poison from Emmett Till's death into the medicine of justice for many others.¹⁶

Alvin did get the FBI to take another look at Emmett Till's case. But in a cruel twist, it didn't happen until 2004, more than a year after Mamie Till Mobley died. The FBI reopened the case¹⁷, with all the resources you can imagine invested into it.

The Justice Department compiled an *8,000-page* report that it turned over to local prosecutors in Mississippi.¹⁸

Yet on February 27, 2007, a grand jury in the county where Emmett Till died declined to bring any new charges against a possible living suspect.¹⁹

NEWS ARCHIVE: Now half a century later it looks as if no one is going to be punished for that crime. A grand jury in rural Leflore County, Mississippi, all but closed the case by refusing to indict the woman suspected of accusing Till of whistling at her. She urged her husband to retaliate, we know, according to documents made public Tuesday, and the result was the fatal beating of the

¹⁵ March 29, 2021: "The case brought Mr. Sykes national acclaim, but something Mr. Harvey's widow said nagged at him: Her husband was the second victim of racial injustice in her family, the first being her distant cousin [Emmett Till](#)." (NYT)

¹⁶ ** return to this? Maybe verify from interview or someone else who was there if possible?

¹⁷ "In May 2004, the FBI reopened the investigation" (FBI)

¹⁸ March 4, 2007: "The FBI amassed an 8,000-page file during its investigation but determined that the statutes of limitations had run out on all possible federal crimes. The agency turned the file over to Chiles, with a recommendation she take a close look at Donham." (Seattle Times)

¹⁹ Feb. 28, 2007: "After a new investigation of the notorious 1955 killing of Emmett Till, a grand jury in Leflore County, Miss., has declined to issue any new indictments, effectively ending any further prosecution of a crime that fueled the civil rights movement." (NYT)

14-year-old. And the two men who allegedly carried out the murder died years ago...

So the authorities closed Emmett Till's case, again. But by this time, his murder was not the only civil rights-era cold case getting new scrutiny.

Investigators from the FBI and Justice Department were returning to other high-profile cases, thanks in large part to new information uncovered by journalists. One of them is Jerry Mitchell.

JERRY MITCHELL: I like to chase the bad guys. I mean, that's a pretty good description of it, I guess. I like to... I like to see injustices corrected.

Jerry is a reporter based in Mississippi. He's been investigating civil rights-era crimes for more than 30 years.

I'd known of and admired Jerry and his work before I even became a journalist. So when I started working on this story, I knew eventually he'd be one of the people I needed to talk to.

And later he actually became an advisor to this project.

Jerry started looking into cold cases after learning about the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers: James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner — a Black Mississippian²⁰ and two white men from New York. Mitchell spent years digging into the case, and writing about the killings. Soon he began investigating other unsolved civil rights cases.

NEWS ARCHIVE: Mitchell's dogged reporting, combined with a new generation of aggressive federal and local prosecutors, has led to the reinvestigation of 20 civil rights-era killings. To date, a total of 23 people have been arrested...

Like the murders of civil rights leaders Medgar Evers and Vernon Dahmer.

NEWS ARCHIVE: In Mississippi, Byron de la Beckwith is convicted of murdering civil rights leader Medgar Evers more than 30 years earlier. Beckwith, a white supremacist, gets life in prison...

²⁰ JUNE 15, 1989: "a time for Northerners to confront their own racism. How many would have voiced outrage if Goodman and Schwerner--both from Jewish homes--had been black, like Chaney?" ([LA Times](#))

And the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four young girls in Birmingham, Alabama.

NEWS ARCHIVE: A former Ku Klux Klansmen becomes the third man convicted for one of the deadliest attacks during America's civil rights era. A jury finds Bobby Frank Cherry guilty of murder in the...

Jerry says this case in particular — the church bombing — demonstrated just how slim the opportunity for successful prosecutions might be.²¹

MITCHELL: It was really one of those kinds of situations where you, you realize the clock was ticking. I've forgotten how many key witnesses died. A year after that trial, they could not have even brought that case a year later. I mean, that's how close they came to losing that case.

And then, in 2005.

NEWS ARCHIVE: It was a case that went cold four decades ago — cold and cruel. The killings of three young civil rights workers in Mississippi. On Monday, a man will finally stand trial for those killings....

Jerry's reporting helped lead to the conviction of a man for the killings of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, 41 years to the day after the murders took place.

MITCHELL: For whatever reason, journalists seem to have done a pretty good job of being able to tackle these cases.... And I think that's because we do take a broader look and that's important to understanding the case, to understanding the history, understanding the context.

So you had the grassroots work of people like Alvin Sykes. You had universities researching cases, and reporters like Jerry Mitchell getting interested and finding new leads. Then law enforcement following up on this work, and winning convictions.

It appeared that, despite the odds, justice in some of these cold cases might still be within reach. Yet the momentum — while building — it needed to be organized.

That gave Alvin Sykes an idea.

²¹ Jan. 7, 2006 May 1, 2001 -- A former Ku Klux Klansman was convicted today in the 1963 bombing of an Alabama church that killed four black girls. ([ABC](#))

SYKES: During the course of that time period, we became aware that there were many, many unsolved civil rights era cases that were, that did not have the notoriety of Emmett Till or the three Civil Rights workers. That there needed to be a systemic way to go after all of these cases.

EDWARDS: So Alvin arranged to meet with Jim Talent, then one of his state's U.S. Senators.²² He sold Talent, a Republican, on the idea — a law that would compel the Justice Department to take on these cases.²³²⁴²⁵ The senator introduced the bill, but it didn't gain momentum until a couple years later, after civil rights leader and Congressman John Lewis took the reins.

LEWIS: For the sake of history, for the sake of justice, for the sake of closure, the 110th Congress must pass this legislation.

Here's John Lewis on the U.S. House floor in 2007 introducing The Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crimes Act.

LEWIS: Mr. Speaker, we have an obligation. We have a mission. We have a mandate. The blood of hundreds of innocent men and women is calling out to us.

Our team interviewed Lewis about the Till Act and why the bill felt so personal to him.

LEWIS: It is so different to be in Washington with members of Congress on the floor of the house and a committee meeting, and being the living room of a family who have suffered so much. You feel their sense of loss, you see their pain and you can only wish and hope there must be more that you can do as an individual.

EDWARDS: Alabama state troopers nearly killed Lewis and other peaceful marchers for voting rights.²⁶ He personally knew the three civil rights workers killed in

²² ** looking to verify which state senator this was. A senator from Oklahoma supported Sykes according to this [NYT](#) article: Undeterred, Mr. Sykes reached out to Senator Coburn, and after several failed attempts got a meeting with him. Following an hours-long conversation, the senator not only relented but also became an advocate for the bill.

²³ Sept. 19, 2005: "Senator Talent teams with local activist Alvin Sykes aiming to solve civil rights murders" ([KCUR](#))

²⁴ June 22, 2007: The Committee on the Judiciary, to which was referred the bill (S. 535), to establish an Unsolved Crimes Section in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, and an Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Investigative Office in the Civil Rights Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. ([Gov Info](#))

²⁵ **Come back to verify

²⁶ " The Selma expanse is where [Lewis once believed he would be killed at 25](#), as he led protesters who marched for the right to vote only to be met by police officers who brutally attacked the protesters."

[Source](#)

Mississippi.²⁷ And when he was a teenager in the '50s, the murder of Emmett Till inspired him to join the movement for racial justice.²⁸

LEWIS: I do see a line, an arch for my own involvement in the civil rights movement during the 60s and the cold cases today. I really truly believe, in the depth of my soul, that if we're going to have peace, if we're going to have healing, if we're going to move closer and closer to that sense of community — then everything must come out. We must tell the whole story, the complete story — people need to know.

The Till Act promised to do something the government had never done before.

It would create a federal law — mandating the DOJ and FBI, in the words of the bill, “to expeditiously investigate” these cases. Congress would give them additional funding to do the work and require annual reports on their progress.²⁹

ALBERTO GONZALES (Archive): Good morning. I'm joined today by FBI Director Bob Mueller, John Jackson of the NAACP, Richard Cohen....

But the FBI and DOJ had their own cold case effort already in the works. Within weeks of the Till Act being introduced in Congress, the agencies held a press conference across town to announce their new initiative.

ALBERTO GONZALES (Archive): ...Part of the Department of Justice efforts to focus on cold cases ...

In the C-SPAN video, the chyron across the bottom of the screen says “Re-Opening of Civil Rights Cases.”

At the mic is Alberto Gonzales, attorney general under then-President George W. Bush. He's there to announce the FBI's new “Cold Case Initiative” — an effort they say they had started the year before.

²⁷ **Need to confirm.**

²⁸ “John Lewis, Anne Moody and Muhammad Ali all recalled their shock at seeing Till's funeral photos in *Jef* magazine, Emmett in his coffin, his face a grizzly ruin. They recalled too how the story gave them grim determination to change things. The photos became part of “Jim Crow wisdom,” visual lessons parents gave children about growing up African American.” [Time](#)

²⁹ JUNE 12, 2007 “The amendment in the nature of a substitute I will offer would authorize \$11.5 million annually to the Criminal Section of the Civil Rights Section of the...” and “The bill also directs the Civil Rights Division to report to Congress annually on the number of open cases and ongoing investigations” ([Gov Info](#))

GONZALES (Archive): In 2006, the FBI began its Cold Case Initiative to identify and investigate murders committed during our nation's Civil Rights era...

The timing of this press conference strikes me — because what Gonzales is announcing sounds a lot like the plan Alvin Sykes envisioned — that would require the DOJ and the FBI reopen these cases. Which led to the law that John Lewis introduced to Congress just weeks earlier.

GONZALES (Archive): We know that not every case will be resolved. In some cases the perpetrators may already be dead. In some cases we may find no federal jurisdiction. But these unsolved crimes remain on our radar, and through these expanded lines of communication we hope we can bring closure to some of these cases.

So, before the Till Act was official, here were the DOJ and FBI, explaining that they were already doing this themselves. They had reached out to FBI field offices and had begun a list of cases.

Was this press conference a way to publicly get out in front of the Till Act?

A reporter at the press conference raised that very question.

REPORTER: Congress was trying to establish a special task force to open these cases. Is this... It seems to me that this was the intent, this is what Congress wanted to do. Have you moved ahead before Congress passed legislation to do this? Is this what's happened here?

GONZALES: Well, we did this because we thought it was the right thing to do. Obviously, if Congress wants to pass legislation to provide additional tools, that would be something we'd have to look at and be happy to support I'm assuming. And so, but no, the reason we did this is because we were prepared to do it. And this was something that, again the initiative began a year ago...

So Gonzales tells the reporter they'd be happy to have the support of Congress — but the FBI and DOJ were already doing this work.

GONZALES (Archive): We asked the FBI field offices to look at the cases, the files; the ones that appeared to be the most promising. And so there's been sort of a list of priority cases that have been developed.

On stage, Gonzales is flanked by a handful of leaders from civil rights groups — like the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Southern Poverty Law Center³⁰.

GONZALES (Archive): It's noteworthy as Black History Month concludes that we announce the next phase of this initiative: a more formal partnership with these groups to identify possible additional cases for investigation and to solicit their help.³¹

I wanted to know what they remembered about that day and what they thought of the FBI's initiative.

RICHARD COHEN: Well, we thought it was better late than never.

Richard Cohen was president of the Southern Poverty Law Center — the SPLC. He was standing two places over from Gonzales at the press conference.

As far back as the 1980s, the SPLC had researched and tracked killings from the civil rights era.

But Cohen says the FBI and Justice Department did not reach out to them. He learned about their initiative from an article in the New York Times. After reading it, Cohen got in touch with the DOJ and shared the SPLC's list of names — more than a hundred victims of suspected racial violence.

COHEN: We wanted to make sure that they had as complete a list of as possible of the victims. I think we thought that would end up, you know, constituting the bulk of their list.

EDWARDS: Soon after the SPLC shared *their* list, the FBI asked them to participate in the press conference.³²

COHEN: We thought that, you know, the initiative was really just getting underway and the press conference was a way to perhaps jump-start it.

³⁰ Feb. 27, 2007: "I am joined today by FBI Director Bob Mueller, John Jackson of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Richard Cohen of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Stephanie Jones of the National Urban League, and Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Wan Kim." ([DOJ](#))

³¹ Feb. 27, 2007: [Prepared remarks](#) from DOJ verifies this quote

³² Civil Rights Martyrs ([SPLC](#))

JOHN JACKSON: Well the day of the press conference, it was a moment of hope.

Also at the press conference was John Jackson — who was with the NAACP³³. He's standing between Gonzales and Cohen.

JACKSON: Hope that what I was taking a part in and the NAACP was a part of was something that was genuine...

Jackson says the NAACP got a call — from out of the blue — about the DOJ's plan. And an invitation to join the press conference.

EDWARDS: And in that phone call, did they get into details about what the initiative would look like or just what type of resources they would be investing?

JACKSON: No, it was very vague at the time. There were questions; questions as to whether or not this was about the people or the politics.

What Jackson said there — “the people or the politics” — it's kind of a skepticism I've heard in other interviews I've done about this press conference. Sometimes these plans or initiatives are announced with a lot of fanfare, and then just sort of fizzle out.

Another thing that a lot of the people I talked to noted was that around this time, early 2007, Gonzales and the DOJ were handling a series of controversies — the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, NSA surveillance, the war on terror. And accusations that dismissals of US attorneys — only a couple months prior to the press conference — were mishandled under Gonzales' leadership.

JACKSON: He was definitely on the hot seat. And in particular, there was questions around his leadership by the Black community. And, as I recall, our doubts were questioning whether or not the Department of Justice would really put its resources around authentically investigating these cases, or was this just about a press conference or a press release to send a message to the Black community that there's something that the Department of Justice wanted to do to keep them close. I just recall, standing there saying that the opportunity for good is greater than my doubts.

³³ Feb. 27, 2007: “I'm joined today by... John Jackson of the NAACP” ([CPAN](#))

Today, Alberto Gonzales is a law professor. He hasn't worked at the DOJ for about 14 years — but I wanted to ask him about the Cold Case Initiative they had been working on separately from the Till Act.

He told me he recalls having one meeting with President Bush about it.

GONZALES: I spoke to him about the possible hurdle and challenges that existed with respect to these kinds of cases. And just wanted him to appreciate that we would be spending time and resources and we might not have much to show for it in the end.

Still, Gonzales said the DOJ had won convictions in some civil rights cold cases. had filed an indictment in a 1964 case just weeks before this press conference.

They wanted to see what other cases were still out there to be investigated.

GONZALES: I can't say we had a magic plan. It was just, you know, grinding, grinding it out, uh, talking to as many people as we could.

I asked Gonzales about the timing of the announcement and some of the skepticism.

GONZALES: No. We typically, well, we always did announcements once when we were ready to make announcements, like you make a, you announce a prosecution and when you're ready to go. So, in response to your question, I, no, the answer is no. The timing would not have been affected by what else was going on.

So. The FBI's Cold Case Initiative began publicly in earnest — and soon the Till Act - conceived by Alvin Sykes and championed by John Lewis — would pass and become law.

Both plans were driving at the same thing - and now there was a list, there was money, there seemed to be momentum — but how seriously would it be taken? How thoroughly would the cases be investigated? And what would come of it all?

The list of names compiled under the Till Act would ultimately grow to more than one hundred fifty women, men, and children. Emmett Till one of them.

WATTS: There was definitely a lot of hope. You know, we're thinking the feds get involved, Department of Justice involved. They have the resources to make something happen...

Emmett's cousin, Deborah Watts told me that for her family, and for other families with loved ones on the list — the initiative is about more than making progress on any one case.

WATTS: You're talking about a lot of generational pain and with some folks, you know, it's not expecting much, you know, too. So, you know, over years, we're talking years and years, decades, that many of these loved ones had been murdered. And so, some of these folks had said, 'Let's just move on. They don't care, they're not going to do anything anyway.' And, you know, it's kind of proven itself, without knowing specific details of each investigation. Who was talked to, how, you got redacted records. You know, there's just still a lot of mystery.

So for us with, in Emmett's name being assigned and attached to it, it doesn't sit well with us, because we want to make sure that there is justice and that they are doing what they said they were going to do.

EDWARDS: When I hear Deborah Watts speak about generational pain and trauma, I think of my family.

The cases on the Till Act list mainly cover the 1950s and 60s³⁴. But what about before then?

Various people have tried, hard, to uncover the truths in cases as far back as the 1940s, 30s, 20s, and beyond. The truth is we'll likely never know the total number.

For every Tulsa massacre, for every Wilmington insurrection, for every Red Summer, there are still more whose names aren't said, who become invisible after time.

I think about my family because one of those invisible names belongs to my grandmother's uncle.

He was one of her father's youngest brothers. His family woke up one morning on their farm in Mississippi and found his body outside, hanging from a tree.

³⁴ June 26, 2017: "Investigators are hoping to unearth evidence in other cases of racially motivated killings across the South in the 1950s and 1960s." ([WaPo](#))

His alleged crime? Dating a white woman.

I still don't even know which uncle. I only learned this story from my mom, and her memory is hazy on that detail. There were a lot of relatives on that side of our family. But I do know, as my mom tells it, that this uncle was maybe in his early 20s and my grandmother says, very charismatic.

It happened in the 1930s, during the Great Depression. My grandmother was a child then, visiting Mississippi from Chicago, like Emmett Till. She told my mom that she only saw her uncle's body once before relatives made her and the other children go back inside.

My grandmother lived to be 94 years old. For the rest of her life — after returning home from that trip — she never went back to Mississippi.

Better late than never. I keep coming back to that phrase. As optimistic as it's intended to be, there are some things that are too late for me to do. Like asking my grandparents more about Mississippi and their lives growing up.

Or talking to Mamie Till Mobley. I didn't find out until after she passed away that she later moved only a few blocks from where I grew up on Chicago's South Side, and that her husband owned a barbershop in our neighborhood that used to be *my* barbershop.

And I'll never get to ask Alvin Sykes everything I'd hoped to learn from him. He'd had health problems before I started reporting this story, and he died, at 64 years old, in March 2021.

A week after his funeral I talked to his friend, David Haley, who'd eulogized him. Alvin Sykes never had the resources of the federal government, of a newsroom, or even a well-funded organization. Never got paid to do his work. Haley told me Alvin lost as many times as he won fights for justice over the years. So I wondered, with all that was stacked against him...

EDWARDS: Why do you think he didn't give up as easily or didn't get as discouraged?

HALEY: I have no idea. That's a great question. Thank you. I needed that after talking about it for a while. I kind of get a little down because I miss my friend. I really do. I miss his drive...I do think, and I do know this. He never gave up on America. He wouldn't. When some of us, myself included, have said that this

country has some inherent problems that will never be resolved...He saw the glimmer of hope.

I don't know if there's any more truth to uncover in a case like my grandmother's uncle.

But what about the Till Act list? I want to believe there's still a glimmer of hope for someone else's uncle, someone else's loved one.

Could there still be truths — even some justice — out there for them? And if so, what would it look like?

I need to find out.

END

I'm James Edwards, and this has been Episode 1 of Un(re)solved, from FRONTLINE.