**Race Against Time**

Dozens of racially motivated murders took place in the South during the 1950s and 1960s. Time is running out to solve them.

By *Shaila Dewan in Atlanta*

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| http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/images/f102510_cold_cases.jpg |

In the summer of 1955, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago named Emmett Till took a trip down to Money, Mississippi, to visit relatives. On August 28, two white men forcibly entered his uncle's home at 2:30 a.m. and abducted Emmett at gunpoint, for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Three days later, Emmett's body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River.

Though the men were brought to trial that year and clearly identified by witnesses, an all-white jury in a deeply segregated South acquitted them of murder, and the men walked free—a scenario all too common at the time.

Emmett Till's murder—which became an enduring symbol of racial violence and injustice for the emerging civil rights movement—was just one of scores of racially motivated killings that took place during the 1950s and '60s, especially in the South.

Many were barely noted, much less investigated, even in the face of damning evidence. Relatives of victims were often afraid to come forward, lacking faith in the judicial system and fearing retribution from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which waged a campaign of racial terror across the South and was itself responsible for many of the murders. Five decades later, many of these cases remain unsolved, and now, the window of opportunity to bring anyone to justice is fast closing, as aging suspects and witnesses die off one by one.

"The families of the victims are still living with the horrors of the murders," says Ben Greenberg, an investigative reporter with the Cold Case Project, an organization of writers and filmmakers dedicated to bringing these cases to justice. "They need closure."

**'Freedom Summer'**

At the urging of families of the victims, the F.B.I. and the Justice Department in 2007 announced the Civil Rights-Era Cold Case Initiative, which put them in charge of reopening and investigating cold case murders. Previously, these prosecutions—about 20 since 1994—were driven largely by the persistence of surviving family members and the painstaking work of journalists and documentary filmmakers, rather than police efforts.

Among their successes was the 2005 conviction of Edgar Ray Killen, one of the Klansmen responsible for the deaths of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—activists in "Freedom Summer" in 1964, when hundreds of mostly young, white, out-of-state volunteers worked alongside black Mississippians to register black voters. (The killings were depicted in the 1988 movie *Mississippi Burning*.) And in 2007, Klansman James F. Seale was convicted in connection with the 1964 murders of Charles Moore and Thomas Dee, teenagers from Meadville, Mississippi, who were brutally beaten and drowned.

On the heels of the federal cold case initiative, Congress in 2008 passed the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, which promised up to $13.5 million a year to investigate 109 unsolved racially motivated murders that took place before 1969.

But those who had hoped for an all-out law enforcement effort to beat the clock have been disappointed. No money was allocated in 2009, and in 2010, the Justice Department received only $1.6 million—less than 12 percent of the funds promised annually—to pursue the cases. Though a recent report by the Justice Department boasted that 56 of 109 cases have been closed, critics say the numbers are misleading: The two that have been prosecuted were holdovers from before the initiative, and 54 have been closed without prosecution—in many cases because the suspect is dead. For cases that might yet yield a viable prosecution, they say, the department has dragged its feet, taking months or years to approach witnesses.

"Everybody put me on the back burner for years and years," says Henry C. Allen, 65.

His father, Louis Allen, was a civil rights worker who was ambushed at his front gate in Liberty, Mississippi, in 1964. Relatives have met with countless officials and offered a $20,000 reward, but progress has been slow.

**Healing Old Wounds**

Federal officials say they take their obligation to review every case seriously. Still, a spokeswoman for the Justice Department says, "We have always known that locating the subjects, witnesses, and evidence for 40-year-old murder cases would be challenging."

Challenging, maybe, but not impossible.

Take the case of Frank Morris, a black cobbler who died from burns in 1964 after a Klansman set fire to his shop in Ferriday, Louisiana. Reporter Stanley Nelson of the *Concordia Sentinel* in Ferriday was able to do much of the investigative legwork, in conjunction with the Cold Case Justice Initiative at Syracuse University's law school.

"When we started the Frank Morris case," says Janis McDonald, the co-director of the Syracuse project, "the F.B.I. said, 'You know, just about everybody is dead.' "

But Nelson managed to track down a black teenager who worked at Morris's store, as well as pastors, F.B.I. agents, and others who spoke with the victim at his hospital bed before he died. Nelson's efforts may have been what prompted the F.B.I. to reopen the case in 2007. Prosecutors are trying to gather enough evidence to bring the case to a grand jury.

McDonald says that pursuing these cases is about more than closure for the families.

"Right now, we're faced with the question, 'Are these people important enough to give the same kind of justice we give every other murder?'" she says. "And if not, what does it say about us?"

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