



Emmett Till's Horrifying Death Still Resonating After Star Witness Recants

By AAAM Board Member Robert Lockett, Ph.D.

When the news broke in February 2017 that Carolyn Bryant Donham—the young white woman infamously at the center of the murder of Emmett Till—admitted to lying in court during the 1955 trial of her husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, public outrage exploded. Historian Timothy Tyson revealed the news in advance of his new book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*. Tyson is the only historian known to have interviewed Donham, and, having sat down with her in 2007, he claims that Donham, still alive, is remorseful for her role in the whole tragedy and that she often thinks of Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett Till's mother, with a deep sense of regret and pain. In the public's eye, those drastically inadequate and seemingly insincere revelations added fuel to the fire to condemn Donham and to bring her to some kind of long-awaited justice, which has been denied since her husband and brother-in-law were acquitted.

Much of the public indignation, anguish, and hostility, particularly in African American communities, must be understood in the context of well-publicized, often officially condoned and systematically perpetrated brutality against black bodies. Immediately, the names Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and a host of others come to mind. For many white Americans and historically white institutions, the fact that Donham outed herself when she is the last living person who could serve some small amount of time in prison for her role in this atrocity is a shock and, for some, an embarrassment. Her admission has given some of these people stones to throw at her in retaliation for what they see as her guilt in Emmett Till's murder, and, in turn, they will soon feel inclined to shut the door on this ugly chapter in American history and claim, thankfully, that it is all behind us. But, the condemnation from African Americans and from the world of black museums and cultural organizations is not born from some kind of surprise that Donham had perjured herself during her testimony.



For black folks as well as those of us who work with the Association of African American Museums, the news that Donham had lied did not come as a shock at all. Her guilt has never been in question. We knew she was going to lie even before she took the witness stand in 1955. Mose Wright, the uncle of Emmett Till, knew she was lying when he stood up in court and pointed directly to Bryant and Milam as the men who had abducted his nephew. Wright even testified that a woman's voice, presumably Donham's, rang from the car in the middle of the dark Delta night and identified Emmett Till as the boy in question.

Mamie Till Mobley, whose decision to have an open casket funeral ignited a generation to activism, knew Donham was lying, as Mobley sat in the segregated seating area of the Mississippi courthouse in the small town of Sumner, where a billboard declared that it was "A Good Place to Raise a Boy" without any hint of cruel irony. Wheeler Parker, Emmett Till's cousin, who was at Bryant's Grocery & Market when the entire incident happened, knew that Donham was lying and has told anyone who would listen for the past 60 years that she had lied in court. Bryant and Milam themselves admitted it when they confessed to kidnapping and murdering Emmett Till to William Bradford Huie for a 1956 *Look* magazine article. Reporter Ed Bradley recognized her lies when he found and attempted to interview Donham for a *60 Minutes* story in 2004. Historian Devery Anderson, whose 2015 book *Emmett Till: The Murder That Shocked the World* is considered to be the most definitive account so far, told us as much a year and a half ago.

Instead, for us, what we all know and recognize is that Donham's confession, far from giving us a national scapegoat for the murder of Emmett Till, emphasizes that violence, untamed and unpunished, aimed at African Americans and African American communities is not a modern story but instead has a long history and legacy in America. The assault against African Americans has been at the heart of the power structure in this country since the days of the Founding Fathers and their commitment to the institution of slavery. If anything, the renewed interest in Donham, who should go to prison if her role is proven in fact to have been criminal and prosecutable today, and in Emmett Till reminds us that the modern civil rights movement was not that long ago and that the struggle continues.



If anything “good” comes from this news, it may be the inspiration of a new generation of activists, much like Emmett Till inspired six decades ago. It will not be some kind of satisfactory conclusion to the saga surrounding the Emmett Till story and Mississippi’s racist history. Rather, it will be a recommitment to the work and mission of black museums, which will continue to empower us to use our past to learn about and shape our present. My own son, two-years-old and named Emmett for the boy who inspired my own scholarship and activism, has the chance to inherit that legacy.