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UUID: 8B58F096-8C8B-A08A-4A49-FF5FF51DE2C7

Recommended Citation:

Louis Burnham. Behind the Lynching of Emmet Louis Till. New York: Freedom Associates, 1955. <http://hdl.handle.net/10428/2991>.

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BEHIND THE LYNCHING OF EMMET LOUIS TILL

by
**Louis
Burnham**



The Author

Louis E. Burnham is editor of FREEDOM, the lively monthly publication which interprets Negro affairs. For ten years he traveled extensively throughout the South as an organizer of the Negro youth and leader of the right-to-vote movement. He is intimately acquainted with the Mississippi Delta area described in this pamphlet and uniquely equipped to write about current developments there on which the nation's eyes are focused.

Published by FREEDOM ASSOCIATES, INC., 139 W. 125 St., New York.

December, 1955



PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

BEHIND THE LYNCHING OF EMMETT LOUIS TILL

By LOUIS E. BURNHAM

IN ALL THE FOUL RECORD of human oppression, few crimes have matched in unbridled savagery the kidnap-murder of Emmett Louis Till. The discovery of the fiendishly mutilated body of this 14-year-old Chicago boy in Mississippi's Tallahatchie River on August 28, 1955, revealed more than the handiwork of a pair of hate-crazed "white supremacists."

It also reminded the nation that:

- 1) 11 million Negroes in the South, 92 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, are denied the commonest rights of humanity, to say nothing of their constitutional rights as citizens; and that
- 2) the entire South is ruled by a political clique so reactionary that it invites comparison with the Dark Ages in mankind's upward climb from barbarism.

Let us look at the record.

A \$1.00 Loaf of Bread

On May 7 in Belzoni, Mississippi, the left side of Rev. George W. Lee's face was blown away by a shotgun blast. The day before he had said: "*If God gives me grace and I'm living on the second day of August, I'm going to march boldly to the courthouse and register.*" To this date no one has been indicted for the murder of Rev. Lee.

On August 13, Lamar Smith was shot down in broad daylight on the courthouse lawn in Brookhaven, Mississippi. He also was a leader in the voter registration campaign among Negroes. Though

30 to 40 citizens witnessed the shooting, not one would say what he saw and a grand jury failed to return an indictment.

Neither has anyone been brought to trial for the near-fatal shooting of Gus Courts, 65-year old Negro storekeeper of the same town of Belzoni, and a leader, together with Rev. Lee, of the right-to-vote movement. Both men had paid their poll taxes and been permitted to register—but not to vote.

Then, on December 4, 33-year old Clinton Melton, father of five young children, was shot and killed by Elmer Kimbell, barely twenty miles from the spot where Emmett Till's body was found. The killer, a local white businessman, claimed Melton, employed in a gas station, had put more gas into his tank than he had ordered.

A Yazoo City, Mississippi, plumber was charged a dollar for a loaf of bread. A veteran in the same town discovered that no store or business would cash his disability check. Both these men had signed a petition calling upon the school board to desegregate schools in line with the U.S. Supreme Court decision.

These examples could be multiplied a hundred fold in Mississippi. Yet, the terror is not confined to this one state.

Churches pastored by the Rev. J. A. Delaine were burned three times because of his leadership in the fight for the integration of schools in Clarendon County, South Carolina. The wife of this courageous pastor reported: *"I can't tell you how many times I've been spit at, cursed and called dirty names by little children and older folks alike, as I've walked down the streets of Lake City."*

In the Tidewater section of Virginia, near Heathsville, 23-year old Howard Bromley was shot to death by Ira D. Hinton, a wealthy storekeeper because the Negro dared put his arm on the white man's shoulder. *An all-white jury freed Hinton in 21 minutes.*

Union Meeting Attacked

In Umatilla, Florida, on October 19, white vandals unloosed shotgun blasts into the Masonic Hall, wounding 12 of 26 Negro citrus workers who had gathered for a union meeting.

From one end of the South to the other, law and order have broken down. A public climate has been created in which a Negro's life is worth no more than a white man's whim. Dr. T.R.M. Howard,

intrepid leader of Mississippi Negroes, reports that in his state, "white people . . . get longer terms in jail for killing a deer out of season than for killing a colored man in the 18 Delta counties."

While the murder of young Till reveals the degradation heaped upon Negroes, the failure to punish his lynchers and kidnappers exposes the despoiling of the court system, the betrayal of the Constitution and the contempt for the American people's sense of justice prevailing among the Southern white ruling class.

The fight to avenge the murder of Emmett Louis Till has become a symbol of the Negro people's bitter struggle for first-class citizenship. Everywhere, they echo the determination of Mrs. Mamie Bradley, mother of the slain boy: "*I have invested a son in freedom and I'm determined that his death [shall not be] in vain.*"

Not Just a "Case" but a "System"

It is worth noting that if Emmett Till had been a Mississippi farm boy instead of a Chicago lad on vacation in Mississippi, the world probably would never have known his fate.

Further, if all the rivers, swamps and woodlands of the Southern countryside could recount the tales of the tens of thousands of Negro bodies thrust into watery graves, strung up on unoffending trees, tortured and murdered by church-going, Democrat-voting defenders of the "American way of life," their story would be too horrible for decent humanity to bear.

Clearly, then, we are dealing not merely with a single "case" or even a number of "cases" of intimidation and murder. Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, provided the clue when he stated: "*We are dealing with a system!*"

What is this system whose most graphic and revolting feature is the organized brutality of lynchers? How does it work and what are its aims? Who profits from it and who are its victims? How firm are its foundations? How deep are its roots?

First, it must be clear that the system is not exclusively a Mississippi system. Mississippi is but the rawest manifestation of the plantation system which survives in one degree or another in the whole South.

The Plantation Economy

The plantation system is derived from and is a crude adaptation of slavery, which was abolished by decree in 1863. It is based on the bitter exploitation of masses of toiling, landless farmers. Seventy percent of these sharecroppers, tenant farmers and day laborers in the South are Negroes. Their lot, from cradle to grave, is abject poverty, enforced illiteracy and social abuse. They are the objects of racist ostracism, humiliation and brutality.

In 1947, the amount spent for food by Negro farm laborers in Mississippi was \$136 for the year, or 37 cents per day. *It is practically the same today.*

Two years ago, the average annual *family* income for Negroes in 11 delta counties which make up the 3rd Congressional district of Mississippi—the area in which Emmett Till was killed—ranged from \$399 in Sharkey county to a high of \$741 in Coahoma. Almost half the Negro families in the district subsisted on less than \$500 a year.

Significantly, the average per capita income for *all* Mississippians in 1953 was only \$834, as compared with \$1361 in Virginia, \$1184 in Georgia, and \$2258 in New York.

Though Negroes make up practically half of the population of Mississippi, they own only 17 per cent as much land as white Mississippi farmers. The extent of the super-exploitation of Negroes is seen in the fact that only one Negro farmer in Washington county owns a mechanical cotton picker, as compared with 900 white farmers. Yet, Negroes make up 70 per cent of the total population of 70,504 in the county!

The homes of the Negro rural masses are usually no more than hovels, little changed from the cabins occupied three generations ago by their slave ancestors. Eight out of every 10 homes in the Mississippi delta have outside toilets. Only four per cent have telephones. More than half are without running water.

Whites Are Victims, Too

While the all-sided oppression of Negroes is the foundation of the plantation system, its horrors do not end with the Negro

people. The low level of wages and working conditions on the plantations becomes the floor toward which employers constantly seek to force down the wage spread and working conditions among all workers, white as well as Negro, industrial as well as agricultural. The plantation system casts its shadow over the whole South and to a considerable extent over the rest of the country.

In Mississippi, for example, the requirements of this outmoded system of agricultural production dominate the economy so completely that there is no such thing as a state department of labor. In most Southern states such commonly-accepted protections as child labor laws, workmen's compensation, minimum wage and maximum hours laws, either do not exist or are woefully inadequate.

The result is that the major regional industries of the South, textile and lumber, are among the lowest paid and least organized in the country. Among 250,000 sawmill workers in the South, most of whom are Negroes, there is practically no union organization and the average hourly wage of 80 cents is little more than half the average for sawmill workers in the Northwestern states. In textile, the lower wages and abominable working conditions which 300,000 Southerners, mostly white, endure are a constant threat to the maintenance of union conditions in New England mills.

The "Upper Classes" and the Mob

It is easy to see who profits from this system of economic exploitation—obviously the plantation landlords, millowners and industrialists.

Two generations ago Frederick Douglass, the great Negro leader, wrote: "*With a few noble exceptions, just enough to prove the rule, the upper classes of the South seem to be in full sympathy with the mob and its deeds. There are but few earnest words uttered against either. Press, platform and pulpit are generally either silent or they openly apologize for the mob and its deeds.*"

In this respect the upper classes of the South have not changed. Indeed, today they are the open instigators of the anti-Negro terror. In Mississippi, the leading organizer of the pro-feudal camp is the plantation owner, Robert B. Patterson, and its leading ideologist

is circuit judge Tom P. Brady. In South Carolina, a newspaper ad urging defiance of the law on integration was signed by 52 top leaders of industry, commerce, education and religion, including B. M. Edwards, president of the South Carolina National Bank.

When an effort is made to purchase an NAACP membership list in South Carolina for \$10,000, in order to widen the area of victimization of Negro militants, it is clear we are confronted with an important center of wealth and power in the state.

A New Secession Movement

The white ruling class of the South is in open rebellion against the U.S. Constitution and the authority of the federal government. Since May 17, 1954, acts of nullification have crowded each other out of the headlines. An organized criminal conspiracy, led by the so-called White Citizens Councils and involving elected and appointed officials of government, has arisen in Mississippi, Alabama, North and South Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida and Virginia.

Increasingly, murder and other forms of force and violence are its weapons. Everywhere, it resorts to "economic pressure" to starve and persecute into submission all Negroes who dare stand up for their rights and support the NAACP.

A reporter for the Associated Negro Press reports from South Carolina: "*Vicious behavior, not the least unlike anything that might have been unleashed in similar situations in Hitler Germany, is evident on all sides. . . . The rebellion, now covering nearly a half of the State, is approaching in vigor and fervor the Secession movement of a century ago. . . .*"

It is most alarming to the Negro people that, faced with this rebellion, the federal government assumes a posture of abject helplessness. The Federal Bureau of Investigation fails to gather sufficient facts to guarantee conviction of a single lyncher. Its agents hastily intervene when white babies are reported missing, but pointedly refuse to budge when a Negro child is kidnapped. It refuses to protect the voting rights of Negroes in the South, while hounding Negro radicals all over the country.

This failure to "do duty" where Negroes are involved strengthens the widespread belief that the Department of Justice and the FBI

are honeycombed from top to bottom with anti-Negro racists. Most important, these agencies are the arms of an administration dedicated to carrying out the policies of Big Business and the plantation owners. And the aim of those policies clearly is not Negro, or human, rights—but *profits*. Big Business thrives on Jim Crow. It is estimated that the annual “take” in super-profits of the industrial monopolies, based on the Negro-white wage differential, is more than four billion dollars.

The Silence of Guilt

This wage differential is directly traceable to the initial oppression of the Negro farming masses of the plantation areas. In addition, Big Business has increasingly assumed direct control over a large segment of the plantation economy. For example, 40 per cent of Mississippi’s cotton production is absentee-owned. To an unsuspected extent, great food chains and insurance companies have bought up huge acreages of Southern farmland and have become the direct beneficiaries of the plantation system.

Perhaps this explains why the topmost leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties have been so conspicuously silent on the wave of terror against Negroes. Big Business and the Dixiecrats still wield dominant influence in *both* parties. The \$4 billions in extra profits wrung out of the oppression of the Negro people has a great silencing influence among the political opportunists who control both legislative and executive branches of government.

In fact, the judiciary is not exempt from the political pressures of the times. It is generally recognized that the Supreme Court decrees of May 31, 1955, on segregation in education, *encouraged nullification of its original decision* by placing implementation in the hands of its most inveterate enemies, the Southern racist politicians, with no specific time-limit for compliance.

Southern Politics: Minority Rule

The murder of young Till and the freeing of his killers was made possible by the absolute and long-standing rape of political democracy in Mississippi. That’s why the fight for equal rights in

the South must include an attack on the political as well as the economic roots of oppression.

The plantation system provides the economic base of Dixiecratism and an unflinching bastion of support for all the forces of political reaction and fascism in the country.

In Mississippi's cotton-rich Third Congressional District, 70 per cent of the population are Negroes. Yet, the Negro vote in the district is negligible. Of the remaining 30 per cent of whites, only a small minority vote. The fundamental responsibility for government is monopolized by the plantation owners, their straw-bosses and hangers-on and a venal crew of professional politicians who serve their interests.

In most Southern states, there are two to five Congressional districts like Mississippi's Third. Roughly, 40 of the South's 122-member delegation in the House of Representatives hold their seats because of the unlawful usurpation of the most elementary political rights of the Negro people. So it is that in a House of Representatives of 534 members, there are but three Negroes rather than an approximate 50; and neither of these three is from a major center of Negro population in the cotton belt of the South.

This picture of lily-white legislative power is absolute on a state level in the South. Among 1,795 state legislators in 11 ex-slave states, not a single Negro can be found. Is there any wonder, then, that following the Supreme Court anti-segregation ruling of May 17, 1954, Southern legislatures got busy concocting illegal schemes to get around the decision? They have threatened to make the public schools "private" to keep Negroes out; to jail anybody advocating integration; to abrogate the First Amendment by prohibiting the right to petition for mixed schools; and to legalize the NAACP. In Louisiana, the legislature has appropriated \$100,000 of the public money (collected from Negro as well as white taxpayers) to hire lawyers to keep Negro children out of public schools with white children!

Reconstruction Democracy Shortlived

Most Americans do not realize that the Negro's battle for political representation today is a fight for the *restoration* of political power wrenched out of his hands seventy-five years ago at the point

of the gun and the end of the Klansman's rope.

One example will serve to underscore this point. As late as 1878, in South Carolina, where the Reconstruction democratic governments recorded their greatest achievements, there were 62 Negroes and 87 whites in both houses of the state legislature. Thus, 74 years ago, twice as many Negroes sat in the legislature of one Southern state as now sit in all the state legislatures of the North combined.

It is timely to recall that the only two Negroes ever to serve in the U.S. Senate, Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, were elected by the popular vote of the people of Mississippi during the short-lived Reconstruction era when democracy was given a chance in that state.

However, with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, Reconstruction was defeated. By 1900, the Negro vote was a negligible factor in the South and the nation. The temporary political demise of the Negro was accomplished as a part of the transition of American capitalism to monopoly production and its early forays into the arena of dollar diplomacy and imperialist aggression.

In spite of the severest repression, Negroes never lost sight of their goal of full citizenship. When the last black Congressman of the Populist movement, George H. White of North Carolina, made his farewell speech in the House, in 1901, he said: *"This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the Negro's temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again."*

Now, fifty-five years after George White's prophetic remark, that day is at hand. Dr. T. R. M. Howard reports that the racists *"are fearful that, as the colored citizens have been aroused during the past three or four years, they must tighten restrictions on voting lest Mississippi might be sending a colored representative to Congress."*

In state after state the forward surge of the Negro people is the most distinctive and progressive feature of Southern politics. Negroes are tired of being governed by laws they have no part in making and by officials in whose choice they have no voice. Their demands echo back through the decades to the Boston Common, to Lexington and Concord, to the little hall in Philadelphia where a band of zealous revolutionaries drafted the first legal paper

of this government, a Declaration of Independence stating that government "derives its just powers from the consent of the governed."

It must give the American people pause that slavery persisted in the presence of this great document for nearly 100 years, and that today, 180 years after its drafting, the Negro people of the South are being murdered for resisting taxation without representation.

Freedom Will Come

Despite the agonizing struggles of the past, despite the blood-stained path along which Negroes have inched their way toward equality in our land, freedom will come. It will come, first, because the mood of militancy of 17 million Negroes will not be denied.

Dr. Howard gave accurate voice to this mood when he told a great audience in Baltimore: "*We are tired of dying for something on Heartbreak Ridge, in Korea, that we can't vote for in Belzoni, Mississippi.*"

This sentiment is not confined to city folks or to Northerners, to intellectuals or to working men and women. It embraces *all* groups or classes of Negroes. Most important, it is surging in the hearts of the most oppressed—the rural masses. Dr. Howard reports:

"I wish that you could go with me back in the swamps, in the plantations of Mississippi and see these eager young colored people who come forward and shake a hand and say 'Dr. Howard, I'm with you; I'm with you.' You can hear that from plantation to plantation, people saying, 'I'm with you; I'm with you.'"

Yes, freedom will come because the Negro people, in the face of the severest trials, have made up their minds not to run. They know the meaning of the words of one of their great poets, James Weldon Johnson:

This land is ours by right of birth.

This land is ours by right of toil.

We helped to turn its virgin earth.

Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.

For generations, Negro Americans have staked their claim to freedom deep in the soil of the South. They will not abandon it now.

Labor's Special Role

The fight for freedom will be won, also, because its achievement will benefit all democratic groupings and tendencies in our nation. The organized labor movement will be the greatest beneficiary of Negro equality; it ought, therefore, to be the foremost champion of the Negro's cause. Labor's most powerful enemies stand astride the land with one foot on the Negro's neck and the other squarely on the working man's.

Consider how much brighter would be the prospects for passage of needed social legislation and the defeat of anti-labor bills if reaction could not count on the bloc of Southern Congressmen whose tenure is directly traceable to Negro disfranchisement. Consider that the Southern states which lead the nation in the oppression of Negroes are also the front runners in hostility to labor, as witnessed in their unanimous enactment of a variety of "right to work," "sedition" and other infamous laws aimed at trade union rights.

The time is clearly ripe for a great initiative by labor in the crusade for Negro freedom. Such an initiative will be a necessary corollary of a drive by the newly merged AFL-CIO to organize the South. A drive conducted in this spirit will greatly strengthen the interracial solidarity of labor and enhance the bargaining power and political influence of the trade unions.

A New World In Birth

Negro freedom will come, too, because we live in an epoch of the liberation of oppressed peoples. Within the past decade, more than a billion people, formerly the providers of imperial wealth and splendor, the playthings of "white supremacy" arrogance, have taken their destinies into their own hands. China's half-billion, India's 370 million, the masses of Burma and Indonesia, have set their nations on the course of freedom and independence. They are through with foreign masters; they will never turn back.

This new world, so dramatically united at the historic Bandung conference, represents an irresistible force in world affairs. The movement for Negro freedom will win, not in isolation from, but

only in conscious and principled alliance with all forces throughout the world who are its natural allies.

Thus, the time has come for a long, new look at who are the Negro's friends and who are his enemies. Surely, the Indian ambassador who was refused a meal at the Houston, Texas, airport must be regarded as a friend, if only in the sense of being a common sufferer of commonplace insult.

Despite the political hysteria of the times, does it impugn our patriotism to say so? Decidedly not! Does it reflect upon our love of country to proclaim that the Americans who Jim Crowed the Indian diplomat and who humiliate Negroes every day are not the friends but the enemies of Negro freedom, even though they are our fellow-citizens? Indeed, any other position would reflect upon a quality with which Negroes are richly endowed—their “mother-wit,” or good common sense.

Tribune of His People

The U.S. State Department would like Negroes to unite with Kluxers in the judgment that Paul Robeson's travel abroad is somehow against the best interests of the United States. However, the daily experience of Negroes tells them that Paul Robeson is not only among the world's greatest artists, but also a tribune of his people whose uncompromising advocacy of Negro rights has brought millions of allies to their side in the face of a powerful and vicious enemy.

The current widespread attacks on the NAACP as “Communist,” the reported tapping of the phones of its leaders, South and North, call for the most energetic defense of the main organization of struggle for Negro rights. That defense is likely to be successful to the extent that it rejects the ridiculous premise of white supremacists—that it is the “Communists” rather than they, themselves, who are the enemies of Negro freedom.

Some few Negro leaders have fallen for this line. But it is unlikely, as the Klansmen's attacks increase in ferocity, that Negro Georgians will be convinced that they should join with the “white supremacists” Herman Talmadge and State Attorney General Eugene Cook, in attacking their former neighbor, Negro Communist

Benjamin J. Davis, Jr. simply because he dares contend for a radical alteration of the status quo.

Given an appraisal of its own strength, a growing alliance with labor, and a true estimate of its friends and enemies at home and on a world scale, what are the next steps for the Negro freedom movement? First is the fight for political democracy, majority rule, in the South. This fight encompasses the demands for: abolition of the poll tax, federal protection of the right to register and vote, passage of an anti-lynching bill, and reduction of Congressional representation of States which deliberately disfranchise Negroes, in accordance with Section II, Amendment 14 of the Constitution.

Program of Land Reform

In addition, organizations serious about the fight for equality must increasingly address themselves to a program to really change the conditions of the masses of rural poor. Such a program should include: a federal program to provide land for the landless, aimed at breaking up the plantation system; an effective program of long-term loans at low interest rates for purchase of provisions and implements; written contracts and federal regulation of crop shares so that tenants and sharecroppers receive a minimum of 70 per cent of their production; placement of agricultural employment under minimum wages, maximum hours and child labor laws; the right of the rural masses to organize and bargain collectively to improve their conditions.

The third major element in a popular program must be the demand for immediate enforcement of the Supreme Court rulings which void segregation in education and in the use of public parks, playgrounds, recreational and travel facilities.

Both Republicans and Democrats would like to avoid these issues in 1956. They must not be permitted to do so. Congress should be confronted with a massive, demonstrative demand for some such people's program for Negro rights. With every passing day, this demand of an aroused population must increase in intensity until it becomes irresistible.

This is the way to strengthen American democracy and to right the horrible wrongs committed against Emmett Till, the entire Negro people and the great American tradition of equality.

THERE ARE THINGS YOU CAN DO NOW!

Democracy in Mississippi and throughout the South depends, first of all, on those who are on the front line of battle for integration and full citizenship rights. It also depends on *you*, wherever you are.

The federal government can be forced to intervene, to use its lawful power to protect the rights of Negro citizens in the South, if *all* citizens *everywhere* speak up.

Has your Congressman gone on record against the reign of terror in Mississippi? Write and urge him to do so.

Has your union, social club, church or civic organization spoken out against the destruction of human rights described in this pamphlet? Ask it to do so at the next meeting.

Two Congressmen—A. Clayton Powell, Jr., of New York, and Charles Diggs of Michigan—are initiating action in Congress to unseat the Mississippi delegation, based on the systematic disfranchisement of the Negro half of the population of that state. Their action is solidly based on Section 2 of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which provides that:

“ . . . when the right to vote at any election . . . is denied . . . or in any way abridged . . . the basis of representation therein shall be reduced in the proportion which the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such state.”

Urge your Congressman to support the movement to enforce the Constitution of the U.S.A.!