

The Murder of Emmett Till

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) unanimously held that the racial segregation of children in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Although the decision did not succeed in *fully* desegregating public education in the United States, it put the Constitution on the side of racial equality and galvanized the nascent civil rights movement into a full revolution.

In 1954, large portions of the United States had racially segregated schools, made legal by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which held that segregated public facilities were constitutional *so long as the black and white facilities were equal to each other*. However, by the mid-twentieth century, civil rights groups set up legal and political challenges to racial segregation. In the early 1950s, NAACP lawyers brought class action lawsuits on behalf of black schoolchildren and their families in Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware, seeking court orders to require school districts to let black students attend white public schools.

The Court concluded that, even if the tangible facilities were equal between the black and white schools, racial segregation in schools is "inherently unequal" and is thus always unconstitutional. At least in the context of public schools, **Plessy v. Ferguson was overruled**. In the *Brown II* case a decided year later, the Court ordered the states to integrate their schools "with all deliberate speed."



Part 1: Answer the following questions based on the reading above.

1. What did *Brown v. Board of Education* decide?
2. What Supreme Court case did the 1954 *Brown* decision overrule?
3. What is the problem with the phrase "all deliberate speed" in terms of enforcing integration?

Part 2: As you watch, answer the following questions using specific detail from the film.

1. What does it mean to say that in the 1950s, "the Mississippi Delta was the most southern place on Earth?"
2. Civil rights efforts had begun in the South before Emmett Till arrived in Mississippi. How did the white southerners react to these efforts? How do you think it affected their reaction to Emmett Till?
3. What is meant by "people disappeared"? Why do you think most black people did not choose to speak out against segregation in Mississippi?
4. Why do you think Emmett Till's murder and the "not guilty" verdict of his killers was such a spark for the Civil Rights Movement?



January 24, 1956: Look magazine publishes an article written by Alabama journalist William Bradford Huie, entitled *The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi*. Huie has offered Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam \$4,000 to tell how they killed Emmett Till. Milam speaks for the record.